



Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(Special Issue 1), 534-552; 2021

Gender differences in classroom interactions and preferences

Alia Alshebl^{a 1} 
^a Uclan University, Preston, UK

APA Citation:

Alshebl, A. (2021). Gender differences in classroom interactions and preferences. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(Special Issue 1), 534-552.

Submission Date:20/07/2020

Acceptance Date:22/09/2020

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate gender differences in classroom interactions and preferences by analysing data collected by a questionnaire, observations and interviews. The data were collected focussing on male and female attitudes towards the teacher's gender, teacher's body language, the task partner's gender, the task type, speaking tasks, risk taking, using computers in the tasks, learning about English culture, misunderstanding and clarification, and oral correction feedback, in addition to the differences in the use of reading strategies and gender differences in topic preferences. Forty-seven international students in the UK participated in the research, 26 females and 21 males who were studying on a pre-sessional course in the Language Academy. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data revealed a number of differences in the participants' interaction patterns. Further, many preferences between the participants mediated by gender factor was recorded. The study has provided many recommendations and suggestions for the future studies.

© 2021 JLLS and the Authors - Published by JLLS.

Keywords: gender; classroom; interactions; attitudes

1. Introduction

Studying differences and variables in students' second/foreign language is crucial because these differences either encourage or prevent the learners from interacting and engaging in classroom tasks (Katayama as cited in Hamouda, 2011). Linguistically, gender and sex are two arguable concepts. According to the Oxford English Dictionary "the words gender and sex both have the same concept, the state of being male or female, but they are used in different ways: sex usually refers to biological differences, while gender tends to refer to cultural or social ones." ("Compact Oxford English Dictionary", 2008, p. 419).

Studying the differences and the variables in the second/foreign language of students has been a topic of interest for researchers since the 70s, because understanding the differences could lead to understanding the problems that prevent success in learning second/foreign languages. Many research studies have been conducted to study those variables, and they have concluded that personality, motivation, and attitudes are closely linked with the success of learning a second or a foreign language (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Cohen as cited in Khalil, 2005). In fact, gender could be added to

¹ Corresponding author.

E-mail address: aliaaalshibel@gmail.com

different learner variables since it has been proven that males and females are not the same. However, gender as a variable has been poorly investigated in the second language learning and teaching field, and, where it has been investigated, it was discussed, but not in enough detail (Catalan as cited in Catalan, 2003).

The essential goal of this study is to discover gender differences in interactions and preferences in an EFL classroom, so that this could help teachers to present a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere to the students in order to increase their ability to speak, interact and participate more in class. Secondly, understanding different preferences could help teachers to change the way they deal with students. They could also change the topics that are discussed in the class to more preferred topics and tasks that could motivate students to interact, even though making changes in an EFL class might not be easy (Hayes, 1997), but change could help in achieving success in teaching and learning English.

This study aims to answer the following two questions:

- What are the differences in interaction patterns between males and females in an EFL classroom?
- What are the gender differences in classroom task preferences?

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Gender differences in education and in learning a second/foreign language

Colley (1998) discussed the differences in the choice of subject between males and females in secondary school. She considered that stereotyping is the reason behind males and females choosing specific subjects, because society links people's role to their ability, and as a result both genders choose subjects depending on the society classification. This gender influence on subject choice has attracted researchers for many years, and it has been found that in the UK there is a difference between males and females' studying choices; for example, Colley found that physical science is more attractive for boys while girls are more engaged in studying English, modern languages and art.

Different factors play a role in males and females' different choices of subjects to study; to begin with, the image that judges what males and females are good at, which is affected by stereotyping of both genders. The educational factors also play a strong role, especially the school setting, which is determined by the teachers' behaviours towards both genders and the content of the syllabus, and the family background, which strongly affects each gender's self-belief (Colley, 1998).

Exploring the content of the two genders' nature and the way they are internalised will explain the reason behind their different subject choices (Colley, 1998). Many research studies, especially in the early 1970s, explored the differences in stereotyping between males and females that classify their behaviour depending on their sex (Bem, 1974, 1981; Spence & Helmreich as cited in Colley, 1998). However, in contrast, Archer and MacDonald (1991) cited in Colley, (1998) concluded that gender differences with regard to stereotypes had started to disappear, and their results were from a small sample with a large age range. Colley (1998) concluded that students enrol in a specific subject because of the social beliefs concerning each gender's ability, for example, the belief that maths, physical science, and technology are the most problematic subjects for girls and are more suitable for boys.

Actually, there are many controversial differences between males and females in education, and, since learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is a branch of education, many researchers have been attracted to the exploration of these contrasts in order to understand learners' behaviour, so that teachers can gain benefit from identification of those disparities and lead students to achieve success in an EFL classroom. Some researchers such as Burstall (1975) have reported that the probable reason behind the superiority of females in learning L2 is that they could have a more positive attitude towards the target language than males (cited in Ellis, 2008). The same result was found by Spolsky's study in a Jewish

school focusing on learning Hebrew. The study was of 293 students, aged between 10 and 18, and a quarter of them were girls; the girls indicated a more positive attitude towards the Hebrew language than the boys (Spolsky, 1989). Bacon and Finnmann (1992) declared that female university students learning Spanish had more motivation towards this task than males, but a good point to think about is to what extent the motivation could be measured accurately.

There are many studies that suggest contrary results of males being better than females at learning a second/foreign language, or similar results between the two genders' achievements. Boyle (1987), in the same previously mentioned study, announced that in his study male learners were better in two vocabulary exams than females (as cited in Ellis, 2008), while Bacon (1992) examined more than 50 university students who learned Spanish as L2 and did not find any differences between the two genders in two authentic listening tasks.

Factors in success in learning a second/foreign language

Many other factors could contribute to achieving success in learning a second language, such as self-confidence and attitude towards the target language culture, which could affect the motivation to learn. Self-confidence is a key to mastering a second/foreign language (Krashen, 1982). However, it differs between males and females; at the time that females are more confident in their ability to master a second language males show less confidence in their abilities (cited in RÚA, 2006). As a result, males' lack of confidence in their ability could affect their interaction in the classroom.

Attitude towards the target language culture is also an important factor which has long attracted researchers' interest. Having a positive attitude towards L2 culture could increase the motivation of learning, which is a key aspect of the learning success, and could help in achieving better learning (McKay, 2000). Powell and Littlewood (1983) and Powell and Batters (1985) showed that females differ from males in their positive attitude towards the second language culture (as cited in RÚA, 2006).

Interaction in the classroom

Interaction is a very important procedure in any foreign language learning classroom, and one of the basic goals for the foreign language classroom is to expedite the initiation of the students' response towards classroom tasks (Xiao-yan, 2006). Sunderland (1992) divided classroom interaction into three different divisions: the whole class work with the teacher, the pair work interaction and the group work interaction. Additionally, since gender and communication is very sensitive in any educational programme (Wood as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013), the gender of the students and the teacher should be taken into consideration. Tannen (1994) concluded that there is a preference for same gender interaction which starts in childhood and continues throughout life, even in the work environment (as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013).

There are gender differences in the communication style between males and females, especially when they are communicating in a group. For example, while males were considered by Tannen (1994) as competitive communicators who consider themselves in the communication as winners or losers, females were described as communicators who contribute their emotions, ideas and support to others. Females' basic aim of communication and interaction is to build relations. He also concluded that in a mixed group men usually interrupt and speak more, while the females are interrupted more and give support to the speaker by being a good listener (as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013).

