

The Impact of Gender on Language Acquisition of Saudi Women

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Abstract: *The study investigates the role of gender in acquiring a second language for Saudi students. This research is to help ESL and TESL/ TESOL teachers understand their students better. In addition, to enrich the literature with gender role studies in second language acquisition.*

Keywords: gender, communicative competence, ESL, TESOL, impact, acquisition, nationality, Saudi female

1. Introduction

Being able to communicate in English has become necessary in the world for business, to get a job or even complete education. The number of Saudi students who are studying in the USA is high. Per the Department of Commerce, in 2016, the number of Saudi students in the United States reached 111,000. Moving to study abroad is a big challenge for Saudis, both female and male. Everyone tries as hard as they possibly can to achieve a dream. That doesn't mean there is no difference between male and female students in the way of studying and learning. Looking at educational background in Saudi Arabia as the heart of the Islamic World, one may find explanation for such differences. For example, students from early stages go to different schools so that male teachers in male schools teach male student and females are segregated in female schools and taught by only female teachers. Except for some university departments and medical colleges at higher education, where women may mingle with men in certain classes and labs and can be taught by male instructors.

Generally, women usually try to be perfect in not only learning English but they worry a lot about committing mistakes. Contrary, men can tolerate learning difficulties. So, there is a difference from biological point of view. Females and males are different in cognitive ability and learning style. The differences are in basic physiological functions, like in the development of the brain, and in higher-level cortical function (Keefe, 1982). This research explains why the communicative competence for Saudi female in USA are less than male because of some barriers that are related to culture.

1.1 Hypothesis of Study

Gender plays a role in learning English, especially for Saudi women in the U.S.A in term of communicative competencies.

1.2 The Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study was to see the impact of gender on Saudi's women who are studying English as a second language in the USA, especially Saudi female students in Russellville, AR, attending Arkansas Tech University, where I study at present. The study investigates

the role of gender in acquiring a second language for Saudi students. This research is to help ESL and TESL/ TESOL teachers understand their students better. In addition, to enrich the literature with gender role studies in second language acquisition.

2. Literature Review

Understanding the difference between sex and gender is important for this study. The first concept, *Sex*, refers to a person's biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex (i.e., atypical combinations of features that usually distinguish male from female). There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia. The second concept, *Gender*, refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity (Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients).

According to Daif-Allah, research indicates that girls have a very strong belief that they are better than men at learning foreign languages. Saudi females are more focused on accuracy, while males are more focused on fluency (Daif-Allah, 2012). Most evidence shows that girls and boys perform at the same level, but girls achieved higher grades than boys in EFL learning (Zoghi, Kazemil and Kalani, 2013). Also, for second language learners, the philosophers of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) believe that second language learning processes for female learners are superior (Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987; Ehrlich, 2001). For instance, in Second Language Acquisition class for graduate students at ATU, Saudi females achieved higher grades in midterm test than Saudi males; out of 16 students, the five Saudi female students scored 186.25 (out of 200), while eleven Saudi male students scored 189.5 (Gemme, 2016). Does gender have an impact on communicative competence?

We need to look at facts from some counties that show the impact of gender on acquire language. Women in Middle East has less access to public life. As a result, less exposure to standard linguistic features (Al-Wer, 2014) A Study of L2

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learners from Russia, studying in the U.S., approved that male and female students earned similar scores in language exam except the speaking. Male were more proficient (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, & Holmes, 2014).

Gender segregation among early school years has an impact on the interaction between male and female students in Japan (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff & Holmes, 2014)

3. Method

It is qualitative study applied three different questionnaires with 30 open ended questions, for three groups to examine the impact of gender on second language acquisition for Saudi females in the US. The interviews were done with participants face to face at the beginning of the study with three groups. The first group is fifteen Saudi female graduate students at Arkansas Tech University. The second group contains fifteen Saudi male graduate students at ATU. The third group contains one open question for fifteen male and female American graduate students at ATU.

