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Saudi Male EFL Students' Perceptions of Female Instructors in Online and Hybrid Classrooms

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Abstract
In alignment with Saudi Vision 2030, gender integration in higher education has advanced significantly, increasing the involvement of female instructors in teaching male students and in English as a Foreign Language. To many male students in Saudi Arabia, this shift introduces an unprecedented dynamic that interacts with long-standing sociocultural traditions. This study examines Saudi male undergraduate English learners' perceptions of female instructors, focusing on pedagogical effectiveness, classroom engagement, student comfort levels, and motivation to interact in online and hybrid educational contexts. This research shows how broad policy reforms connect to what happens in classrooms. It helps evaluate how well current educational changes work and supports inclusive teaching that encourages equity. The researcher employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. They collected data using a 9-item questionnaire completed by 76 participants, and 6 of them also took part in semi-structured interviews. Results show generally positive views of female instructors' competence and legitimacy, with moderate to high learner participation. This analysis shows that the Saudi Vision 2030 reforms are making female leadership more common in English as a Foreign Language teaching. It also points out how cultural factors affect students' participation in class. The study links these policy changes to what happens in the classroom. This study connects broader policy changes to classroom experiences and offers thoughtful suggestions for creating more gender-inclusive higher-education environments.

***Keywords*:** Cultural norms, English as a foreign language instruction, gender Integration, female instructors, hybrid Learning, perception, willingness to communicate

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia's 2030 reform agenda has brought transformative changes to the country's economic, social, and educational sectors. As part of its effort to diversify the economy, the nation is placing significant emphasis on expanding its higher education system, which is experiencing rapid growth (Hamdan & Hamdan, 2020). As a result of this shift, female instructors are increasingly teaching male students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This development advances the country's broader goals of modernization and social reform. However, it also introduces new challenges and opportunities for Saudi Arabia's traditional, gender-segregated education system.

In EFL classrooms, where communication and interaction are key to learning, the instructor's gender can strongly influence students' experiences. The focus is important because EFL teaching relies on active speaking, group discussions, and spontaneous communication. These activities can also involve interactions that are affected by changing gender dynamics. For many Saudi male students, being taught by female instructors is a novel and complex educational experience that intersects with deeply rooted cultural norms regarding gender roles, social interaction, and public behavior. The shift toward online and hybrid learning further complicates these dynamics, as digital spaces replace traditional classroom boundaries.

The research problem is that, although policy has changed, the micro-level classroom impact on male learners remains underexplored. Recent studies broadly explore gender integration in Saudi education. However, few researchers have investigated male students' perspectives regarding female-led EFL instruction. Understanding this perception is essential, not only for evaluating the effectiveness of ongoing reforms but also for informing pedagogical practices and institutional policy that support inclusive and communicative learning environments. Furthermore, insights into learner comfort, engagement, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in gender-integrated classrooms are crucial for optimizing language acquisition and educational equity.

This study addresses a gap by examining Saudi male EFL students' perceptions of female instructors in online and hybrid classes. It aims to assess students' perceptions of female EFL instructors' teaching effectiveness, examine how gender affects classroom interaction and willingness to communicate, and identify sociocultural and technical challenges during this transition.

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine how gender integration under Vision 2030 affects university-level EFL instruction and to identify the sociocultural factors that continue to shape male learners' classroom engagement.

This study addresses the following research questions.

1. What are Saudi male EFL students' perceptions of female instructors in terms of teaching effectiveness, comfort, and legitimacy in online and hybrid classrooms?
2. How do Saudi male EFL students experience classroom interaction, participation, and willingness to communicate (WTC) when taught by female instructors?
3. How do Saudi male EFL students describe the challenges and opportunities of being taught by female instructors for the first time?

Literature Review

Gender Educational Change in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's education system has been characterized by strict gender segregation, deeply rooted in cultural and religious norms, which has shaped educational access and outcomes

for women (Baki, 2004; El-Sanabary, 1994). Gender segregation has long been a defining feature of the Saudi Arabian education system, rooted in deeply embedded social, cultural, and religious norms (AlMunajjed, 1997). Educational institutions in the Kingdom have traditionally operated under a dual-track model that separates males and females not only physically but also in terms of faculty access, pedagogical approaches, and institutional policies (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015).