A contrast study was conducted by Tannen (1992), who declared that the main key for interaction in a mixed group conversation is the nature of the topic of the conversation itself, whether it is a female preference or a male preference. McIntyre et al. (1998) suggested that the reason preventing people from interacting and communicating in L2 is their fear of losing face by making mistakes and not their gender differences.

The different goals behind the interaction between males and females were discussed by Holms (1995), who mentioned that, while males use the interaction to swap knowledge, females use it to communicate with others (as cited in Gascoigne, 2002). Other research studies about classroom interaction in L1 mentioned that the males lead and control the interaction in the classroom with the encouragement of the teacher's behaviour—giving them extra time and care—and, because of the politeness of the females' participation in the class, they are the underprivileged in a mixed class (Holms as cited in Shakouri & Saligeh, 2012). Swann (1989) mentioned that males dominate the speech in the classroom, even though being talkative is stereotyped as a female trait, and that is because of the way males interact by using a lot of interruption. A study that was conducted in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom by Howe (1997) concluded that boys contribute more than girls in the whole class interaction.

In an EFL classroom, pair work and group work tasks are very common, and the students' attitudes towards the partner(s) in the task could affect their contribution and the way they interact. Pica et al. (1989) investigated five female and five male Japanese English learners and concluded that males formed the best of their oral output when talking with females (as cited in Shehadeh, 1999). Cao and Philip (2006) started their study on 10 learners of English as a second language in New Zealand, but only eight of those students continued participating to the end of the study; these students were four females and four males. The authors concluded that language learners prefer to interact in a small group where they know all the members instead of interacting in a large group. In fact, both McCroskey and Richmond (1991) presented a similar opinion about the preference of students to work in a small group in language learning classes (as cited in Cao & Philip, 2006). However, none of the previous researchers differentiated whether this conclusion differs between the two genders or not, even though Cao and Philip had equal numbers of males and females in their study.

1.2. Teacher's gender and students' classroom interaction

Khosravizadeh and Pakzadian (2013) studied the relation between students' interaction in the EFL classroom and their attitudes towards the teacher's gender in their study of 33 female students and 32 male students studying English as a foreign language in Tehran, Iran. They concluded that male students' attitude towards their same gender teacher is a competitive one and, as a result, this could be the reason behind misunderstandings between them. Female students did not have this attitude towards the male teacher. They concluded that those results could positively or negatively affect the students' interaction in the class, because of the important fact that the teacher is the most essential and valuable support for the EFL students in the class (Alemi & Pakzadian as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013). However, since this study was in Iran, which has its own culture and traditions which differ from other contexts, the results of their study cannot be generalised to other contexts, but they could shed light on some EFL aspects for further consideration.

The effect of the teacher's gender cannot be neglected; hence, it could be the reason behind the success of female students who have a female language teacher. In addition to that, the teacher could be the model to follow for some students, which could improve their positive attitudes and motivation towards the second language, and as a result this could lead to success in the learning (RÚA, 2006).

1.3. Gender differences in skills and topics' preferences

Examining different skills in any foreign language has always been a destination for researchers. Ryan and Demark (2002) investigated the gender differences in language skills' achievement. They investigated 80 students' assessment results and concluded that females exceeded males in writing skills due to their higher marks in the assessment, and they mentioned that this outperformance in writing reflects that females have more preference for writing than males (as cited in Engin & Ortaçtepe, 2014).

Another study on German learners investigated their preferences towards different skills in the language area; male participants declared their preference for speaking skills more than female participants, while the females declared their preference for reading more than males (Graham as cited in Engin & Ortaçtepe, 2014).

Since interest in the topic is very important in maintaining students' enthusiasm in class, Chen (2012) studied the different topic preferences among EFL Taiwanese online students; there were 138 female and 42 male students in her study. She presented them with different articles about different topics, and asked them which they found the most interesting. She concluded that both males and females were interested in the entertainment topic but the males revealed more preference for economics, science, education and technology, while the females expressed less interest in those topics.

2. Method

2.1. The participants

The participants were chosen from the Uclan Language Academy pre-session course that had many different-level groups, but three groups were chosen, and the total participants were 47 adult students. The groups consisted of 26 females and 21 males. All of them studied the Academic English conditional course that will enable them to enrol on undergraduate and postgraduate courses at the university after they pass the exam at the end of their course. All the participants were from China, except two participants – a male and a female – who were from Saudi Arabia.

The students were B1 level; they attended 25 hours per week, five days per week; four days were in a normal classroom while the fifth was to work on their project with their teacher. Each group was taught by three teachers. Their classroom differed from their project one; the first one had a white board, a smart board, a projector, wireless internet access, an audio facility and a desk computer for the teacher. The students were divided on different tables. Each group on each table comprised three to five students, while the project class had the same facilities in addition to an individual computer for each student, to enable them to search for the required information and discuss it together.

A mixed method was applied in this study, to enable me to triangulate the data so I could contrast the various aspects of the QUAN and QUAL data. I used the Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method Design which starts with the quantitative data collection and analysis followed by the qualitative data collection and analysis, and continues with the interpretation of both (Creswell, 2014). Hence, the mechanism to accomplish this study was both quantitative and qualitative. A questionnaire was designed to cover the interaction patterns between males and females in the EFL classroom and the gender differences in EFL task preferences, followed by an observation of two classes of two groups, and then six interviews were conducted, three with each gender.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions. It was piloted in the university library with non-native-speaking students from different nationalities and some changes were made to clarify three questions, based on the feedback from the piloting. The questions that were amended are numbers 9, 11, and 12. Since the basic study is about the gender differences in the classroom, asking the participants to identify their gender in the first question was essential, so that I could classify the participants into their gender and analyse the data depending on that classification, while the second one asks the participants about their nationality. When designing the study, I expected that the participants would be from different nationalities and cultures, because this is normal in the Academic pre-session classes. That was expected to affect the result but in the real study, as was explained previously, 45 students out of 47 were Chinese who came to the UK to learn English, so I think that fact that the majority were Chinese might affect the result since they might choose the questionnaire answers based on their culture.

The class interaction observation was pre-planned to collect the quantitative data. The author was inspired by Flander's interaction analysis system, which is an observational manner that categorises the spoken style for both the teachers and the students during their interaction in the classroom (Allwright & Bailey, 1991).

In this study, the observational checklist was divided into two sections; the first one assesses the interaction amongst the whole class together with the teacher by numbering the differentiation between males and females in answering the teacher's question, asking for repetition, asking a question and the peer interaction. The second section assesses the interaction among the students during the pair and group work with the same previous numbering. A pilot observation was run twice before conducting the actual one and a comment category was added to the checklist based on it, because I had noticed that some students made some comments about the discussed topic. Two of the three groups were observed once each. The observation in total was three hours.

The qualitative data were collected through the interviews, since the participants had the questionnaire and were observed, but I did not know their thoughts, and I wanted to know the reason behind specific behaviours. Fourteen interview questions were designed; some of them would be triangulated with others and some were to gain new data. The interviewed participants were three females and three males who had been observed and who had also answered the questionnaire.

