

Debating the Mixed Gender Classroom and Saudi Female Students Visibility in Coeducation

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Abstract—In Saudi Arabia, the country is making strides to improve its educational sector, specifically in coeducation. While the concept of female students in leadership positions is novel in this country, the government is endeavoring to reduce gender segregation and same-sex education in schools, to empower women. There are already existing coeducation opportunities for females pursuing undergraduate levels in medical majors, including for scholarship pursuits outside the nation. Many universities aim to enroll thousands of students in Saudi Arabia's first coeducational higher-education programs. Furthermore, studies show that education can be even more reinforced through enhancing ESL methods in this higher education, enabling both male and female graduates to compete with peers worldwide. Therefore, this study examined three Saudi ESL students who took English classes at Root Hall, Union University (pseudo name), exploring their viewpoints about mixed-gender classrooms and their influence on English language development. The results determined that their confidence significantly improved through coeducational programs and English language proficiency.

Index Terms—coeducation, ESL, ELTE, TCs, mixed-gendered

I. INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia has made a notable shift in recent years to empower females within the workplace. Unfortunately, these same advancements have not been applied to the country's educational system. Many schools and universities still segregate students based on gender, providing only same-sex or single-gender educational opportunities. These practices are founded upon Arab culture and traditions, including traditional Islamic interpretations, especially since this has discouraged men and women from interacting socially. This has led to strict enforcement of gender separation within the educational system, as both cultural and religious aspects inherent in the country have tainted these systems.

However, there have been recent strides to address this issue, aiming at empowering females in the country. The Saudi government has invested energy and time to improve the educational system, allowing women to enroll in universities that have traditionally only served men (Al Munajjed, 2009). These efforts have led to more women receiving higher education. Literacy rates for women in Saudi Arabia were only 2% in 1970, but only four decades later, this rate has increased to 91%, compared to 97% for men (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Saudi officials claim that they have almost eliminated illiteracy among younger generations of women (World Economic Forum, 2014). According to Tanveer (2021), recent statistics from the Saudi education ministry show that almost 52% of university graduates were women in 2014, with over 35,000 female Saudis studying abroad. This increasing prevalence of education among women in Saudi Arabia may be attributed to the fact that females face more social restrictions, which subsequently encourages them to pursue this advanced education (Cordesman, 2003).

II. THEORITICAL RATIONALE

The theoretical rationale for this research is derived from feminist theory. This theory focuses on the idea that gender is socially constructed and that the current patriarchal system creates unequal opportunities for women. The feminist theory seeks to challenge these inequalities and create a society that recognizes the importance of gender equality. The debate around mixed-gender classrooms and Saudi female students' visibility in coeducation is an important one as it seeks to challenge the traditional gender roles that have been assigned to Saudi female students (Sousa, 2006). It creates an environment where they can feel visible and be given the same opportunities as their male counterparts (Sousa, 2006). This can be seen as a way of challenging patriarchal norms that have been in place in Saudi Arabia for centuries and creating a more equitable educational environment. Feminist theory also argues that education is an essential tool for creating social change and that it has the potential to create a more equitable society.

By challenging traditional gender roles in the classroom, Saudi female students can be allowed to develop their skills and be given the same educational opportunities as their male peers. The main idea behind co-education is that it helps to promote interaction and collaboration between both sexes, which can lead to increased understanding between genders and foster a more equitable and tolerant social culture. Studies have shown that mixed-gender classrooms can promote higher academic achievement, as both sexes can benefit from a richer range of educational experiences (Gardner, 2011; Gurian, 2009; Levine, 2002; Sax, 2005). It can help to create a more inclusive and equitable society

and create an environment where female students are given the same respect and opportunities as their male counterparts.

Many studies have focused on the benefits of single-sex education. For example, Hughes (2006) found that public school single-sex environments are conducive to improved student achievement, particularly for minority students, such as those in poverty. This is because there are better behaviors within these single-sex classrooms, with teachers concentrating on learning-style differences (Hughes, 2006). By offering single-sex education, students are given opportunities to learn in environments that do not have as many distractions (related to the other sex), highlighting the prioritization of academic performance; furthermore, teachers can develop curricula tailored to each sex (Hughes, 2006).

