

FEMALE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CLASS IN CONSERVATIVE IRAQI COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study, which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods, looks at the social, cultural, and institutional barriers that prevent women from participating in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in conservative Iraqi communities. We got information from three public high schools in Al Najaf, Iraq, by doing surveys with 150 girls between the ages of 15 and 18, interviews with 10 teachers, and observations of classes. The surveys showed that 68% of girls didn't want to talk in classes with boys and girls because they were afraid of being judged ($p < .05$). On the other hand, 82% of girls talked more in classes with only girls ($p < .01$). Interviews and observations showed that cultural norms, like expectations of hijab and strict gender roles, made it hard for girls to work with boys during group activities. Teachers said that parents often didn't like English being linked to Western culture and that they didn't know how to talk about gender issues. Some of the suggested solutions were classes for only one gender, lessons based on local stories, and training programs for teachers. The study states that teachers should respect Iraqi traditions while also using fairer methods, like keeping English classes separate by gender and working with communities to change negative views about learning English. It stresses the need for school policies that respect local culture while also encouraging girls to take part.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), differences in participation by gender, sociocultural barriers, patriarchal hegemony, and single-gender pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the year 2003, Iraq has been making efforts to include English as a Foreign Language (EFL) into its educational system. This attempt is being driven by a number of irrefutable causes, including the necessity for economic development, the globalisation of the economy, and the dominance of the English language in the fields of education and information technology. Al-Jubouri (2020) has pointed out that these modifications are quite important (2020). The cities of Basra, Najaf, and Karbala are all examples of traditionally conservative regions in which female students face a distinct set of problems. When compared to long-standing religious, cultural, and tribal customs, full participation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) study is highly discouraged among students. According to Al-Hassan and Al-Dosky (2018), this disagreement does more than only hinder the growth of linguistic competence; it also prevents women from acquiring an education, which in turn restricts the options they will have in the future for a profession.

In Iraqi cultures, gender roles are often very strict, and women's public behaviour is closely linked to hijab and family honour (Al-Khateeb, 2017). Coeducational settings are becoming more common in cities, but they are still controversial in more conservative areas where boys and girls are often not allowed to interact (Ali, 2019). These kinds of rules have a direct effect on how things work in the classroom. For example, female students might not want to speak up in front of male classmates, be hesitant to volunteer answers, or avoid activities that they think are culturally inappropriate (Mahmood, 2019). Iraq's traditional EFL teaching style makes these problems worse because it focuses on grammar drills and rote memorisation instead of interactive, student-centered methods (Hussein, 2021). As a result, female students in these situations are at a societal restrictions make it harder for them to participate, and old- fashioned teaching methods don't meet their language and cultural needs.

Existing research on gender and EFL participation has largely focused on Western or East Asian contexts, highlighting factors such as confidence gaps, teacher bias, and peer competition (Baxter, 2012; Lee, 2018). Few studies address the intersection of conservative cultural norms and language education in the Middle East, particularly in post-conflict settings like Iraq. For instance, Al-Mahrooqi and Denman's (2016) work in Oman revealed that single- gender classrooms significantly boosted female participation, suggesting cultural alignment as a key facilitator of engagement. Al-Hoorie et al. (2020) revealed that Saudi Arabian female students preferred gender-segregated environments to reduce social communication anxiety. While these studies provide valuable insights, Iraq's distinct socio-political landscape, marked by decades of conflict, sectarian divisions, and fluctuating educational policies, demands localized investigations to inform equitable pedagogical strategies.

This research study addresses the subsequent enquiries:

1. In what ways do the cultural and social norms of conservative Iraqi communities influence the participation of female students in English as a Foreign Language learning environment?
2. Which institutional and teaching methods can facilitate females' participation in EFL classrooms?