However, the Saudi education landscape is undergoing a systematic transformation driven by Vision 2030, which emphasizes developing human capital and digital collaboration as enablers of economic diversification (Shafi, 2026). The transition is not merely administrative; it involves a profound shift in legitimacy. Increasingly, institutions and students recognize academic authority through pedagogical competence rather than through traditional gender roles.

Female Instructional Authority in Saudi HE

The appointment of female faculty to male undergraduate programs in Saudi Arabia is now a live research area. The Kingdom's pace of social and educational change has made the question urgent, and the implications for gender norms in education are significant (Alghofaily, 2024; AlJuhani, 2023). These reforms are important both socially and theoretically because they challenge traditional gender and encourage inclusivity. Data show that more women are enrolling in higher education and taking on leadership positions (Ahmed & Yusuf, 2024; Alotaibi, 2020). Even so, placing female instructors in front of male students remains contested. The classroom sits inside wider debates about gender equality and educational access (Abduljawad, 2022).

(Akbar et al., 2023) addresses how reforms have helped female instructors teach male students in Saudi Arabia, and how these changes fit within the country's unique cultural and institutional setting, especially in higher education. Three things in particular remain underexamined: whether reforms work, what hurdles they face, and how male students and their institutions respond (Abduljawad, 2022; AlJuhani, 2023). Alqahtani (2024) found that Vision 2030's discussion of women's empowerment does not fully appear in EFL textbooks. This points to a cultural lag in the curriculum. Broader policy reviews confirm that bureaucratic ideologies and cultural misalignment limit the deep transformation of gender norms (Iqbal et al., 2026).

Gender and Classroom Interaction in SLA

According to Vygotsky (1978), language acquisition is a socially mediated process in which interpersonal interaction drives cognitive development. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) explains that our mental abilities develop through social interactions, cultural settings, and activities. These factors are especially important for learning a new language, particularly a second language (Lantolf, 2002). Recent research has confirmed that SCT remains a central practice in L2 classrooms. It highlights the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), dynamic assessment, and the instruction-development dialectic as core frameworks for research-informed pedagogy (Lantolf & Poehner, 2023). Contemporary applications extend SCT principles to digital language learning contexts, emphasizing the importance of explicit mediation and scaffolding over implicit input alone (Lantolf & Xi, 2023)

ZPD is central to SCT. It is the space where learners improve by performing tasks with help from others, such as teachers or peers (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to Mitchell and Myles (2004), sociocultural theory portrays learners as active participants who change and engage with their own learning environments. Wertsch (1991) further argues that the sociocultural

perspective differs from other approaches, such as constructivism, due to its strong emphasis on learned social and cultural contexts.

WTC in Conservative Sociocultural Contexts

Maclntyre et al. (1998) describe L2 Willingness To Communicate (WTC) as an individual's preparedness to engage in conversation in a second language at a given moment with a particular interlocutor or group. L2 WTC is a complex, multidimensional construct that encompasses effective, social, psychological, linguistic, and communicative factors. It serves not only to describe and explain, but also to predict learners' engagement and communication using a second language. Numerous factors influence L2 willingness to communicate, with perceived communicative competence and communication anxiety among the most prominent (Baker & Maclntyre, 2000; Maclntyre, 1994; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). Additionally, learners' attitudes toward the international community, as well as prior and merchant experiences, have been identified as significant contributors to L2 WTC (Milani, 2007).

In conservative settings, WTC is becoming less of a fixed trait and more of a question of personal identity. Students no longer follow a pre-written script. They are working out how to reconcile their social identity with what the new classroom asks of them. Almansour & Almaneea (2024) found that motivation is the strongest in how flexible reconciliation is. Learners with high motivation are more likely to cross gender lines.

Online Learning as a Mediation Space

The digital platform is an important "mediating space" for gender interactions. Technology works as a symbolic buffer, or "scaffold," that reduces the risks of cross-gender communication and makes these interactions more structured and low-risk (Boualili & El Bakkali, 2025). The use of modern digital tools further facilitates these transitions, providing students with safe avenues to practice English and engage with instructors beyond traditional face-to-face constraints (Mubarak, 2026)

Mitchell and Myles (2004) state that this mediation occurs through learners' increasing mastery of mental tools. In addition, Lantolf (2002) identifies 3 distinct forms of mediation: through others (e.g., teachers), through self-regulation via private speech, and through cultural artifacts such as tasks and technologies. While the EFL classroom meets the needs of others, the teacher's role in scaffolding is crucial to learners' language development. Overall, this approach views human development as socially constructed, arising from interaction rather than individual efforts alone.