3. Results

To find out the preference of the students regarding their teachers' gender, the results revealed that that both male and female students had similar opinions regarding their teacher's gender. The results are shown in Figure 1.

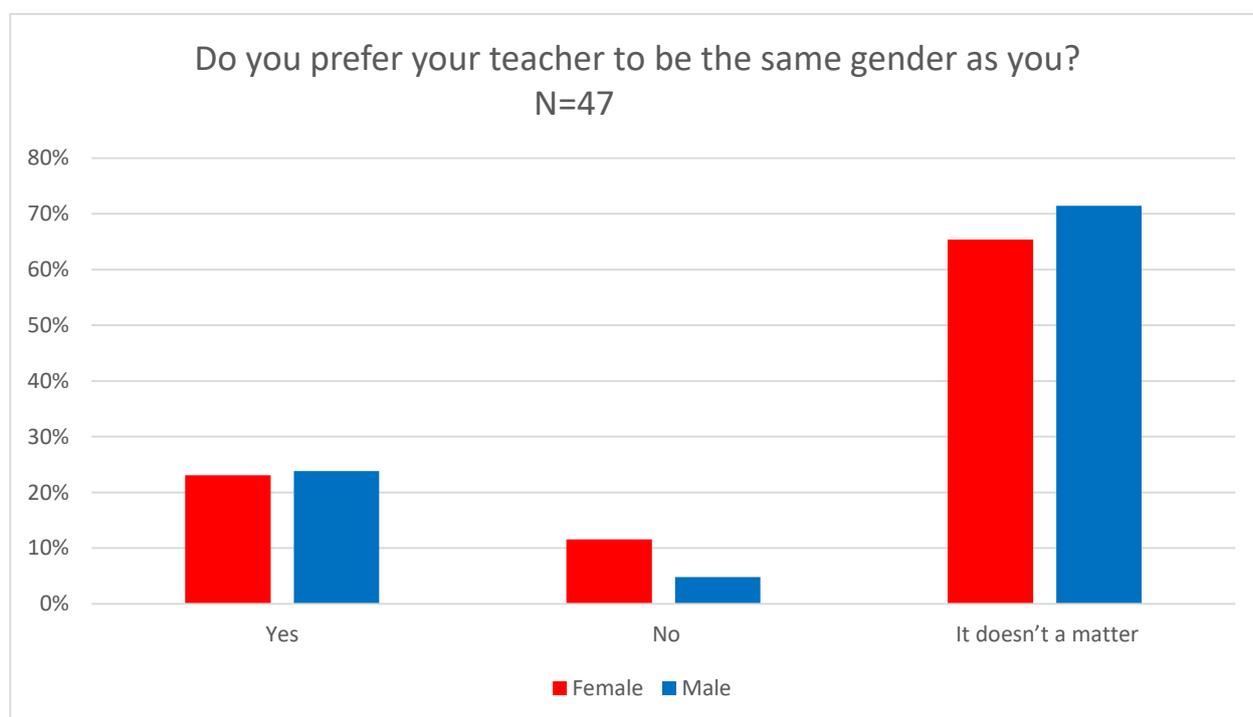


Figure 1. Do you prefer your teacher to be the same gender as you?

Figure 1 shows that both male and female students had similar opinions regarding their teacher's gender: 71% of males did not mind the teacher's gender and nor did 65% of females. Both males and females were also almost in agreement about having a teacher of the same gender, with a percentage of around 23% for females and 24% for males.

Looking at the interview answers, three females expressed their acceptance of whatever the teacher's gender is, but said that they would feel more comfortable and relaxed with a female teacher because they would have the same way of thinking. Contrary to the females, the males expressed different opinions in the interviews; all of them preferred a teacher of the opposite gender, either because they believe that female teachers are kinder than males or because of a previous negative experience with a teacher of the same gender.

Table 1. The observation of the class interactions

Verbal Participation	WHOLE CLASS				PAIR WORK	GROUP WORK
	Ask for Repetition	Hands up	Ask question	Peer Interaction		
Female to the teacher		60	2			
Male to the teacher		80	2			
Female to female				13		74
Female to male				5	8	42
Male to male				1	33	49
Male to female				7	3	28

However, as is clear in Table 1, there was a difference between males and females taking a risk and answering the teacher's questions; it was shown that males took the initiative 80 times during three hours of observation, whilst females did so only 60 times.

3.1. Peer interaction in the classroom

Table 1 showed that in the observation the maximum peer interaction was 13 times, and this was between females, which was followed by 7 peer interactions, which were male to female peer interaction, while female to male peer interaction was five times and the least peer interaction was between male and male, with only one interaction during three hours of observation.

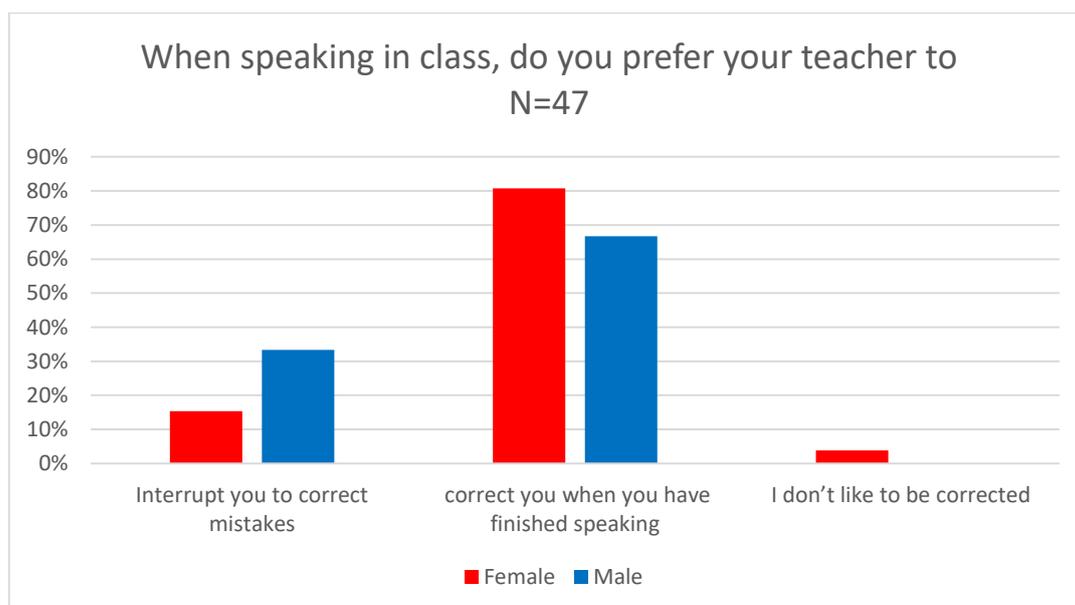


Figure 2. When speaking in class, do you prefer your teacher to...

It is clear from Figure 2 that both male and female agree that, when they make mistakes during speaking, they prefer that the teacher will correct their mistakes after they have finished speaking, with 81% of females and 68% of male students claiming this.