From a global perspective, the purpose of this research is to deepen our comprehension of the ways in which cultural conservatism affects the process of language learning. Addressing these underlying issues, it allows teachers and policymakers to have access to useful materials that may be used to make English as a Foreign Language classes more welcoming. The results are held in high regard not only by the communities of Iraq, but also by the communities of other culturally traditional nations that are struggling with the challenges of how to modernise their educational systems while still honouring their traditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural context of education in Iraq

The educational landscape of Iraq is still being shaped by Islamic ideals, tribal traditions, and the long-lasting legacy of political turbulence and violence. According to Al- Khateeb (2017), this difficult past has a significant impact on the dynamics of classrooms in the conservative governorates of Najaf, Al-Diwaniyah, and Karbala. These governorates are located in areas where traditional gender norms are still strongly prominent. To overcome the challenges that women face when participating in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs, it is essential to acquire an understanding of the cultural environment in which they are engaged.

Traditional Islamic practices, such as the separation of the sexes and the wearing of the headscarf, impact how schools are run. According to Al-Hassan and Al-Dosky (2018), many schools uphold gender segregation because they consider it a violation of their religious beliefs. Cultural traditions in tribal societies strengthen the importance of honour by barring girls from public spaces like schools. This practice is common among households. The tribal elders of Basra have spoken out against an EFL program that encourages gender-neutral conversation and interaction (Al-Mousawi2, 020).

As a consequence of the years of conflict and instability that have occurred, conservative viewpoints in the field of education have become even more popular. The Ba'athist administration, which ruled the region from 1968 until 2003, promoted for the development of secular schools and banned cultural activities (Jabar, 2018). This administration was in power from 1968 until 2003. Conservative groups were given additional ability to advocate for traditional values as a result of the shift to decentralised education, which took place after the year 2003. They frequently prioritise the study of religious topics over the study of other languages (UNESCO, 2021). Restrictions on the economy and continuous volatility have made it more difficult for educational institutions and training programs for teachers to get the resources they need. In rural areas, this has had the greatest impact on the education of young women (Hussein, 2021).

2.2 Gender Roles and Classroom Dynamics

Cultural norms often lead women to focus on household duties, leading families to prioritize less investment in girls' English education. Girls are taught from a young age to avoid speaking up in public, as assertiveness is sometimes seen as improper (Mahmood, 2019). In

English classes, this results in hesitation to join activities like debates or group work, especially around boys or male teachers (Al-Jubouri, 2020). For example, a 2019 study in Najaf showed 73% of girls said they "never" spoke up in mixed-gender English classes, compared to just 22% in girls-only settings (Al-Zubaidy & Rahman, 2021).

Iraq's English curriculum also puts more emphasis on grammar and translation than on real-life speaking skills. This way of teaching is like traditional memorization-based learning, but it doesn't encourage students to participate (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). Many conservative groups think that modern teaching methods, like group projects, are not culturally appropriate (Hussein, 2021). Textbooks also don't often help Iraqi women in jobs, which reinforces stereotypes about what men and women should do (Al-Hassan & Al-Dosky, 2018).

Finally, people's views on education differ from one area to another. In cities like Baghdad, mixed classrooms and modern teaching are more accepted. In rural southern areas, on the other hand, these changes are not as welcome (Ali, 2019). For instance, Basra's cultural ties to Iran have made religion more important, which has led to stricter rules about how boys and girls should be kept apart in schools. In the meantime, more girls in Kurdish areas in the north are taking English classes (Jabar, 2018).

3.METHODOLOGY

3.1Research Design

This study examined the participation of female students in English classrooms within conservative Iraqi communities with a mixed-methods methodology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study employed surveys, classroom observations, and interviews to get quantitative data (such as the frequency of girls' participation) and qualitative insights (such as cultural or pedagogical barriers) to comprehend the issues confronting females. The survey enquired about students' self-reported engagement and perceived challenges, while observations and interviews provided contextualisation for these findings. The integration of both datasets during analysis corroborated the results, enhancing their reliability and providing a clearer insight into the influence of cultural norms on classroom behaviour. This strategy proved particularly effective in Iraq's complex educational system, where rigid gender roles and resource scarcity following years of violence necessitate adaptable research methodologies.