4. Results

Table (1) shows how the students usually behave inside the classroom from different specific points, such participations, gender of teacher, gender of classmates, group work and working just with males.

For *Frequency of Participation*, the first group mentions that they usually participate and some of them believe that their personality allows them to speak out when they want.

While the second group indicated that they rarely participate because they prefer to answer when the teacher calls them by their names and many times they know the answers, but hesitate to answer or talk about their own opinion. For the last group, 20% said it depends on the kind of topic. If the topic is related to religion and politics, they will try to avoid participating. In addition, if they have strong background and prepared very well, they will be at ease to participate. That explains why Saudi female students are less participates in classroom than male.

As for *Gender of teacher*, all participants indicated that the gender of teacher doesn't matter for them. The reason is, in most female universities in Saudi Arabia, there are male professors and doctors. That mean they get used to dealing with male teachers.

For *Gender of classmates*, half of participants report that gender of classmates matters, as they prefer to work with women rather than men, for different reasons. They feel more comfortable and act more informally. In Japan, for instance gender segregation among early school years has an impact on the interaction between male and female students (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff & Holmes, 2014). Some of them indicated they feel that males are better than them in speaking, so they prefer to work just with women. Also, some of them said that it is related to their personalities and feel shy when working with male. For the other half, they stated that the gender of classmates doesn't matter with them and they don't have any issue of that.

For *Group work vs. in front of class*, 90% prefer working in small groups, which is a huge number. The majority of participants feels more confident practicing language with a small number of people and in case of making mistakes they will feel less embarrassed. If they speak in front of class, they have to act in a formal way. On the other hand, working in small groups is usually informal, which reduces anxiety and lets them relax. One participant said that maybe if she had a previous experience in teaching, her preference would have been different.

For *Nationality of male partner (Native speakers, Saudi, other Nationality)*, Noticeably, the first two groups prefer to work with non-Saudi male for two main reasons: language purposes and segregation system in Saudi Arabia. Majority of participants prefer to work with native and other nationalities because it is chance to practice language and they feel working with them is more beneficial. A few of them mention that the segregation system in Saudi Arabia have an impact on not preferring to work with Saudi males because they are used to deal with men in public places such as malls, but do not deal with them in schools and universities. For the last group, 25% said it doesn't matter because they prefer to work with someone who learnt something new, whether Saudi or English native speaker. Also, few of them mentioned that it doesn't matter, but may prefer to work with Saudi male more in case someone didn't understand something, they could explain to each other by using first language. On the other hand Group (2), Saudi male participants were asked which nationality would they prefer to work with if they have to work with female classmates. 80% of the Saudi male participants claimed that they prefer working with native speakers and other nationalities rather than working with Saudi female classmates. Their reasons almost the same that Saudi female mention. It may seems to American society that Saudi women try to avoid working with Saudi male students, but the questionnaire approved the opposite. Only 10% of Saudi male said that they prefer to work with Saudi female.

Table1 (A), Group (2): In classroom

Statements	Percentage
Frequency of participation	40 % usually 40% rarely 20% it depends
Does Gender of teachers matter?	100% No
Does Gender of classmates matter?	50%yes 50% No
Group work vs. In front of class	90% prefer small groups 10% no preference
Nationality of male partner (Native speakers, Saudi, other Nationality)	50% Native speakers 25% Native & other nationalities 25% it doesn't matter

Table 1 (B), Group 2: In classroom

Statements	Percentage
Nationality of female partner (Native speakers, Saudi, other Nationality)	80% Native speakers 10% Native & other nationalities 10% Saudi female

Table 2: Practicing the language:

Statements:	
Having friendship with native speakers	% 75 No friendship %25 Female friendships
Daily interaction (outside classroom)	Almost non