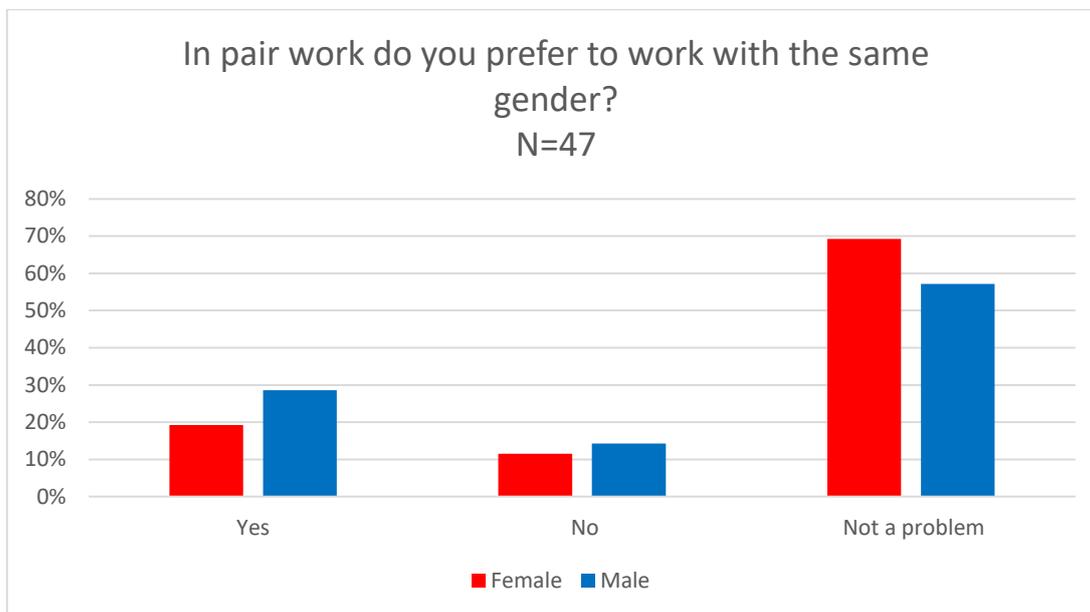


Figure 3. In pair work do you prefer to work with the same gender?

Figure 3 shows that neither males nor females consider it a problem to work with the same or with the opposite gender in pair work, but the female percentage was 69%, which was higher than the male’s 58%. The chart shows that almost 20% of females and almost 30% of males do prefer to work with the same gender, whilst 11% of females and 14% of males do not.

In contrast to the questionnaire, the interviews showed three different answers: one of the female participants did not mind, while the second preferred to work with the opposite gender in pair work to gain a different viewpoint and way of thinking, and, contrary to this viewpoint, the third participant preferred working with the same gender as she felt it was easier to think, since both have the same way of thinking.

The males’ answers were totally different from the questionnaire: two males preferred to work in pairs with the opposite gender, one of them had the belief that working with females makes them more hardworking and the other would not explain the reason; on the other hand, the third male participant said that he did not mind whatever the gender is.

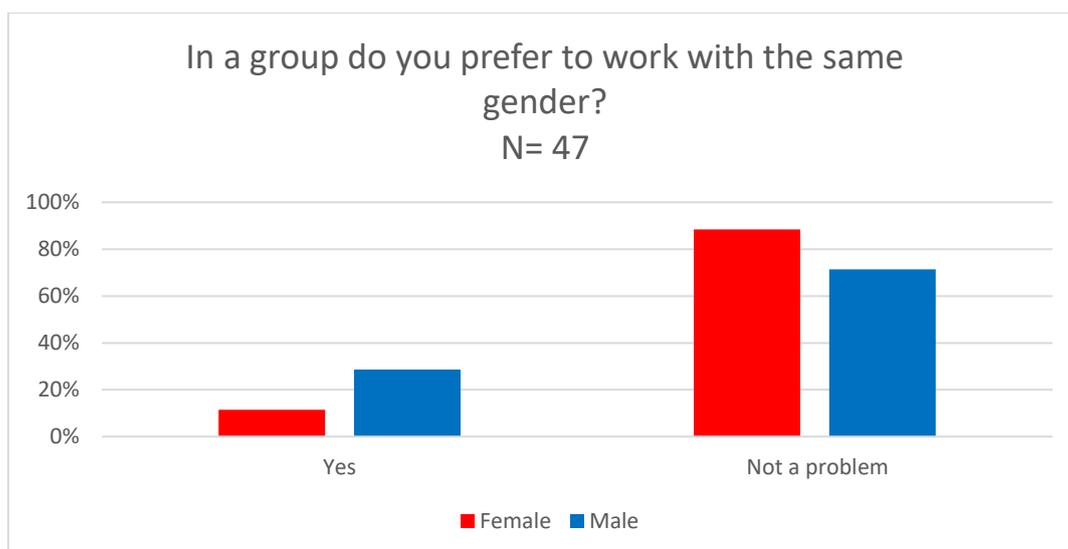


Figure 4. In a group do you prefer to work with the same gender?

It is clear from Figure 4 that the majority of both male and female do not consider working with the same or the opposite gender to be a problem in a group work, with 88% for females and 71% for males. However, on the other hand, 29% of males prefer working alongside the same gender in group work, and only 12% of females have the same opinion.

Comparing these results with the interviews and the observations, it can be seen that there are different results. In the interviews, when providing their opinions about their preference for working with the opposite gender, two out of three females mentioned that they do not mind working with the opposite gender, either because the personality is more important than the gender, or because of the thought that each gender has different advantages. However, one female preferred working with the same gender because of shyness around boys.

In contrast, all the boys in the interviews said that they prefer working with the opposite gender, the first because of what he is used to in his country and the second because of the belief that the same gender students will make the same mistakes, so this interviewee preferred to get the benefit of the other gender's thoughts. The third interviewee did not have a clear reason for his preference to work with the opposite gender, other than it is something he enjoys.

In the interview, they were asked if they would be the speaker for the group, whether it is a mixed or a single gender group. Two females said that they would be the speaker in the single female group and a listener in the mixed one, because boys usually start the speech, while just one declared that she is always the speaker in a mixed group.

The males' answers for this question were totally different from the females' answers and from each other's. One of them said that he was always the speaker in both single and mixed gender groups; the second said that he would be the speaker in the single gender group but would let the females speak in the mixed group. The third male participant would let the others in the single gender group speak if they wanted to and be the speaker only if the rest of the group did not want to speak.