The theoretical framework in this research study is based on the concept of gender segregation and its implications on society. This paper focuses on the debate around the implementation of gender-mixed classrooms in Saudi Arabia and how it impacts the visibility of female students in coeducation. The theoretical framework of this paper is rooted in gender studies, which examines the role of gender in society. The paper then draws on sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, emphasizing the importance of interactions between individuals and the meanings attributed to those interactions (Gurian et al., 2008). These theories help to explain how gender segregation can create an environment of gender inequality and how it impacts the visibility of female students in coeducation. The authors also draw on feminist theories to explore the power dynamics between men and women in society's education. This is done to analyze further the effects of gender segregation on female students and their visibility in coeducation. Finally, the paper applies postcolonial theory, which examines how power is distributed in societies with a history of colonialism. This is used to explore the implications of traditional gender roles and how they can be challenged through the implementation

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ESL Education and Identity Conceptualization

Studies show that language educators in ESL classrooms frequently do not consider their students' cognitive or emotional characteristics (Jackson, 2008; Parkinson & Crouch, 2011). This is a necessity in this learning process. In a recent meta-analysis, 184 studies were analyzed on the effects of single-sex and coeducational schooling on students (Pahlke et al., 2014). This represented 1.6 million students from 21 nations throughout Grades K-12, with multiple outcomes examined, including mathematics, science, educational aspirations, self-concept, and gender stereotyping.

B. English Language Learning and Gender Identities—Single-Gender Education

Single-gender education exists in other societies besides Islam, such as Europe and the U.S. Many schools have been single-gendered, with core courses in parallel education. Studies have shown both the advantages and disadvantages of these single-gendered educational systems. For example, a systematic review at Union University (UU) which was undertaken in 2005, compared single-sex schooling to coeducational. The researchers failed to find sufficient evidence to indicate that single-gender education was superior to coeducation. However, other research has stated that single-gender programs have their benefits. They enable female students to feel more comfortable expressing themselves when there are no males in the classrooms (Salomone, 2006). Furthermore, a UCLA study corroborated these findings, determining that single-gendered classrooms allow teachers and professors to spend more time with the students and help prevent any awkwardness (Stets & Burke, 2003).

Within Saudi Arabia, male and female students are separated within higher education, although recent changes have allowed male professors to teach both male and female students in graduate programs (Alsuwaida, 2016). At the local university in Riyadh, several video conferencing classes are taught by male professors, which have both male and female students. However, group discussions were not possible with the setup, while there were other challenges, including not being able to see the blackboard.

C. Test Scores Data

A comparative study was conducted at Root Hall and Saint Mary of the Wood, with data, gathered and then analyzed (Barry, 2019). The goal was to compare the achievements of Saudi female students enrolled in a coed class to those of female students enrolled in a single-gendered class at UU.

TABLE 1
FEMALE STUDENTS' SCORES IN THE ESL CO-ED CLASS BY THE END OF THE SEMESTER

Institute	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD
Graduate			
Interlink	20	87	28
SMOW	16	91	20
	36	89	24
Undergraduate			
Interlink	49	79	28
SMOW	32	56	26
	81	68	28

The results showed that female students in Root Halls' LLL coed class (undergraduate level) were in the 50th percentile in mean achievement score, which was very close to the female students in Saint Mary of the Wood's single education class (graduate level). However, this graduate class was still below the 50th percentile, indicating the students' achievement was not as great as that in the undergraduate coed class. Statistical analysis, including Cohen's *d* and mean scores, determined there was not a meaningful effect ($d = .12$) in the LLL classes, while there was a slight effect ($d = .19$) in the graduate class.

IV. METHODS

A. *Research Design*

A case study was undertaken on four Saudi female students enrolled at a Saudi university. The aim of the study was for these students to engage in reflection while carefully examining their language skills development. They were expected to reflect on their experience-based assessment by comparing their learning in both coed and single-gendered classes. The participants were told to reflect upon their experiences from KG to 12, noting similarities and differences, including barriers and challenges, between mixed-gendered classrooms and single-gendered classrooms they had been enrolled in over the years. Using journaling to collect student data, a narrative research approach was utilized to examine this lived experience.

Additionally, interviews were conducted, enabling students to discuss these experiences with the researchers. Observations were made on how the students spoke and "how" they reflected upon these lived experiences, noting facial expressions, tone, and pauses. This enabled the researchers to capture the students' past, present, and future perceptions of these classrooms. Unfortunately, there were no video recordings for the researchers to examine after the interviews.