This study examines how well we understand the reforms that have enabled female instructors to teach male students in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the country's unique culture and higher education system. There is a knowledge gap regarding the effectiveness, challenges, and perceptions of these reforms, particularly concerning male students' acceptance and institutional support. Despite progress, the integration of female instructors into male-student classrooms remains a sensitive and complex issue, reflecting a broader debate over gender equality and access to education.

Vision 2030 Gender Reforms

Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's strategic plan to diversify the economy and modernize its social and cultural institutions. Gender reform sits at its core. The government has expanded

women's participation in education and the labor market and removed earlier limits on mobility and employment. These policy changes brought Saudi Arabia closer to global conversation about gender equality (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023; Bajabir, 2025). As the government focuses on youth and refugees, it is important to examine how young people, especially male students studying abroad, respond to these developments. Experiences with acculturation, identity development, and gender equality can influence how people imagine Saudi Arabia's future. Seeing balanced gender roles may affect whether learners accept or oppose the changes in Saudi Vision 2030. The success of these reforms may depend on how closely real-world conditions align with the goals outlined in policy discussions (Pilotti et al., 2021).

Theoretical Foundations

Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky's (1986) Social Cultural Theory (SCT) is one of the most influential frameworks in second language acquisition and continues to shape curriculum design and pedagogical practices in English language learning. Concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), prior knowledge, social interaction, and scaffolding have significantly informed ESL instruction. According to Vygotsky, language learning occurs primarily through social engagement, with cognitive development emerging as learners' goal of constructing knowledge under the guidance of adults or more experienced peers.

Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) ZPD describes the gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with help from others. Learning happened through guided interaction (Ohta, 2000; Lantolf, 2000). This idea has shaped the work of other theorists, such as Krashen (1985, 1982), who highlight the value of meaningful input in social settings. Prior knowledge forms the foundations for new learning (Garcia, 2005; Gestwicki, 1999); both authors argue that language learning is continuously modified and reconstructed through social experiences. Language learners bring diverse prior experiences that can be a valuable resource for effective language learning.

Poststructuralist Identity

This study draws on Bonny Norton's (2000, 2013) poststructuralist theory, which considers identity a socially constructed, continually evolving concept shaped by language practices. Post-structuralism argues that individuals are subjects with multiple, complex, and fluid identities that contradictions continuously reshape. These identities change over time and depend on different historical periods and social settings (Norton, 2000). This means language learners take an active role instead of just receiving information. From this perspective, language learners are active participants rather than passive recipients of input. Their willingness to speak depends on how they read their own social position, who holds power over them, and what linguistic and social resources they believe they can access (Norton, 2000).In the classroom, that reading is constantly being renegotiated- between what students were raised to expect and what the present moment asks of them. Norton's theory explains that learners might accept, challenge, or change the rules in a language classroom based on how they see themselves and others regarding gender, authority, and legitimacy (Norton, 2013).

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. The researcher adopted this design because it allows the simultaneous collection of both data types, allowing the statistical trends from the survey to be cross-validated and enriched by the in-depth personal experiences gathered in the interviews. According to Creswell (2014), mixed methods of research design involve merging or incorporating qualitative and quantitative research and data in a single study (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data comes from open-ended sources that do not have preset responses. In contrast, the researchers collect quantitative data from closed-ended sources such as tests, questionnaires, or psychological assessment instruments (Creswell, 2014). Johnson & Christensen (2014) also explain that using both methods together makes the research more valid because it allows for convergence, complementarity, and triangulation between two types of data.

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling and comprised 76 male undergraduate students aged 18 to 22 years. The participants were specifically selected because female instructors were teaching them. The researcher conducted the study at Umm Al-Qura University, a public university in the western region of Saudi Arabia in the holy city of Makkah, where males and females study on separate campuses. Most students were in their first year of study (79%), with a smaller proportion in their second year (19%). The students came from a range of academic disciplines, including nursing, business majors such as finance and accounting, and applied sciences. The students were required to take two English courses: English 1 in the first semester and English 2 in the second. The department designed these courses as English for General Purpose (EGP) courses to develop students' general English proficiency and support their academic communication skills.