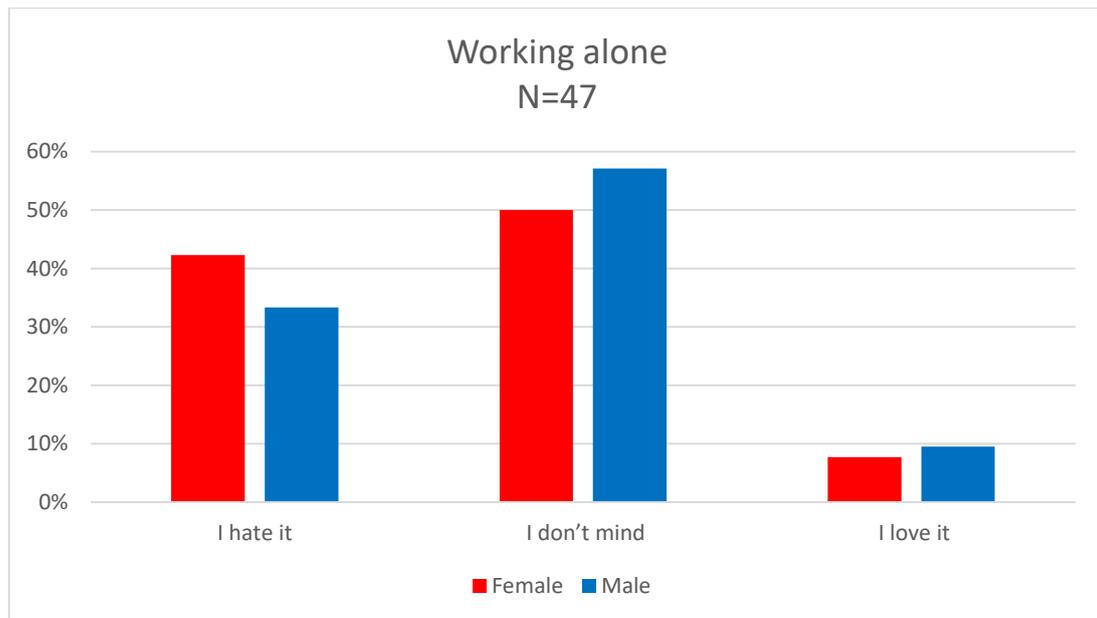


Figure 5. In class do you prefer working alone?

Figure 5 shows that less than 10% of the two genders love working alone in the class, which is a very low percentage compared with those 42% of females and 33% of males who hate it, while the highest percent was for do not mind working alone, with 50% of females and 57% of males.

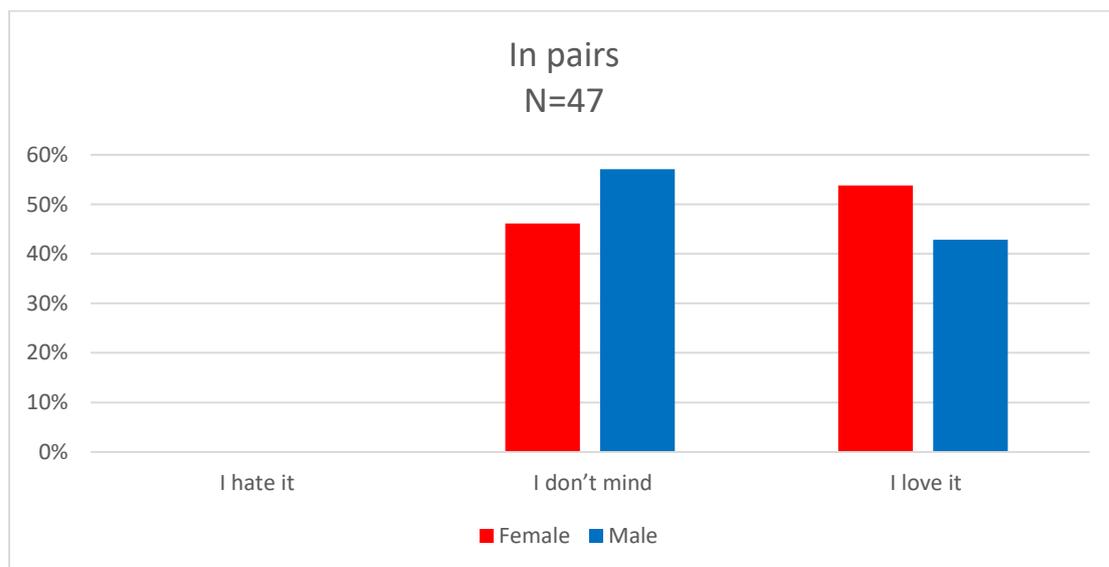


Figure 6. In class do you prefer working in pairs?

It is clear from Figure 6 that females prefer working in pairs more than males, with 54% of females and 43% of males, while the majority of males do not mind working in pairs with 57%, and this is 46% for females.

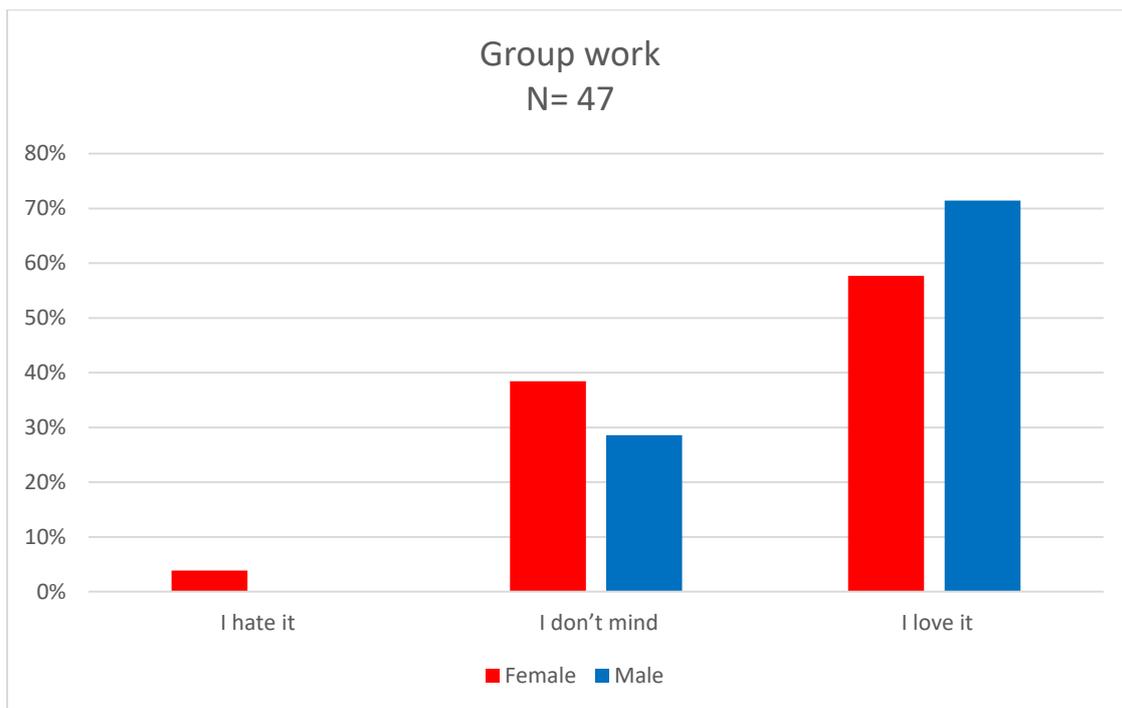


Figure 7. In class do you prefer working in a group?

It seems clear from Figure 7 that both genders prefer working in a group, with 71% for males and 58% for females, while only 4% of females and 0% of males hate working in a group.

