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# Gender Bias in Lebanese Language Classes

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## **Abstract**

*Gender bias, though often implicit and unnoticed, exists in many forms and in different situations. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether gender bias exists in Lebanese language classrooms. Semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and nonparticipant observational techniques were used for data collection. Results reveal discrepancies and similarities between participants' responses to questionnaires, interviewees' standpoints, and researchers' observation reports. Results show that, though gender bias exists in Lebanese language classrooms, it is hidden and inconspicuous.*

**Key words:** *English as a Second Language education, teacher education/certification.*

In the past few years, research has revealed insights into how teachers treat students differently based on their gender (D'ambrosio and Hammer 1996). Leaper and Spears Brown (2008) pointed out that female students are victims of gender bias manifested in various forms. In fact, gender bias in classrooms is attributed to several factors: untrained teachers, biased curricula, and a lack of role models from both genders (Gatta and Trigg 2001). To override the problem, serious steps should be put into action. Yopez (1994) reported on the very few studies that consider gender bias in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in the United States, but no research appears to have thoroughly examined the issue of gender bias in Lebanese ESL classes. Thus, this study investigates whether gender bias exists in Lebanese ESL classrooms.

## **Gender Bias**

Gender is constructed across various cultural and social contexts (Jackson and Gee 2005). The seeds of bias usually are planted early in life, refined at home, and

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experienced in schools. Gender bias is the exhibition of inequitable actions—usually subtle and difficult to detect—that treat boys and girls differently (Sadker and Zittleman 2005). According to Tannen (1990), gender bias implies a difference in status; it weakens females' self-esteem, limits their aspirations, and affects their entire careers (Davis 1999). Overcoming gender bias and achieving equitable educational environments demands pervasive efforts at all levels (Gatta and Trigg 2001). In fact, gender bias and gender equity are discernible in several ways in the educational system (Davis 2003). Many language textbooks portray women as victims of gender bias (Sunderland 2000). The formation of an individual's gender identity is greatly influenced by the stereotypical portrayals of males and females in books and other types of media (Frawley 2005). Children form their beliefs, attitudes, and gender-role identities based on their exposure to images that exist in hidden messages conveyed to them through several types of instructional materials (Frawley 2005).

### *Classroom Practices*

The school reflects the outside world (Coates 1993), which is fast-paced, multifaceted, and confusing (Sadker and Sadker 2003); and the classroom is a miniature society of its own (D'ambrosio and Hammer 1996). Though most teachers aim to teach their students equitably, equity is still not the case in many classrooms (Hannan 1995; Volk and Beeman 1998; Sadker 1999; Jones et al. 2000; Duffy, Warren, and Walsh 2001; Sadker and Zittleman 2005). Such differential treatment largely depends on the subject matter taught in the classroom. For instance, in science and technology classes, instructors hold higher expectations of male students than female students, and males receive positive feedback more often than do female students (Duffy, Warren, and Walsh 2001).

Teachers are involved every day with their students in thousands of verbal interactions, which may hold different nuances of meaning in each instance (Sadker and Sadker 2003). The discrepancy in the amount of attention given to each gender has a negative impact on the academic performance of girls (Sadker 1999). For instance, male students are asked more often than females to respond to in-class queries, and eventually have more access to academic discussion and the attention of teachers (Sadker and Sadker 2003). Female students are disadvantaged because their educational needs are ignored (Hannan 1995); therefore, their learning is "short-circuited." The differential treatment, in favor of males, sends hidden messages to students that males are the high academic achievers and that catering to their educational needs is paramount (Jones et al. 2000).

Social prejudices exist in societies. Heller (2003) argued that social problems are visible at schools, and the unequal treatment of both genders has profound consequences in the larger society. Young (2004) maintained that cultural models inform members of a specific culture what ways of doing or being are typically appropriate. Cultural models have the power to shape teachers' interactions in the classroom and affect the amount of attention granted to both genders.

According to Jones et al. (2000), female students receive positive feedback from their teachers based on the neatness and timeliness of their work, yet are criticized for the content completed. Males are mostly rewarded for their smart answers, which are anticipated because of their perceived masculine innate abilities. Hannan (1995) confirmed that boys

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also receive more help from their instructors to perform a certain process, while teachers usually complete the task on behalf of the girls.