Regarding English proficiency, nearly half of the participants were at the beginner level (47%), followed by intermediate learners (40%) and a smaller group of advanced learners (11%).

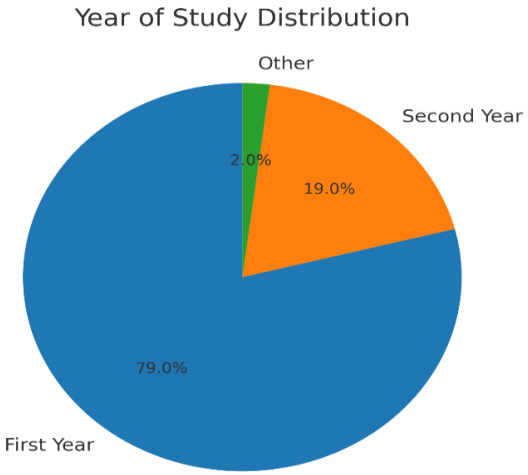


Figure 1. Distribution of participants by year of study

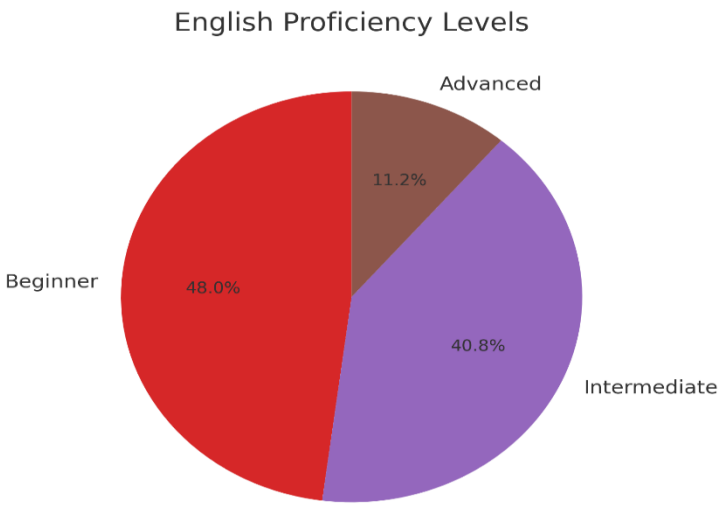


Figure 2. English proficiency level of participants

The researcher collected data in 2025 from a public university in the western region of Saudi Arabia. The students' population represented diverse regions across the country. Most participants indicated that they came from conservative family and social backgrounds, a contextual factor that is particularly relevant when experiencing interaction, participation, and willingness to communicate in gender integrated EFL settings.

Research Instruments

Survey

A structured questionnaire collected quantitative data on students' perceptions, experiences, and views of gender-focused EFL instruction. The survey used a 5-point Likert scale, with options from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It had three sections: one focused on students' views of female EFL instructors, classroom interaction, and willingness to communicate, while another covered motivations for learning English.

The researcher administered the survey to a sample of Saudi male EFL students enrolled in courses taught by female instructors. The course is usually taken in the first year as a mandatory course and covers General English. The researcher developed the survey items from established literature in TESOL, sociocultural theory, and willingness-to-communicate research, and then assessed the instrument's internal consistency and the internal consistency of its subscales. The researcher tested the instrument using Cronbach's alpha (α) to confirm acceptable reliability before conducting the statistical analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to complement the survey results and better understand the students' experiences. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. The

researcher conducted it in either Arabic or English. This helped students share their views accurately and comfortably.

The interview explored how participants felt about working with female instructors, their comfort in class, any communication issues, and their knowledge of gender integration reforms. However, this qualitative section did not provide detailed context or further explanation of the quantitative findings.

Research Procedures

Quantitative Analysis

The researcher analyzed quantitative survey data with descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and overall response patterns. Reliability analysis used Cronbach's alpha (α) to examine the internal consistency of the survey instrument and its subscales.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data through observations of people's actions and words. This approach is naturalistic and interpretative, emphasizing how people make sense of phenomena in their social lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). According to Berg (2007), it involves understanding meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions.