B. *Participants and Context*

The narrative was focused on four Saudi female students aged between 22 and 23 years' old who were enrolled in the ESL program offered at UU. Furthermore, they all had similar demographics and backgrounds, as they were from mid-class families and had studied in public schools before enrolling in the ESL program. This program offered a coed class setting, which was noticeably different from the predominantly single-education classes with which the two students had previous experience. A comparative case study research design was chosen, as this enables a more comprehensive reflection on the impacts of society on people's experiences. Since the study design is founded upon socio-cultural theories of education, it is a preferable choice for investigating policy and practice (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2019). Finally, the sampling used in this study was convenient, since there were only two students who participated.

C. *Data Collection and Analysis*

There were two primary data sources, including bi-weekly journals and semi-structured interviews. These interviews provided narrative frames within which the spatiotemporal dimensions of the participants' experiences could be gleaned. Furthermore, the researchers also gathered information such as English language learning histories and biographical identities of the four students. Five in-depth interviews were performed, with participants being interviewed for about 45 minutes to an hour through the Google meet application. This enabled the researchers and participants to engage in voice-note conversations which could be recorded, enabling the interviews to be transcribed later so they could be analyzed. The researchers then chronologized the information so the participants' experiences could be more easily examined. This enabled the four classroom settings to be more successfully compared. The data were analyzed by Dedoose, which aided in data analysis, codification, and identification of themes.

V. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. *Tension and Gender Identity*

According to Howe et al. (2006), interactive activities should be included in student learning programs to increase the interactions between students from diverse backgrounds. The participants in the current study effectively utilized interactive activities to connect with other students to learn about the topics such as politics and power that were formerly restricted to them (Jackson, 2008). There is an indication that when the language learning experience is made more interactive and pleasant, it supports the ability of the students to gain understanding and knowledge. One of the participants explained how she was obliged to convince her family to cross borders of societal traditions by accomplishing her domestic duties. When faced with the pressure of tight schedules at university and home, the students opt to devote themselves to the subjects they view as essential, mainly the major subjects. Major subjects are mostly prioritized since they have more credit points and marks. Since the university offers the ESL course as minor, female students find it difficult to prioritize it, despite it being essential in advancing their language skills and gaining confidence. One participant indicated that she mainly studies ESL topics that can be discussed in class or those that can be examined. The engagement of female students in the ESL programme is reduced to the bare minimum of passing examinations mainly due to the pressures they face at the university and at home.

A large part of the semi-structured interviews involved questioning the participants regarding how their gender identities interact with the new ESL classroom environment, their learning responsibilities, and how the interactions affected their learning experiences. One of the main themes from the semi-structured interviews is that the participants primarily perceive coeducation in a higher education institute as a chance for them to challenge the individualities imposed on them by society. The bi-weekly journals also showed that both participants tried to participate in all the university's educational activities. Through the interviews, the participants also stated that studying English was essential to their university life since it helped them build confidence throughout their ESL program. Female students perceive that when they use English to interact with other students, they are seen as individuals who are not constrained in their societal roles. One of the participants shared her reflection as follows:

Growing up, I always assumed that men thought females existed only to work in houses. But now I know we can do more. Through studying, a woman can become an important person who builds society [...] besides having the right motivation, and one must also have English language skills to understand the teachings. As females, we are more motivated to study hard due to past experiences that we may have had regarding our gender. We aim to change our lives. Studying English gives us the confidence and skills to complete our education.

B. ESL and Imagined Border Crossing

Analysis of the participants' bi-weekly journals depicted the variances between the new ESL program experience in Root Hall and that of their previous public school. One participant stated in her journal that she was now more self-confident about joining classroom discussions and demonstrating that she has the same capabilities as the male gender. According to Howe et al. (2006), by giving students a chance to learn and practice the language in class, the ESL program assists in creating the students' confidence. The program sometimes mainly utilizes activities such as debates to generate student discussions. Both the journals and the interviews depict that the students view debates as an activity that allows them to negotiate using English and learn the meaning of different words. The more interested they got in the debate activities, the more they got the encouragement to use other resources to further their English language skills, understanding, and knowledge. One of the students notes in her journal that at first, she did not know how to speak in front of the male students, but most of them were devoted to supporting her, and thus she managed to start speaking, which is how she became a frequent speaker.