Language is the most important discipline for the study of society and culture (Heller 2003). Language brings about gender stereotypes that exist in classrooms, homes, and societies (St. Pierre 1999). Thus, girls are described as "obedient," "neat," "tidy," and "orderly," while boys are described as "confident," "active," "adventurous," and "aggressive." Sanders (2002, 2003) concluded that gender stereotypes affect both males and females. Scientific subjects are regarded as masculine subjects, whereas languages, art, and music are regarded as feminine subjects. Thus, the under-representation of females in math, science, and technology in schools, universities, and in the workplace is attributed to stereotyped feminine qualities, such as a lack of self-confidence, or to classroom practices, which allow boys to control classroom interactions and dominate in subjects such as technology and computers (Acker and Oatley 1993). Many teachers' stereotypical beliefs lead them to exhibit gender-biased behaviors (Gatta and Trigg 2001), which have harmful social effects and consequences on males and females (Frawley 2005), such as limiting students' accomplishments and ambitions and lowering self-esteem and self-confidence. To counteract gender role stereotypes, educators should encourage both female and male students to achieve in all subject areas and to reach their full potential, and ensure that all students' individual educational needs are met.

Teachers' language is considered gender-biased (Davis 1999) because it has a negative impact on female and male students (Davis 2003). Through classroom exposure to biased language, both genders might feel uncomfortable about themselves or their surroundings. If words illustrate the real world and its existing realities, then using "man," "he," or "guys" to refer to both genders does not accurately portray our world.

### *The Problem*

Several researchers concluded that teachers' gender biases are subtle (Garber 2003). Many instructors believe they treat all their students equitably, yet they are unaware of the hidden and inconspicuous biases existing in their classrooms (Plucker 1994). St. Pierre (1999) confirmed that there is a positive correlation between teachers' behaviors and creating equitable learning environments. To achieve gender equity in classrooms, it is imperative that teachers recognize their differential treatment of both sexes. There is common agreement that socialization has an effect on teachers' classroom behaviors and interactions with their students. Sanders (2002) maintained that overcoming this dilemma requires serious rhetoric, among all educators, about the educational well-being of female and male students.

### *Gender Bias Versus Discourse Analysis*

Discourse is defined as "a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts which manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action" (Wodak and Reisigl 2003, 383). Discourse during interactions is a venue for examining social actions and social structures.

Boys and girls grow up in different worlds of words (Tannen 1990); men's talk and women's talk differ in content, as well as in nature (Johnson and Aries 1998). Gender

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differences in speaking habits are observed in children as young as three years of age. Tannen pointed out that men interrupt women when they are speaking; and if women attempt to speak louder and more assertively, they are regarded as being masculine. Consequently, these research findings reveal important factors regarding why male students are observed to dominate classroom interactions. The unequal treatment of the two genders is visible in educational settings and is manifested in the discourse of their daily interactions (Heller 2003). There is insufficient information in the literature about the effect of gender bias on male students because it is assumed that gender bias exclusively affects female students as direct recipients (Davis 2003). However, Sadker (1999) confirmed that gender bias also affects male students. Boys are stereotyped into gender roles at an early age. As they grow older, males encounter social pressures steering them toward "masculine" occupations while sometimes disregarding their true interests. The truth is that both genders exhibit different strengths, weaknesses, and needs.

### *Gender Bias in Relation to ESL*

According to St. Pierre (1999), gender discrimination in favor of male students constitutes a major problem in ESL classrooms. ESL teachers' behaviors, classroom interactions and discussions, and reading and writing assignments subtly, though unintentionally, reinforce gender stereotypes (Roop 1989). Sunderland (2000) maintained that classroom interactions highlight the differences between the genders in ESL education. Moreover, Coates (1993) confirmed that males and females follow different interactive styles; therefore, the differences in styles of interaction may result in miscommunication or a cross-cultural communication (Tannen 1990) between the two genders. Coates (1993, 16) observed that within classroom settings, males and females learn various patterns of interactions that contribute to different outcomes for both genders, such as "when to speak, when to remain silent, how to mark speech politeness, when it is permissible to interrupt, etc."