3.2 Participants

The research examines female students in grades 10 to 12 from three public high schools in Al Najaf, Iraq. The girls are aged 15 to 18. Fifty students from each school were chosen to represent urban, semi-urban, and rural areas (150 total). The study also included interviews with ten English teachers, five men and five women, who had been teaching for at least three years. We did classroom observations in 20 EFL sessions (10 coed and 10 single- gender) to see how students interacted in different settings and to compare patterns of participation. This sampling method struck a balance between being doable and getting a wide range of viewpoints. It did this by including both urban and rural schools to avoid any possible biases.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were used survey, classroom observations, and interviews. The student survey adapted Al-Mahrooqi and Denman's (2016) EFL Participation Scale and included 32 items, such as Likert-scale questions (e.g., "I feel comfortable speaking English in front of male peers"; 1= Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) and demographic inquiries (e.g., parental education levels). The survey was piloted with 30 students to establish content validity (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$) and translated into Arabic using back-translation to ensure accuracy. Classroom observations followed a modified COLT framework (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995), coding participation frequency, interaction types (e.g., teacher-student vs. peer discussions), and cultural barriers (e.g., avoidance of eye contact). Two trained observers attended each session to ensure inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = 0.78$). Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored themes like cultural norms, pedagogical strategies, and parental influence. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4 Procedure

Data collection occurred over six weeks in 2024. Surveys were administered during homeroom periods by female research assistants to align with cultural norms, ensuring participants' comfort. Classroom observations were scheduled during regular EFL sessions, with observers positioned discreetly to minimize disruption. Teacher interviews were conducted in private school offices, lasting 45-60 minutes. All data were anonymized; surveys used coded identifiers, while interview transcripts replaced names with pseudonyms (e.g., "Teacher A").

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.28. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) summarized participation trends, and regression analyses examined relationships between variables like school type (urban/rural) and participation frequency. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) via NVivo 12. Open coding identified recurring themes (e.g., “fear of judgment”), while axial coding linked these to broader categories (e.g., “cultural barriers”). Triangulation merged survey results with observational and interview data; for instance, low self-reported participation in surveys was cross-checked with observational records of verbal engagement. Discrepancies, such as students overestimating their participation, were noted and contextualized through teacher interviews, which highlighted societal pressures to appear compliant.

4. RESULTS

This mixed-methods study examined the factors influencing female students’ participation in EFL classrooms in conservative Iraqi communities. Results are presented in four subsections as quantitative survey findings, qualitative themes from observations and interviews, triangulated insights, and unexpected findings. Tables and figures are embedded to illustrate key patterns.

4.1. Survey Findings

A total of 150 female students across three schools in AL-Najaf completed the survey. Descriptive and inferential analyses revealed significant trends in participation levels, barriers, and demographic variations.

4.1.1 Participation Frequency

Students in mixed-gender classrooms reported significantly lower participation rates compared to single-gender settings (Table 1). For instance, 68% of respondents never or rarely volunteered answers in coeducational classes, whereas 82% felt comfortable or very comfortable participating in girls-only environments. Urban students engaged more actively than their rural peers, showing 25% higher self-reported engagement ($\chi^2 = 8.32, p < .05$).

4.1.2 Perceived Barriers

•Fear of judgment from male peers (75% agreement) and parental restrictions (63% agreement) emerged as prevailing barriers (Figure 1). Regression analysis identified these factors as significant predictors of participation:

•Fear of judgment: $\beta = -.57, p < .001$

•Parental restrictions: $\beta = -.32, p < .05$

4.1.3 Demographic Variations

Students with college-educated parents participated 35% more frequently than those without ($r = .42, p < .01$), suggesting that parental education moderates engagement.

Table 1. Participation Frequency in Mixed-Gender vs. Single-Gender Classrooms

Participation Level	Mixed-Gender (%)	Single-Gender (%)
Never	42	5
Rarely	26	10
Sometimes	20	25
Often	10	40
Very Often	2	20

Note. Data reflect self-reported participation on a 5-point Likert scale (N = 150).

4.2. Qualitative Themes from Observations and Interviews

Thematic analysis of 20 classroom observations and 10 teacher interviews identified three key themes:

1. Cultural Barriers to Verbal Engagement

Female students avoided speaking in mixed-gender settings to uphold norms (hijab). Observations noted:

- 90% of girls declined role-plays involving male peers.
- 75% redirected questions to male classmates when called on. Teachers emphasized familial honor as a deterrent:

“Parents warn daughters that speaking loudly in English could damage their reputation.”