Kandel (2020) lists several features of qualitative research. These include observing natural settings without control, findings shaped by the researcher's own views and interests, and an emphasis on understanding causes, meanings, interpretations, and implications. Braun and Clarke (2006) described six steps for researchers using thematic analysis. These are: becoming familiar with the data, coding it, finding patterns or themes, reviewing those themes, defining them, and finally writing the report. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, the researcher thematically coded the semi-structured interview data in MAXQDA, which supported the systematic management of codes and themes. This approach effectively detects and interprets patterns in qualitative data. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher carefully reviewed each transcript multiple times to familiarize himself with the content. Initial codes are assigned to meaningful segments of the data to capture the key ideas and insights expressed by the participants.

The researcher implemented in vivo coding because it captures participants' exact words and produces richer data for analysis (Saldaña &Omasta, 2016). MAXQDA helps organize and manage the coding process, enabling the grouping of codes into broader themes and the direct addressing of the research questions. The researcher refined the themes through an iterative process to ensure they accurately represent the data. Finally, the researcher defined and named the themes to offer a clear understanding of the participants' experiences and selected direct quotes to illustrate the main themes. This method enabled a comprehensive and detailed analysis consistent with the study's exploratory focus.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the quantitative findings present male EFL students' perceptions of being taught by female instructors and online university courses. The analysis comprises three main dimensions. First, students' perceptions of teaching clarity in instructional support focused on their excitement to assess how effectively the course content was delivered. Second, the

dimension of interaction and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was analyzed to determine the extent of student engagement and comfort in gender-integrated online environments. Finally, the study examines the dimension of perceived learning effectiveness in relation to progress in language learning.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for male EFL students' perceptions of being taught by female instructors in online & hybrid EFL courses*

Dimension	Item	M	SD
Teaching Clarity & Support	I can easily understand the lesson from my female ESL teacher.	3.82	1.28
	The pronunciation of letters and words is clear when taught by a female ESL teacher.	3.74	1.31
	My female ESL teacher is effective inside and outside the ESL class.	3.88	1.22
Interaction & WTC	I feel confident and comfortable speaking in English in front of my female ESL teacher.	3.62	1.30
	I can freely express my thoughts in front of my female teacher.	3.51	1.19
	It embarrasses me to express my opinions in front of my female ESL teacher.	2.94	1.41
	Even when I am well-prepared, I feel anxious about speaking in front of female ESL teachers.	2.88	1.37
Perceived Learning Effectiveness	I learn English well in online classes taught by female teachers.	4.26	1.56
	My female ESL teacher always motivates me.	3.91	1.25

Note 1. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

RQ1: What are male students' perceptions of being taught by female EFL teachers?

Descriptive statistics reveal that male EFL students generally held positive perceptions of being taught by female instructors and in an online university setting. The results are organized into three key dimensions: teaching clarity and support, interaction and willingness to communicate (WTC), and received learning effectiveness. Means scores above the scale midpoint (3.00 on a 5-point Likert scale) suggest overall agreement with positively worded statements.

Students gave positive ratings for teaching clarity and support. They agreed that lessons from female instructors were easy to understand (M=3.82, SD=1.28) and that their pronunciation was clear and accessible (M=3.74, SD=1.31). Furthermore, students rated the perceived and structural effectiveness of female teachers positively (M = 3.88, SD = 1.22), suggesting they viewed EFL female instructors as supportive and competent educators.

RQ2: How do these perceptions relate to interaction and willingness to communicate (WTC)?

The results for interaction and willingness to communicate showed moderate trends. For example, the statement" I feel confident and comfortable speaking in English in front of my female EFL teacher" had a mean score of M=3.62 (SD=1.30), which suggests that participants tended to agree. Similarly, "in an EFL class, I can freely express my thoughts and in front of my female teacher" yielded a mean of M=3.51 (SD=1.19), indicating A generally positive perception of classroom participation.

In contrast, negatively worded items reflected lower mean scores and greater dispersion. The item" it embarrasses me to express my opinion in front of my female EFL teacher" had the mean of M=2.94 (SD=1.41), while "even if I am well prepared for EFL class, I feel anxious to speak in front of female EFL teachers" showed the mean of M=2.88 (SD=1.37). These scores indicate that, on average, the students were not highly anxious; there was substantial variability, reflecting differing levels of comfort.