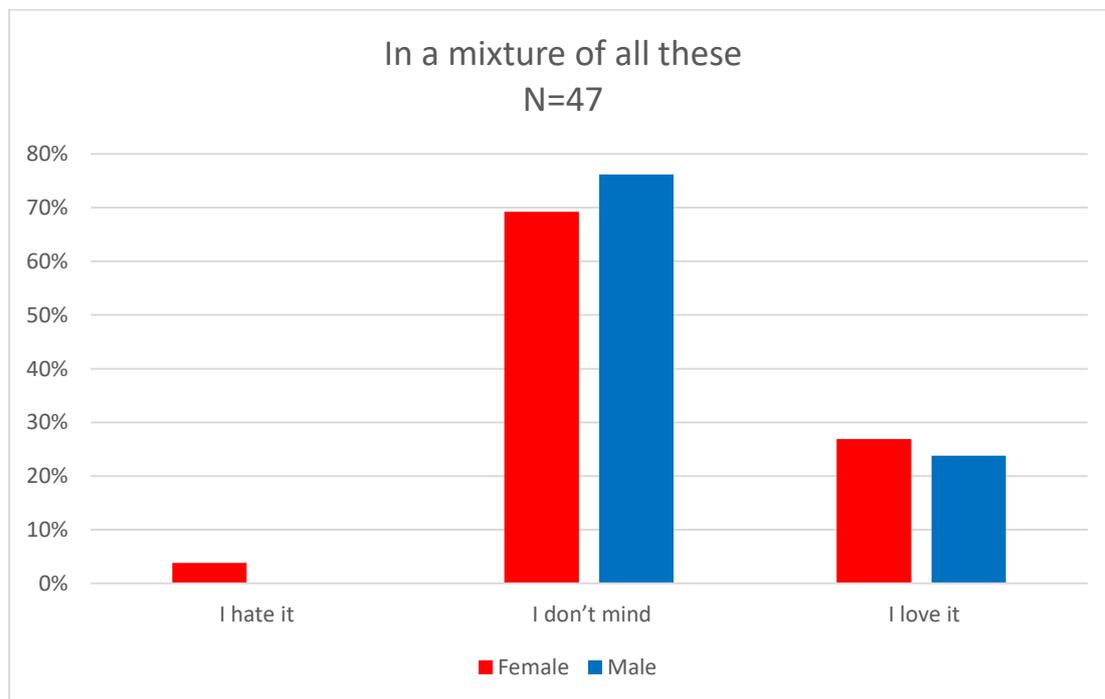


Figure 8. In class do you prefer working in a mixture of all these?

Figure 8 shows that a very high percentage do not mind working in all types of work, with 69% for female and 76% for males. Comparing the previous question with the female participants’ answers in the interviews, we got the following answers: two females preferred the group work, either to make friends or because group work enables people with their different ideas to solve problems and to answer difficult questions, but one mentioned that she preferred a small group to a big one. In contrast, the third

participant considered working in pairs was the best for her to experience different ways of thinking, but she did not prefer group work because many students spoke about issues that were irrelevant to the task. However, none of the three participants expressed acceptance of working alone.

3.2. Differences in topic preferences

The questionnaire investigated the five most preferred topics for both genders. All the topics were given points depending on how they were ranked, as follows: 10 points for being ranked first, 8 points for being ranked second, 6 points for being ranked third, 4 points for being ranked fourth, 2 points for being ranked fifth. Then by multiplying the rank points by their frequency, an overall score for each topic was calculated for males and females separately. By following this process, the results show two important points. Firstly, the best five topics for each gender are as follows.

Table 2. The males’ five most preferred topics

The rank	The males’ five most preferred topics	The points
1 st	History, Sport	74
3 rd	Food	64
4 rd	Business	50
5 th	Travel	42
6 th	Communication	35

Table 2 shows that history, sport, food, business, travel and communication were the six most interesting topics for males to discuss in the class. It is supposed to rank the five most preferred topics, but, as can be seen in the table, there are six topics since history and sport were ranked joint first.

Table 3. The females’ five most preferred topics

The rank	The females’ five most preferred topics	The points
1 st	Art & creativity	118
2 nd	Food	100
3 rd	Fashion & Beauty	92
4 th	Travel	74
5 th	Friendship	64

Table 3 shows that the females are most interested in art and creativity, food, fashion and beauty, travel and friendship.

Table 4. The least interesting topics for both males and females

The least interesting topics were		
Male	Female	Points
Future life	Education	Zero
Literature	Environment	Zero
	Famous people	Zero
	Politics	Zero
	Technology	Zero

It is clear from Table 4 that the males were not at all interested in topics about future life and literature, which gained zero points, while the females’ least interesting topics were education, environment, famous people, politics and technology, which did not receive any points.

The second important point that could be noticed by following the previously described process is the big gaps amongst some preferred topics. I chose the five most gapped topics by subtracting the lowest gained point from the highest one and the results are as follows.

Table 5. The five most gapped topics

The five most gapped topics			
The topic	The male points	The female points	The gap points
Art and creativity	24	118	94
Fashion and beauty	26	92	66
Friendship	10	64	54
sport	74	22	52
History	74	28	46

It is clear from Table 5 that there are some topics where the two genders had big differences in their opinions towards them, with very high gap points, such as art and creativity, fashion and beauty, and friendship – all these three topics had a very high positive attitude from the female side while they were not very welcomed for discussion in the classroom by the males. In contrast, sport and history had a high positive attitude from the males while they were not very acceptable by the females.

Comparing these results with the interview answers for the following question: “which topics motivate you the most to participate in class?” showed that the females preferred to talk about beauty, fashion, shopping, food, cities, songs and about the students’ personal information, because that would help them to make friends. In addition, one of the female participants preferred to talk about business because it is her major and it would be interesting to talk about it. The topics that best motivated males to participate in class varied among football, games, science, movies, comic books, music, and fashion. One male participant took it for granted that fellow males always like sport.

Understanding the body language in the classroom

Body language is important in second language learning. In the interview, the participants were asked, “to what extent do you understand the teacher and the students from the body language?” All the females agreed that they understand the teacher and their classmates, and the body language helped them to understand if they do not know the meaning of the words. The males also agreed that the teacher’s body language is important in helping them understand more, but two of them agreed that sometimes the body language confused them if it differed from what they are used to, especially with their classmates.

3.3. Differences in attitude towards English culture

The students were asked about their attitudes towards English culture. All the three females prefer to know about English culture because when they arrived in the UK they noticed that the culture was different from the Chinese one. All the three male participants agree that it is important for them to know about English culture; one of them said that this enabled him to communicate easily with English people.

4. Discussion

4.1. The preference for teacher’s gender

The questionnaire shows that both genders did not mind what the teacher’s gender is. However, in the interviews, there were totally different answers: all the females expressed that it was no problem for them, whatever the teacher’s gender, but they felt more comfortable with a teacher of the same gender. In contrast, all the male participants preferred a teacher of the opposite gender. This shows totally

different opinions for both sides and the question to be raised here is, is it a matter of gender choice or is it a matter of proficiency of the female teachers, since both males and females expressed their preference for female teachers? This is an important issue to be taken into consideration since student attitude towards teacher's gender is the main motivation behind class interaction (Alemi & Pakzadian as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013).

4.2. Peer interaction in the classroom

The observation showed a difference in the peer interaction between the two genders: while the highest peer interaction was between members of the female gender, the lowest one was between members of the male gender. Since the observation was a visual one, it was not easy for me to know what this peer interaction concerned. However, there are some possible explanations behind this peer interaction result: it could be either asking help from a friend to re-explain something or making a comment or asking for help about a question that they could not answer, since it was proven in this study that females are less likely to take risks than males, so this could be the reason behind their higher level of peer interaction compared to males.