Teacher 3 (Semi-Urban School)

2. Teacher Strategies to Foster Participation

In single-gender classrooms, teachers employed gender-sensitive methods:

- Collaborative Learning: Group storytelling increased participation by 40% (observational tally).
- Cultural Tailoring: Lessons featuring Iraqi women (e.g., poet Nazik Al-Malaika) boosted engagement.

3. Parental and Community Resistance

Interviews revealed parental scepticism toward communicative activities:

“One father accused me of promoting ‘Western immorality’ for assigning dialogues.”

Teacher 6 (Rural School)

Table 2. Qualitative Themes and Representative Quotes

Theme	Example Quote	Observation Frequency
Cultural Barriers	<i>"Girls fear being labelled 'bold' by peers."</i>	85% of sessions
Teacher Strategies	<i>"We use all-female groups for debates."</i>	60% of sessions
Parental Resistance	<i>"English is for boys, not daughters."</i>	70% of interviews

4.3. Triangulated Insights

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data revealed consistent patterns:

-Single-Gender Classrooms as Safe Spaces:

Surveys showed 82% comfort in girls-only settings, aligning with observations of 50% more verbal interactions (e.g., questions, debates) in single-gender sessions.

-Cultural Norms as Participation Moderators:

Fear of judgment ($\beta = -.57, p < .001$) and parental restrictions ($\beta = -.32, p < .05$) predicted low participation, corroborated by interview themes emphasizing (familial honor).

Table 3. Triangulation of Participation Drivers

Factor	Survey Correlation (β)	Qualitative Support
Fear of Judgment	-.57**	<i>"Girls avoid eye contact with boys."</i>
Parental Education	.42**	<i>"Educated moms encourage practice."</i>
Teacher Gender (Female)	.30*	<i>"Girls engage more with female teachers."</i>

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

4.4. Unexpected Findings

-Technology as a Participation Catalyst

In one urban school, Arabic-subtitled English videos increased participation by 25%, suggesting that audiovisual tools mitigate pronunciation anxiety.

- Peer Support Networks

Observations noted informal after-school "study circles" where girls practised English together, highlighting peer collaboration as an untapped resource.

Table 4. Unexpected Findings and Implications

Finding	Example	Implication
Technology Use	25% participation increase with videos	Invest in audiovisual resources.
Peer Networks	15 girls formed a study group	Foster peer-led learning initiatives.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the profound influence of cultural, institutional, and pedagogical factors on female students' participation in EFL classrooms within conservative Iraqi communities. Integrating quantitative data, qualitative observations, and teacher interviews, the research illuminates both barriers and facilitators of engagement, offering insights into strategies for fostering equitable language learning environments. Below, we contextualize these findings within existing literature, discuss their implications, and outline avenues for future research.

According to the findings of a study, cultural and religious standards, such as the expectation that females should wear a hijab and the need to protect the honour of their families, make it extremely challenging for girls to speak up in classes where boys are present. Patterns similar to these were observed in other regions of the Middle East, where women are frequently unable to express their opinions in public due to the influence of social constraints. For example, seventy-five per cent of students who were questioned stated that they were concerned about being criticised by boys, and sixty-three per cent stated that the severe regulations that their parents imposed made them even more reserved. These findings are comparable to those obtained from Iraq, where women who exercise their right to speak their minds are sometimes regarded as socially unacceptable. In addition, the fact that Iraq places a greater focus on rote grammar courses rather than interactive learning, which is a popular method of instruction, makes the problem much more exacerbating because it does not provide female students with the power they require to cross cultural barriers. The results of studies conducted in Saudi Arabia (Al-Hoorie et al., 2020) and Oman (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016) show that classes with only one gender tend to have more active students. Students' verbal engagement increases by 50% in girls-only situations, and more than 80% of students feel more comfortable speaking in such circumstances. Culturally responsive education is powerful, as these results showed. Group storytelling or classes highlighting Iraqi women leaders are examples of gender-sensitive practices that teachers can use to increase student engagement (Ali, 2019). There is evidence to show that training teachers with a cultural lens could help remove structural barriers, uphold community values, and open doors to quality education.