Overall, the WTC results show that many students felt confident and willing to communicate or work with female instructors. However, a significant number still felt uncomfortable or anxious, which may be linked to their previous experience in gender-integrated settings.

Perceived Learning Effectiveness

Items measuring perceived learning effectiveness demonstrate constant positive results. The statement "I learn English well in online classes taught by female teachers" received the highest average score among all survey items (M=4.26, SD=1.56), indicating strong agreement with its effectiveness.

The item "my female ESL teacher always motivates me" had a mean score of M = 3.91, SD = 1.29. This result shows that students saw female instructors as motivating and supportive. Survey items on comprehension and instructional effectiveness also had average scores above the neutral midpoint.

Overall, most learning-related items had mean scores above 3.80. This suggests that female instructors were effective at helping students learn and stay engaged in the hybrid EFL course.

Reliability

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90, indicating strong reliability of the overall scale.

Table 2. *Reliability analysis for the overall perception scale*

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Overall Perception Scale	9	.90

Qualitative Results

To address Research Question 3- "How do Saudi male EFL students describe the challenges and opportunities of being taught by female instructors for the first time?" the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six male EFL students enrolled for the first time in female-led English courses. Thematic analysis identified six predominant themes: (1) prioritization of competence over gender, (2) modality as an influential mediating variable, (3) bilingual clarity in pedagogical approaches, (4) normalization of female authority within the educational setting, (5)

personal and cultural adaptation processes, and (6) technical impediments as the principal challenge.

Competence Over Gender as the Central Evaluative Lens

Throughout the interviews, students emphasized that instructional competence was more important than gender-related factors. Participants consistently describe their female instructors as eloquent and methodical, demonstrating a high degree of professionalism. One participant stated, "I do not see a difference based on gender. For me, it is based on the individual teaching methodology and personality." Another student said, "She explains listen clearly, I am learning effectively." Even students who initially held religious or cultural beliefs ultimately regarded their female instructors as competent and influential. These findings align with the ongoing shifts within Saudi higher education, which progressively adopt professionalism over customary gender rules, as specified in the 2030 plan.

Bilingual Instruction as a Pedagogical Asset

Students reported that using Arabic to help them communicate with their English instructor made it much easier to understand the lessons. Simplifying vocabulary and grammar was a major strength for the students. Participant one explained, "Using both Arabic and English helped us understand the vocabulary and the grammar." In addition, another interviewee added, "Using Arabic translations for vocabulary and grammar is very useful." By deliberately drawing on students' L1, the instructors used a translanguaging pedagogy. This approach supported cognitive access without compromising target-language immersion. These findings indicate that the bilingual instructional methodology adopted by the female educators not only addresses learners' linguistic needs but also aligns with contemporary second-language acquisition research.

Normalization of Female Authority in Academic Contexts

Different interviewees related their personal experiences with a female ESL instructor to a form of social reform. For example, participant 3 observed, "Now we see women working in different fields, and this is part of the change." Connecting this to the objective of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 on gender inclusion in education and the labor sector. Additionally, another participant mentioned that "it is part of the development, and I think this is becoming normal that we see this in the university." These statements reflect a growing internalization of the national reform narrative and a gradual acceptance of female authority figures within the education system.

Personal Adaptation and Emotional Shifts

Some participants said they felt uncomfortable at first because the situation was new or unfamiliar to their culture. However, most people said they got used to it and eventually accepted it. One of the interviewees commented, "I was a bit unsure at the beginning, but now I feel more OK and comfortable." This illustrates how exposure fosters adaptation. Another interviewee reflected, and he said," I was surprised at the beginning of the semester, but after a few sessions, I started to get used to it." Notably, participants more often attributed reluctance to speak in class to personality than to instructor gender. Another example is that one student said, "I am a shy person, so I do not think having a female teacher was a problem for me."

Technical Barriers as Primary Challenges

Participants identified technology, not gender, as the main source of difficulty. Students highlighted slow internet speeds, Blackboard issues, and difficulty focusing during online sessions as key obstacles. One participant explained, "Honestly, there is no major challenge. The only difficulties are technical issues… not the faculty member." These findings emphasize that perceived instructional limitations are infrastructural rather than instructor-specific, reinforcing the legitimacy of female instructors in digital learning environments.