The second important gender issue of ESL education is the gender bias existent in language textbooks (Sunderland 2000). Males are overrepresented in language textbooks. They are portrayed in stereotypical roles such as doctors and lawyers, whereas females are depicted in subordinate positions that stereotype them as emotional and weak. Sunderland's view concurs with McGrath's (2002) posit that the lack of balance between the representation of men and women in ESL materials holds negative consequences.

### *Overcoming the Problem*

A major step toward overcoming the problem is to bring it into the open (Wolfe 1998). The issue requires serious talk about the educational well-being of both genders, not either one independently (Sanders 2003). Teachers should provide equitable learning environments that reduce gender stereotypes and foster equal role development (Slavkin 2001). Altering attitudes about gender equity must begin with educators who are involved in educational processes (Garber 2003). Teachers are the essential means for developing new attitudes (Davis 2003). Conversely, teachers' ideologies set limits on what changes they are likely to accept.

### *Teacher Awareness and Training*

Educational institutions should explore gender issues and pedagogies (Gabriel and Smithson 1990), yet several studies conducted in the 1990s confirmed that gender equity

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is still in its earliest stages of consideration (Sanders 2002). The problem stems from the fact that teacher education programs do not equip future teachers with strategies that embrace the range of gender differences existing in the teachers themselves and in their classrooms (Annas and Maher 1992).

Sanders (2003) maintained that it is important to have gender parity within the curriculum of teacher education programs. The whole educational system must work toward raising teachers' awareness on the topic. In short, it is crucial that academic authorities highlight the importance of gender equity in relation to teacher education and students' educational well-being. Gabriel and Smithson (1990) confirmed that teachers who have not been trained about gender issues should attend gender equity workshops. Gabriel and Smithson's view was later affirmed by Martino, Lingard, and Mills (2004, 450), who stated, "there is clearly a need for professional development on this issue and its effect on the schooling experiences of both boys and girls."

### *Teachers' Pedagogical Practices*

All students, regardless of their gender, are entitled to equal educational opportunities. To reach this end, appropriate pedagogical practices should be implemented. When students are encouraged to take part in debates and reach understanding as they are seeking knowledge, they are involved in active learning (Dunlap and Grabinger 1996). Wolfe (1998) conducted an exploratory study in an ESL classroom to determine whether a traditional lecture style grants students equal access to classroom interactions or whether boys dominate in the classroom and hinder female students' language learning and acquisition. Wolfe concluded that only the language teacher he observed, whose instructional style was in line with the constructivist theory of learning, offered all students equal access to language discourse, thus providing them equitable language learning experiences. In contrast, the instructional style of other subject-matter teachers was more suited to male than female students, but less opportunity for access to academic discussion for both males and females was apparent.

### *Students' Biased Behaviors*

Murray, Meinholdt, and Bergmann (1999) stated that females should be able to recognize and deal with gender inequity, regardless of the context. Davis (1999) argued that perhaps the most significant principle of gender parity, which teachers ought to employ, is to remedy student gender-bias behaviors. Gender bias among students is common, and ignoring this dilemma indicates to students that it is adequate or acceptable in today's world. Davis (1999) suggested that teachers openly discuss with their students issues of gender bias and establish some unbiased rhetoric principles related to their class. Learning and practicing equitable gender behaviors will teach students to deal with gender disparity and ensure that students will pursue things consistent with their abilities, not with their genders.

### *Instructional Materials*

Instructional materials, like oral language, may transmit hidden messages to all students (Volk and Beeman 1998). Instructors should critically evaluate materials for any gender bias prior to using them (Volk and Beeman 1998; Frawley 2005). Frawley stated

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that one way to fight gender bias is through instructional materials, by selecting literature that depicts nontraditional characters involved in non-stereotypical behaviors.