4.3. Differences in pair work preferences and interactions

The questionnaire of the present study showed that neither gender minded the gender of the other person in pair work, while the interviews showed totally different opinions from the male side, as they preferred to work with the opposite gender. Moreover, the females had mixed opinions of preferring, refusing or being neutral towards the gender in pairs. However, in the observation, the highest recorded number of pair interactions was between males, with 33 interactions, as mentioned previously in the results, while male interactions with females was very poor in pair work. This result contradicts Pica et al. (1989) found that males produce their best oral output when interacting with females (as cited in Shehadeh, 1999). The possible explanation for this result could be because those male pairs are friends and have a good relation even outside the class, so they do not feel embarrassed if they make mistakes or do not provide a good idea for a task. As Baleghizadeh (2010) mentioned, even though pair work is essential in learning English classes, the method of choosing a suitable partner is ambiguous. Thus, due to the obtained results, I think it is very important for the students to select their partners in pair work, as the teacher might find it difficult to pair them as per their preference.

4.4. Differences in group work preferences and interactions

The result of the questionnaire showed that both females and males had a neutral opinion towards the gender of the other students in group work, whilst the interviews showed a contradictory opinion from the male side, who prefer to work with the opposite gender. This could be explained because of the females' characteristics in relaxing the speaker by their good listening and encouraging facial expressions, which enable the males to speak, interact, and interrupt more in group work since the males consider the group conversation as a competitive task (Holms, 1993; Oh, 2000; Tannen, 1994).

However, two out of three females in the interviews had unbiased attitudes to the other group members' gender while the third preferred female members. This could be because the females' perspective of group communication is about sharing different ideas and emotions and making new friends (Tannen as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013). However, the actual observation had different results to what was shown in the data, in that the highest number of interactions was among the group who are the same gender: 74 interactions among the female group, 49 interactions among the male group. On the other hand, in a mixed group task the females interacted 42 times while the males interacted only 28 times. These practical observation results contradict some previous studies that found that males

interacted more than females in mixed gender groups – for example, Tannen (as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013), Oh (2000) and Durán (2006). The possible reason behind the females exceeding males' interactions in this study could be the topic of the task itself, which might attract the females to interact more than the males, supporting Tannen (1992) that the basic reason for interaction in a group work task is interest in the topic and is not related to gender.

4.5. Strategies to improve English in general

The interviews of this study showed similar strategies are used by both genders in improving English in general by receiving different types of input, such as reading newspapers, watching movies, or listening to English songs, to help them in producing the output when speaking to foreigners and to local English people. The result of this study showed no gender influence on the learning strategies, which contradicts the result of Ehrman and Oxford (1990) when they declared a great gender influence on the learning strategies, since they concluded that females use more learning second/foreign language strategies than males, and they use the strategies more frequently (as cited in Sanz, 2005). However, it could be possible that, although the students use the same strategies, the applied topics in these strategies could differ, taking into consideration the students' different topic preferences. For example, even though both genders mentioned that watching movies is one of their strategies, possibly the females would watch a social movie while the males would watch a historical one.

4.6. Differences in topic preferences

The questionnaire and the interviews showed very interesting differences in the topic preferences between the two genders. While the most interesting topics for the males were history, sport, food, business, travel and communication, the females' most interesting topics were art and creativity, food, fashion, beauty, travel, and friendship. However, the interesting point to notice is that food and travel were of equal interest to both genders and achieved exactly the same rank in the preference for both genders, which could mean the two genders would interact well in discussing them.

The topics with the biggest gap between the two genders need to be taken into consideration, since sport and history were very interesting to the males, but they were rejected by most of the female participants. Similar to this, art, fashion and beauty were topics that were very much preferred by the females in stark contrast to the males.

Those topic preferences could be caused by stereotyping, since a female and a male in the interview mentioned that they preferred a specific topic because it is known that his/her gender likes it. This study could support Colley's (1998) conclusion that males are attracted to physical science while females are attracted to art.

4.7. Understanding the body language in the classroom

The interview results showed different opinions between the male and female interviewees: while the females declared that the body language was important in helping them to understand the teacher more in the class, and the male participants agreed about the importance of the body language in the EFL class, two out of the three male interviewees said that sometimes they are confused by the body language, which might be a reason for them not understanding something in the class. The students' belief about the importance of non-verbal communication supports the finding of Elfatih's (2006) study in EFL in a Moroccan high school: that the body language in the EFL class can help the teaching and learning process. However, no previous study was found about gender differences in understanding the body language in the EFL class, which I think is important to investigate.

4.8. *Difference attitudes towards English culture*

All six interviewees agreed that it is important to know about English culture for different reasons; the most important one was that this knowledge facilitates communication with English people. This result contradicts what was suggested by Bacon (1992), that female learners have a more positive attitude towards the foreign language culture, since both genders have the same positive attitudes towards English culture. This positive attitude could be because of the students' need to communicate with English people successfully, since they have come to the UK to study at an English university. Another study to investigate the students' attitudes toward English culture is needed in the future.

4.9. *Recommendations for practice*

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the EFL/ESL teachers take into consideration the following issues. Firstly, encouraging the students to take risks in the classroom to achieve language success, by planting the idea that there is no stupid answer, question or repetition request, and by not interrupting them to correct their mistakes. This will all help to achieve a relaxed atmosphere where students feel they can take risks. Secondly, avoiding the individual task in the classroom unless it is necessary, and letting the students choose their partners in the pair and group work, since it could be hard for the teacher to choose a suitable companion for each student.

Since reading, writing, and listening are not preferred by at least one of the two genders in this study, it would be useful if these skills are not presented separately, but are linked with the speaking skill, for example, by starting to discuss the topic orally first before applying it to the other skills, or by linking these skills with the computer since the two genders expressed their high interest in computers. Furthermore, in the case of a mixed gender class, it could be important to avoid gapped topics such as sports, history, art, fashion, and beauty, so that neither female nor male students would feel bored in class. Finally, since the males are sometimes confused by the teacher's body language, this could mean that the teacher needs to take body language seriously in the class by simplifying it and checking the understanding of the male students.

4.10. *Limitations*

The sample of this study is a small one, so the results could not be generalised in a bigger context. However, EFL teachers could relate the results to their classroom, depending on the classroom situation. In addition to that, the observation affected the students' interactions. Sometimes, when they saw me looking at them interacting, they stopped doing it; even if they were interacting with a peer in the Chinese language they stopped, which could be a reason for any inaccurate results. Finally, since the observation was done visually, without videoing, in order not to affect the students' interaction, this could be a reason for imprecise observation, because, even with my training in observation, the researcher was not able to observe every little interaction in the classroom at the same time, and because it was not videoed, the researcher was unable to return to it to see their interactions.

5. **Conclusions**

This study investigated the gender differences in the EFL classroom interaction and preferences. It followed the mixed method to collect data by using a questionnaire, interviews, and observation.

This study showed differences and similarities in the interaction patterns between males and females in the EFL class. Starting with the similarities in the interaction, it showed no gender differences in asking the teacher questions; it also showed equality in the non-existent repetition request. In contrast, it did show differences in taking risk, pair work, group work and peer interactions. In pair work interaction,

the most observed interaction was in male pair, while less interaction occurred in the mixed pairs with the note that there was no female pair to observe. Interaction differences were also found in the group work. This study showed that the highest interaction was registered in the one gender group, whether it was a female or a male group. However, in the mixed gender group, the females dominated the speech by speaking more than males in the interactions. Finally, the females spoke more than the males in the female peer interactions.