Discussion

This section explains the key findings by examining the research questions, previous studies, interpretations, and relevant theory. It also discusses what these findings mean for EFL educators and higher education in Saudi Arabia as the country works on Vision 2030.

According to Research Q1 (What are Saudi male EFL students' perceptions of female instructors in terms of teaching effectiveness, comfort, and legitimacy in online and hybrid classrooms?), most Saudi male EFL students have positive views of their female instructors. The data show that male EFL students found lessons comprehensible, the pronunciation clear, and instructors effective overall. In addition, the interview data show that the students describe their female teachers as professional, eloquent, and of high teaching quality.

These results match Abduljawad (2022) findings, who found that initial shyness does not affect learning outcomes for Saudi male students. They also align with the findings of Taqi et al. (2015) and Noorbakhsh et al. (2018), who report that teacher gender is not the primary factor in how teaching success is perceived. Taken together, these student evaluations indicate a profound shift in the academic environment. Students now define the right to teach in terms of professional competence rather than traditional legitimacy. This trend aligns with recent findings that pedagogical skill is the primary criterion for student satisfaction, regardless of the teacher's gender.

Regarding research Q 2 (how do Saudi male EFL students experience classroom interaction, participation, and Willingness To Communicate (WTC) when taught by female instructors), the data demonstrate that participation in the educational environment remains positive within the gender-inclusive context. Such engagement emerges through mediated gender contact, in which the digital platform serves as a symbolic intermediary that mitigates cultural apprehension. Within this context, students undergo identity recognition, moving from conventional social rules to a more adaptable "learner identity" that emphasizes academic advancement over gender-related reluctance. This finding confirms the assertion by Alhazmi and Nyland (2015) that e-learning promotes an inclusive atmosphere that eliminates conventional barriers.

These results align with Armugam and Kesavan (2025), who show that computer-mediated communication tools reduce the social costs of cross-gender L2 interaction by softening the cues that trigger cultural modesty norms. Al-Mudhayan and Alruwaili (2025) state that evidence from Saudi EFL contexts confirms that reduced social visibility in synchronous computer-mediated communication increases participation and lowers anxiety. In addition, virtual classes help increase L2 interaction and positive attitudes among Saudi undergraduates (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020).

The current study demonstrates that digital mediation facilitates a transition from traditional Constraints to a new participatory standard in Saudi higher education. The data showed that online and hybrid platforms enable mediated gender contact, in which technology serves as a low-risk scaffold that reduces anxiety during classroom interactions. This process fosters a

continuous identity that recognizes the renegotiation among male learners as they shift from conservative social rules to an academic identity that prioritizes pedagogical support and instructional competence (Wang & Reimann, 2025). Consequently, a significant shift in legitimacy occurs. Students initially engaged with the female instructor's expertise as a mediating tool before encountering them as a fully embodied academic authority. Over time, this results in institutional normalization, where cross gender academic interaction is no longer a conscious adjustment but an internalized and "normal "component of the learner's regularity toolkit (Almekhled & Petrie, 2024).

However, the research findings reveal that substantial differences and willingness to communicate as a minority of the students still report levels of discomfort or anxiety. This supports the poststructuralist view that identity is the dynamic site of negotiation rather than a fixed trait. For the learners, the traditional gender script is currently undergoing active identity renegotiation rather than being fully replaced by a new classroom expectation. This hesitation reflects a transitional identity position within a society in which entrenched cultural norms meet the evolving participatory demands of the modern classroom.

According to research question 3 (how do Saudi male EFL students describe the challenges and opportunities of being taught by a female instructor for the first time?), the qualitative data reveal 6 dominant themes. However, two of them are especially important: the displacement of cultural periods by inference and by fresh structural ones, and the normalization of the situation of female academic authority.

The data show that male students prioritize technical difficulties, such as connectivity issues and platform form glitches, over gender-related concerns. (Apriani et al. state that male students' barriers are predominantly technical and infrastructural in nature. The finding decenters the instructor as a source of cultural disruption, replacing traditional sociocultural challenges (Baki,2004; AlMunajjed) with infrastructural ones. Such results support the argument made by Akbar et al. (2023) that educational success in this transitional period depends more on technological reliability than on gender dynamics.