Table (2) focuses more on practicing language outside the classroom. Sadly, the majority of them don't have native friends for different reasons, such as there are not many native speakers in their classroom, and there are more Saudi and other nationalities. In this case, the chance of making friends and communicating with native speakers is less due to a firm religious status in both sides. Saudis come from an Islamic background while local people of Russellville have strong Christian ties. Few participants said Russellville is considered as Bible Belt States, so some of them prefer to focus more on religious topics rather than daily communicative English. Hence, their language could be very limited to only discuss topics in this regard or even tend to defend their concepts of religion. Occasionally, they felt that some local people do not accept their culture or beliefs or even why they wear (the Hijab). On the other hand, in the second group, 25% of them have just female friends. They feel happy having nice friends whom, they adapt mutual acceptance with each other and have a sort of respect for one another regardless of religion or culture though, the daily interaction is almost none, and most of their interactions are just inside the classroom with classmates.

Table 3: Barriers

Statements:	
Personalities	Shyness
Responsibilities	Mother + Student
Culture	Conservative culture
Religion	Hijab

Group (3): Affect of Hijab

Statements:	Percentage
Is wearing Hijab affect your interaction with Saudi females?	100% don't affect

Table (3) illustrates different barriers that Saudi females, in the USA, face like personalities, responsibilities, culture and religion. To start, based on culture and women personalities, most women from Saudi Arabia are conservatives and shy to mingle with men that might affect learning process. For responsibilities, many Saudi females are mothers and students at the same time, so that could be hard for them to balance between house responsibilities and study requirements. Participants mention that if they find a free time, they prefer to spend it with family or relax.

For *religion*, some participants report that their Hijab affects their integration with native speakers for different reasons. They feel that some native speakers don't want to interact with them because of the way they look with Hijab on. Some of them notice that they didn't feel comfortable to speak with them. Moreover, Saudi females feel nervous about starting a conversation because they don't know what will be their reaction. While other said that the Hijab doesn't affect interaction because people respect them. It is more related to the personality of the learner. Nowadays, there are many Muslims, so most Americans are familiar with Hijab.

Compare to group (3) of native speakers replies that Hijab doesn't affect their interaction with Saudi females for several reasons. One of them mentions he has become accustomed to being around the international student community, so that familiar with cultural significance of covering that Saudi female have. The participants report that they respect that because cultural part of their religion, so Americans should never be afraid or ignorant about interacting with women that cover their faces or heads.

Table 4: Acquiring the Language

Statements	Percentage
Language improvement	%90 a lot %10 a little

Table (4) explains language improvement of Saudi female. For most, their language improves once they start studying English in the USA. Most participants mentioned that they weren't able to speak English and make conversation as well as writing too. Nowadays, they can speak and write but that doesn't mean being perfect.

Table 5: Proficiency of Saudi female and male skills

Statements	Saudi Female	Saudi Male
Reading	20%	20%
Writing	60%	26%
Listening	10%	14%
Speaking	10%	40%

Table (5) is focused on which skill that Saudi female feels they are stronger at.

Writing comes at the beginning and then reading. These two skills don't need to interact with people to be developed. The percentage of listening and speaking are equal and most of them didn't mention a clear reason. On the other hand for Saudi male, speaking comes at the beginning, which is the most improvement skill for them since they have come to the US. The next skill they improved is writing, then reading and listening. The result shows that the effect of gender on language improvement is obvious.

5. Conclusion

The research indicates that gender plays negative impact on second language acquisition for the Saudi females who are studying English in the USA. Communicative competence of Saudi females is less than males, even though females have higher grades in their classes. Saudi males are more superior in interpersonal settings than females.

Accordingly, to the results of the interview, there is an impact of gender in second language acquisition in the USA, but there is no impact of gender in learning English in Saudi Arabia as they are separated in different educational settings. It is clear that culture is the biggest impact reason on language acquisition. Though there are variety of reasons that lead

Saudi females to speak less in an educational setting in the USA such as some barriers that reduce their interaction. These reasons are caused by factors like personalities, culture, responsibilities and religion. As teachers, we should

encourage Saudi female to come out of their shell and be more engaged in classes because not all Saudi female are the same.

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