### *Overcoming Gender Bias in the ESL Classroom*

Good teaching requires qualified teachers who are able to stimulate active, rather than passive, learning (Park 1996). English teachers should thoughtfully orchestrate classroom activities to strengthen female students' self-confidence as meaning-makers (Roop 1989). Park confirmed that teachers should interact with their students, involve them in classroom discussions, and motivate them to think critically and creatively. According to Wolfe (1998), language instructors should ensure maximum access to academic language discourse for *all* students. English departments should ensure gender equity in all the required readings (Cleary and Whitemore 1999). Further, language learners ought to be given opportunities to discuss what they hear, read, or write about (Alvermann and Commeyras 1994). "Genderizing" the English curriculum is an opportunity that could enrich students' lives in the course of their experiences with literature (Cleary and Whitemore 1999); consequently, students become aware of germane issues that are existent in life and displayed in literature.

English teachers should promote the use of unbiased language. Because words are used to express what people intend to say and mean, it is crucial that gender-specific words change and become inclusive.

Classrooms must act as learning environments. Teachers' relationships with their students, both boys and girls, are central to good teaching (Martino, Lingard, and Mills 2004). Zittleman and Sadker (2005) concluded that the best places to create gender-free climates are schools and classrooms.

Better education leads to better generations, which bring about better populations. Frawley (2005) concurred that teachers are obligated to examine ingrained sexist attitudes and to be ready to employ a variety of teaching strategies. Instructors have the power to stop the damage being done through the subtle messages that biased environments and societies generate and spread. Teachers ought to analyze in a critical manner their personal attitudes and behaviors regarding gender roles. They also should examine instructional materials and be more aware of their impact on students. Davis (2003) concluded that teachers who employ a variety of teaching approaches and strategies are more likely to construct unbiased learning environments appropriate for all students.

### *Methodology*

The researchers in this study examined gender bias in the natural setting of Lebanese ESL classrooms. They followed the naturalistic approach: The emphasis was on individuals' subjective experiences "with a focus on qualitative analysis" (Burns 2000, 3). A range of interrelated interpretative practices was employed. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that each of these practices makes the studied phenomenon visible in various ways. Thus, the researchers combined qualitative and quantitative methodology to gain in-depth understanding of gender bias in ESL classrooms. The methodology used was threefold: semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys, and nonparticipant observations.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The semi-structured interviews were in the form of conversations between the study participants and the interviewers. The questions were flexible enough to allow the researchers to assess the participants' beliefs and examine their perceptions of the issue. The researchers elicited responses and then evaluated the data for trends. The study participants represented the larger population of intermediate and secondary level ESL teachers, with four males and four females; their ages ranged between 21 and 52. The interviews were audio-recorded.

Three files were constructed for each interview: transcript file, personal file, and analytic file. In the transcript file, the entire interview was transcribed into written form. The personal file included information from the transcript file, as well as the researchers' personal interpretations of the data. The analytic file classified the data into thematic and conceptual categories and subcategories of the issues and topics.

### **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires constitute an important method in educational research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000) because they provide comparable information from a number of respondents within a specific time frame and at a minimal cost (Burns 2000). The primary focus of the questionnaires in this study was gender bias in Lebanese ESL classrooms; secondary issues also were examined to gain further insights into the respondents' beliefs and perceptions of the issue. The participants who responded to the questionnaires included 40 ESL teachers (7 males and 33 females) selected from a representative sample of schools in Lebanon. The questionnaires incorporated closed questions, open-ended questions, and Likert scale items. The data collected were categorized according to the same issues and topics that were the focus of the eight interviews and were summarized in tables. Descriptive statistics were used to present the participants' responses to the questionnaire items.

### **Observations**

Classroom observations took place in the natural setting of the ESL classrooms. Four female teachers and one male teacher were observed in 18 ESL classroom sessions. The classroom observations were analyzed in terms of the teachers' instructional strategies, teacher-student verbal interactions, teachers' patterns of interactions with their students, the type of language communicated in the classrooms (inclusive or exclusive), instructional materials used during the observation sessions, and the classrooms' setup (including seating arrangements).

## ***Results and Discussion***

### **Teachers' Awareness of the Problem**

All interviewed teachers maintained that they were aware of gender bias in the ESL classes. In contrast, 67.5 percent of questionnaire respondents disagreed that gender bias is a problem that prevails in ESL classrooms; this finding contradicts St. Pierre's (1999) declaration that gender discrimination, in favor of male students, constitutes a major problem in ESL classrooms.