The second part of the theme is institutional normalization, which comes through most clearly in a student's statement: "It is part of the development, and I think this is becoming normal that we see this in the university." Students are not just accepting female instructors. Instead, they view this acceptance as part of Saudi Arabia's national progress under Vision 2030. This means that micro-level classroom experience and micro-level reform policy are now reinforcing each other, which is consistent with Alhawsawi and Jawhar's (2023) findings on the empowerment dimension of Saudi educational reform.

The data show that bilingual instruction is a significant strength, serving as a symbolic tool for mediation within the classroom. These results exemplify a shift in legitimacy under Vision 2030, in which students and institutions now regard female academic authority as a standard feature rather than a disruption. Online platforms serve as a digital buffer, enabling mediated gender contact and allowing students to adopt their cultural views (identity renegotiation). Although this pattern is becoming standard (institutional normalization), it remains an ongoing transition. Full integration still depends on resolving technical issues and supporting students who continue to feel uneasy.

Conclusion

This study explored how Saudi male EFL undergraduates view female instructors and online or hybrid classrooms. It focuses on teaching effectiveness, classroom interaction, willingness to communicate, and challenges and opportunities of being taught by female instructors for the first time. The findings showed that male students generally hold positive perceptions of their female EFL teachers. For Research Question 1, students rated female instructors as clear, motivated, and effective, with the highest score recorded for learning gain in female-led online classes. According to research question two, students reported moderate to high comfort and willingness to communicate, supported by the affordances of online and hybrid modalities such as windows, breakout rooms, and email. For Research Question 3, the main challenges reported were technical rather than cultural. In contrast, the main opportunity included bilingual instructor support and the normalization of female academic authority as part of Vision 2030 reform.

The study introduced the concept of mediated gender contact as an addition to the WTC literature to capture how digital modality scaffolds cross-gender L2 participation and a conservative cultural context. Practically, the study offers concrete guidance for EFL teachers, teachers' educators, and policymakers in Saudi Arabia. First, professional development for female instructors should foreground hybrid and online participation tools. Trainers should foreground pedagogical clarity, motivational support, and bilingual scaffolding, since these are the qualities that students explicitly endorse. Second, Institutions should retain hybrid and online participation as culturally responsive WTC scaffolds rather than treated as pandemic-era expedience. Third, policymakers should invest in digital infrastructure, since the binding constraint on female-led EFL instruction is now technological rather than cultural.

It is important to mention here three limitations of the present study. First, because the sample size is relatively small (n=76, n=interview) and drawn from a single public university in the western region of Saudi Arabia, the findings do not generalize broadly. Second, the study relies on self-reported survey and interview data; it did not triangulate learners' perceptions with classroom observations or interaction data. Third, the study was conducted only in online and hybrid contexts, so the findings do not capture how the same students perceive female instructors in fully face-to-face classrooms.

These limitations point to several possible directions for future research. For example, researchers could explore how female students perceive male EFL instructors to better understand gender integration in Saudi higher education. They should also consider whether the legitimacy shift described here depends on the learning format or has already moved into traditional settings. In addition, a longitudinal design that tracks the same cohorts over time would help model how identity renegotiation evolves as Vision 2030 reforms continue to mature. Taken together, the present study and its proposed extensions can deepen our understanding of how macro-level policy reform and micro-level classroom dynamics interact to reshape gender, majority, and dynamic authority in the Saudi EFL classroom.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for male EFL students' perceptions of being taught by female instructors in online & hybrid EFL courses*

Dimension	Item	M	SD
Teaching Clarity & Support	I can easily understand the lesson from my female ESL teacher.	3.82	1.28
	The pronunciation of letters and words is clear when taught by a female ESL teacher.	3.74	1.31
	My female ESL teacher is effective inside and outside the ESL class.	3.88	1.22
Interaction & WTC	I feel confident and comfortable speaking in English in front of my female ESL teacher.	3.62	1.30
	I can freely express my thoughts in front of my female teacher.	3.51	1.19
	It embarrasses me to express my opinions in front of my female ESL teacher.	2.94	1.41
	Even when I am well-prepared, I feel anxious about speaking in front of female ESL teachers.	2.88	1.37
Perceived Learning Effectiveness	I learn English well in online classes taught by female teachers.	4.26	1.56
	My female ESL teacher always motivates me.	3.91	1.25