However, some students expressed annoyance with some English textbooks that had distressing images that made their English learning unpleasant. The images show women doing house chores such as cooking, ironing, and cleaning while men are shown studying, operating computers, and watching TV. According to Rouse (2002) and Zahra (2005), images such as these reflect the pervasive socio-cultural norms in the typically male-dominated society. The English learning dynamics eventually make female students lose interest in the ESL class despite joining it to advance their English-speaking skills. The findings match those of Amna (2009), who studied in Pakistan and focused on identity and curriculum in primary education. She notes that women's illiteracy can be partly attributed to the educational system provided by the government. Women cannot consider themselves capable if the textbooks have pictures of boys or men dominating all fields of life. In contrast, girls or women are portrayed as timid, submissive, and restricted to house chores.

C. Reconceptualizing Participants' Identities in a Mixed-Gender ESL Classroom

Besides enjoying learning in the ESL program, the participants indicate that they experience extensive involvement in balancing their student and gender identities. The participants' roles as university students seemed to conflict with their gender identities associated with their families and expected family responsibilities. Females are expected to undertake all domestic tasks, including cleaning, washing, and cooking, despite having male siblings or some family members who can help (Evans, 2014; Sullivan, 2009). Therefore, women are more unlikely to receive help or support with house chores even though she is needed to dedicate their time to their learning. The students report that the communication gap between male and female students increased when the male students dominated class discussions. Some female students even opted to stop participating when the male students took it too far to cite religious sources to prove their claims. Sometimes, the teacher does not note the distress of the female students and thus takes the situation passively, making them fail to intervene.

D. Students Reviews

Sometimes, the teachers also employ learned stereotypical gender projection as mediated identity construction. For example, one student notes in her journal that she was frustrated when she questioned the picture the teacher had given the class to discuss. The teacher defended portraying male roles in the image as realistic and fair. The learning morale of female students gets destroyed when they see images representing women as beings confined at home (Ebrahimi & Yarahmadzahi, 2015; Smyth, 2010). The student recalls the situation calmly, indicating that her frustration had reduced as the female role in society changed. The other student depicts her annoyance with male students showing their power in class discussions. She notes that at one time, she was incapable of saying anything despite having a lot of things to say. The male students were aggressive and confident with their arguments, which made her lose her confidence to say anything, and she ended up remaining silent the whole time.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The study findings show that coeducation in the language classroom has several positive effects, including falsifying wrong societal behaviors or attitudes. In the uncontrolled studies, there were some modest advantages for single-sex schooling in mathematics performance but not science performance; furthermore, controlled studies demonstrated only minor differences between the students (Pahlke et al., 2014). Therefore, the findings from this meta-analysis indicate that single-sex education does not provide benefits compared to coeducational settings (Pahlke et al., 2014).

Through the class discussions, such as debates promoted by the ESL course, misconceptions are corrected as stereotyped societal attitudes are challenged. Coeducation enables one gender to see the other as equal and view everyone individually, not as a generalized group. The study findings support the study, Jackson (2008), where it was found that a coeducation environment fosters interaction and inclusiveness. The students cultivate mutual respect as they understand and support each other (Orfan & Niazi, 2021; Narwana & Rathee, 2017). A coeducation environment also creates a situation whereby females develop the confidence to share their ideologies. For example, with the ESL course, they learn how to speak English fluently and have enough courage to argue in class discussions substantively.

This study demonstrated the benefits of a coeducational classroom system. The two Saudi Arabian women who participated in the study perceived coeducation in a higher education institute as an opportunity to contest the identities imposed upon them by society. Furthermore, they reported that studying English was considered a vital aspect of their university life, with the ESL program helping to build their confidence and motivating them to participate in classroom discussions. Unfortunately, there are still male-dominant discussions ongoing in these classrooms. Male students dominated over the fewer female students in these discussions of gender roles, exacerbating the communication gap.

In contrast, the teacher – who was male – did not provide the support the female students needed. Without teacher intervention in these unfair discussions and shows of power, it can make female students even less likely to participate, negating the potential benefits of coeducation. However, the two participants saw the other classes more favorably, as their desire to know about previously prohibited topics motivated them to put more effort into the ESL program. Therefore, the female students' English language learning experience was much more pleasant and interactive, supporting their ability to attain new knowledge and understanding.

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