This study also showed similarities and differences in the EFL classroom gender preferences. Starting with the similarities in the classroom preference: both females and males showed preferences for female teachers and showed a positive attitude to the correction of oral mistakes, but without being interrupted to be corrected, but both agreed with the importance of oral mistakes being corrected at the end of their speech. In addition to that, neither gender preferred individual work; both preferred the pair and the group work. Moreover, both genders avoid asking for a repetition from the teacher in the classroom even if they do not understand something. Finally, their preferred English skill is speaking, and they also use exactly the same strategies in reading tasks and in improving their English in general.

In contrast, the genders differed in the following preferences: while males preferred working with females in both pair and group work, the females showed various preferences for the pair and the group work members' genders being the opposite or the same or had a neutral attitude, not minding which it is. Secondly, the males preferred both reading and listening skills while the females preferred speaking and writing skills. In addition to that, males showed preference for studying history, sport, food business, travel and communication topics in the EFL class, while the females' preferred topics are art and creativity, food, fashion, beauty, travel and friendship. Equally importantly is the fact that the gapped topic preferences from the male side are art, fashion, and beauty while from the female side they are sport and history. Finally, the study showed that, while the body language helps females to understand more in the EFL class, it could confuse the males in the same class. A further study is needed about the gender differences in both reading time sufficiency and in understanding the body language in the EFL class.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: December 26, 2020).

References

- Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. M. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom: An introduction to classroom research for language teachers*. Cambridge (England); New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bacon, S. M. (1992). The relationship between gender, comprehension, processing strategies, and cognitive and affective response in foreign language listening. *The Modern Language Journal*, 76(2), 160-178.
- Bacon, S. M. C. & Finnemann, M. D. (1992). Sex differences in self-reported beliefs about foreign-language learning and authentic oral and written input. *Language Learning*, 42(4), 471-495.
- Baleghizadeh, S. (2010). The effect of pair work on a word-building task. *ELT Journal*, 64(4), 405-413.
- Cao, Y., & Philp, J. (2006). Interactional context and willingness to communicate: A comparison of behaviour in whole class, group and dyadic interaction. *System*, 34(4), 480-493.

- Catalan, R. M. J. (2003). Sex differences in L2 vocabulary learning strategies. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13(1), 54-77.
- Chen, A. (2012). Application of gender difference and topic preference to promote students' motivation for online EFL learning. *The EUROCALL Review. Proceedings of the EUROCALL 2011 Conference*, 20, 35-40.
- Colley, A. (1998) Gender and Subject Choice in Secondary Education. In J. Radford (Ed.), *Gender and choice in education and occupation* (pp.18-36). London, GBR: Routledge
- Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* (2008). (3rd ed., rev. ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (Fourth edition, international student ed.). Los Angeles, Calif: SAGE.
- Durán, N. C. (2006). Exploring gender differences in the EFL classroom. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 8, 123-136.
- Elfatih, M. (2006). *The role of nonverbal communication in beginners EFL classrooms* (Unpublished PhD dissertation). Sidi Mohamed Benabdellah University.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Engin, A. & Ortaçtepe, D. (2014). Gender differences in item format and skill area: Some evidence from an EFL achievement test. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 4(2), 48-62.
- Gascoigne, C. (2002). The role of gender in L2 interaction: Socialization via L2 materials. *Encuentro Revista de Investigacion Innovacion en la Class de idiomas*, 13(14), 81-89.
- Hamouda, A. (2011). A study of students and teachers' preferences and attitudes towards correction of classroom written errors in Saudi EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, 4(3), 128-141.
- Hayes, D. (1997). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. *ELT Journal*, 51(2), 106-116.
- Howe, C. (1997). *Gender and classroom interaction. A research review*. SCRE publication 138. using research series 19.
- Khalil, A. (2005). Assessment of language learning strategies used by Palestinian EFL learners. *Foreign Language Annals*, 38(1), 108-117.
- Khosravizadeh, P. & Pakzadian, S. (2013). The relationship between an EFL teacher's gender and students' willingness to communicate. *The International Journal of Communication and Linguistics Studies*, 10(4), 17-29.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Dörnyei, Z., Clément, R., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562.
- McKay, S. L. (2000). Teaching English as an international language: Implications for cultural materials in the classroom. *TESOL Journal*, 9(4), 7-11.
- Nóbrega, D. G. A. (2008). Oral interaction and its implication in the learning and teaching progress in EFL. *Revista Eletrônica de Divulgação Científica em Língua Portuguesa, Lingüística e Literatura*, 4(8) - 1º Semestre de 2008.
- Oh, S. (2000). Explanation for the Gender Difference in Expressing Emotions. *University of Pennsylvania*, SARS- 013, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/communication/soojin.htm>

- RÚA, P. L. (2006). The sex variable in foreign language learning: An integrative approach. *PORTA LINGUARUM*, 6, 99-114.
- Sanz, C. (2005). *Mind and context in adult second language acquisition: Methods, theory, and practice*. Georgetown University Press, University Presses Marketing.
- Shakouri, N. & Saligheh, M. (2012). Revisiting age and Gender Influence in second language acquisition. *Advances in English Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-6.
- Shehadeh, A. (1999). Gender differences and equal opportunities in the ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 53(4), 256-261.
- Spolsky, B. (1989). *Conditions for second language learning: Introduction to a general theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sunderland, J. (1992). Gender in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 46(1), 81-91.
- Swann, J. (1989). Talk Control: an illusion from the classroom of problem in analysing male dominance of conversation. In D. Cameron & J. Coates (Eds.), *Women in their speech communities: New perspectives on language and sex* (pp.122-140).
- Tannen, D. (1992). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. London: Virago.
- Xiao-yan, M. (2006). *Teacher talk and EFL in university classrooms* (Unpublished Master's thesis). Yaantze Normal University.

Sınıf etkileşimleri ve tercihlerinde cinsiyet farklılıkları

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, bir anket, gözlemler ve görüşmelerle toplanan verileri analiz ederek sınıf içi etkileşim ve tercihlerdeki cinsiyet farklılıklarını incelemektir. Veriler, öğretmenin cinsiyetine, öğretmenin vücut diline, görev ortağının cinsiyetine, görev türüne, konuşma görevlerine, risk alma, görevlerde bilgisayar kullanma, İngiliz kültürünü öğrenme, yanlış anlama ve açıklama konularına yönelik erkek ve kadın tutumları ve sözlü düzeltme geribildirimini, ek olarak okuma stratejilerinin kullanımındaki farklılıklara ve konu tercihlerindeki cinsiyet farklılıklarına odaklanarak toplandı. Araştırmaya Birleşik Krallık'taki kırk yedi uluslararası öğrenci katıldı Nicel ve nitel verilerin sonuçları, katılımcıların etkileşim modellerinde bir dizi farklılığı ortaya çıkardı. Ayrıca, katılımcılar arasında cinsiyet faktörünün aracılık ettiği birçok tercih kaydedildi. Çalışma, gelecekteki çalışmalar için birçok öneri ve öneri sağlamıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Cinsiyet; sınıf; etkileşimler; tutumlar

AUTHOR BIODATA

Alia Alshebl had a Master's degree in TESOL with Applied Linguistics. She works in Prince Sultan Cardiac Center in Riyadh, KSA , where she designed a special English course for social work staff. Her research interest is in Gender differences in learning and Acquiring Languages, World Englishes and ESP