It is clear that socioeconomic position influences educational opportunity since students from urban families whose parents had higher levels of education exhibited consistently higher levels of classroom engagement. According to Hussein (2021), Iraqi educators have also noticed a trend of increased student participation when there is a substantial correlation between parental education levels and this pattern ($r = .42$, $p < .01$). Still, many people, especially in more remote areas, were resistant to what they saw as "Western" educational practices. The fact that 70% of teachers interviewed had to deal with family opposition to interactive classroom activities show

how seriously parents take the preservation of cultural traditions (Al-Zubaidy & Rahman, 2021). Based on these results, it's obvious that schools and communities need to work together, respecting local beliefs and effectively addressing structural hurdles in English language instruction can only be achieved through this relationship.

Despite the constraints of the research budget, actionable techniques to increase student engagement were identified. Participation at a specific urban school increased by twenty-five percent as a direct result of the presentation of videos in the English language that were supported by subtitles in Arabic. In addition to this, it has the potential to preserve cultural significance while simultaneously reducing the anxiety that students have regarding foreign words, so fostering improved comprehension among them. The results of this study are consistent with those obtained by Silva and Oliveira (2021) in Brazil, who found that students'

anxiety about public speaking was reduced in a similar manner when they were exposed to media that contained subtitles.

In conservative areas where the traditional teacher-centered approach remains dominant, small groups of students engaged in peer-led "study circles" significantly influenced language assignments. They may experiment with new English vocabulary and expressions among their peers without fear of criticism. This indicates that grassroots collaboration can thrive in situations that usually obstruct it.

According to these findings, two substantial opportunities exist that educators could capitalise on.

1. Integrating technology: The utilisation of affordable technologies, such as subtitled films, can facilitate language acquisition and reduce stress.

2. Peer learning: Instruction can be facilitated by student groups, thereby maintaining motivation while adhering to cultural standards. Educators can conduct these lessons. Silva and Oliveira (2021) assert that such strategies may aid schools in resource-constrained areas in transforming traditional instructional methods to better align with contemporary demands. Success is dependent on interventions being customised to the needs of the local community. For instance, employing subtitled information that mirrors the cultural experiences of students or organising peer activities that align with community values are also instances.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the interplay of cultural norms, institutional regulations, and pedagogical approaches in influencing the participation of female students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes within conservative Iraqi communities. The study addresses the research questions: In what ways do social and cultural norms influence participation? And what techniques enhance individuals' interest? The findings indicate that entrenched attitudes, such as hijab and familial honour, significantly impede progress, particularly in environments comprising both genders. The research identifies methods to empower female learners, emphasizing the necessity for culturally relevant reforms aligned with local norms.

First, the study backs up earlier research from the Middle East (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016; Al-Hoorie et al., 2020) by showing that single-gender classrooms make students much more likely to participate. In fact, 82% of students said they felt more comfortable in girls-only classrooms. This shows that teaching boys and girls separately can be a good way to balance preserving culture and making sure everyone gets a fair education. Second, parental education and living in a city turned out to be important factors that affected engagement. These factors showed socio-economic differences that policymakers need to fix by reaching out to communities and giving them more

resources. Third, training teachers in gender-sensitive teaching methods and using culturally relevant materials, like lessons with Iraqi female role models, helped get more students involved, which is in line with UNESCO's (2021) suggestions for conservative settings.

Some unexpected results, like how Arabic-subtitled videos can help people with language anxiety and how peer-led study circles can grow naturally, show that technology and collaborative learning can help people get around social and cultural barriers. These ideas support comprehensive solutions that combine changes at the top with efforts at the bottom.

Future research should look into how language proficiency changes over time in different regions and how pedagogical interventions affect language proficiency over time. Also, studies that compare different societies could look at how well single-gender models work in other conservative societies.

In conclusion, this study shows how important it is to make English classes that work for girls in places like Iraq, where culture and tradition shape how people live every day. Schools should teach English in ways that are respectful of local customs, such as using stories that people know or having separate classrooms for boys and girls. This will make families feel respected and girls feel safe to join in. Iraq's schools need to rebuild trust after years of struggling by showing communities that learning English can help protect their culture instead of destroying it. Schools can give all students, especially girls, the tools they need to succeed without losing their identity by using both modern teaching methods and being aware of other cultures.

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