A male interviewee affirmed that female students suffer from gender bias in their homes and that they are not given the chance to pursue their education because of their gender.

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The interviewee's statement concurs with Davis's (1999) and Frawley's (2005) arguments that the differential treatment girls encounter is completely based on their gender.

Concurrently, other study participants asserted that teacher-to-student gender bias and student-to-student gender bias exists. One female interviewee pointed out, "Female teachers tend to address boys more often than girls. Female teachers usually favor male students, and I have observed this bias in classrooms." This statement corresponds to Sadker and Sadker's (1994) affirmation that in today's classrooms, girls are underprivileged and teachers interact more with their male students than their female students. Additionally, 82.5 percent of the participants' responses to the questionnaires indicated that the ESL teachers interact equally with both genders; however, the classroom observations revealed the opposite—in ESL sessions observed, the majority of the interactions were between the teachers and the male students. The number of interactions in favor of male students was observed in the male teachers' classrooms, as well as the female teachers' classrooms. In these excerpts from observation reports, teachers related: "The interactions were led by the teacher and the male students. Only three girls participated, which is a relatively small number. Eight girls were not involved in the classroom discussions at all."

Consequently, these results corresponded to Davis's (1999) research findings, which indicated that male and female teachers' interactions are biased in favor of male students. Results of this study revealed that teachers are unaware of the biases existent in their classrooms—concurring with St. Pierre's (1999) argument that to achieve gender equity in classrooms, it is imperative that teachers recognize their differential treatment of the sexes.

### **Gender Bias in the Classroom**

The interviewed teachers asserted that they either do not allow gender bias to take place in their ESL classrooms or they try to avoid it. Similarly, in 95 percent of the questionnaires, respondents agreed that ESL teachers do not permit any form of gender bias to take place in their classes. However, one female respondent claimed that gender bias in the classroom occurs automatically and is implicit: "Without you noticing it, it happens." This respondent's statement corresponds with Garber's (2003) declaration that teachers' gender bias is subtle to a point of being invisible.

Seven interviewees maintained that students are gender biased toward one another. A male respondent shared, "Many of the boys tend to think they are superior to girls. They would say something like 'girls should follow because I am the master; I am the man'." This respondent's statement corresponds with 62.5 percent of the participants' responses to the questionnaires, which revealed that male students exhibit gender biased behaviors in ESL classrooms. These results concur with Davis's (1999) statement that gender bias among students is common; however, ignoring this problem indicates that this behavior remains acceptable in today's world. During the observation of a male teacher, one girl expressed her opinion regarding the topic discussed and one of her classmates agreed with what she stated; in response, the teacher addressed the boy by saying, "Because she's a lady, you blindly follow her. ... Is she the boss?" Unfortunately, a statement like this likely would serve to promote gender bias among the students rather than eradicate it.

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A female interviewee referred to an incident with a male student who was not taking notes. When confronted, the boy replied that if he takes notes then everyone would think that he is a geek: "He has this macho image that he likes to keep up." This incident, along with the teacher's analysis of the student's statement, reflects the serious ill effects of some cultural models on students' performance (Young 2004).

Concurrently, a female interviewee described another incident that occurred with one of her female students, who refused to engage in group work with a boy; she told the teacher, "Please, I don't want to work with him; he's a boy!" She persisted in her complaint, and her female friends told the teacher, "She's not used to it since he is a boy." The teacher confirmed that such a problem is common among other girls as well: "I think there are quite a few of them; not only this particular girl." This incident can be explained by Tannen's (1990) argument that girls and boys grow up in different worlds; had the female students been given adequate opportunities to learn within balanced social contexts, they would not have had the problem of working with the boys in their classroom. It should be noted that all the observed classrooms had single-sex compulsory or assigned seating arrangements; the girls were sitting next to one another and the boys next to one another—"girls with girls and boys with boys."

Most of the interviewees declared that they made sure the instructional materials they use in their ESL classrooms are free of gender stereotyping. Respondents to the questionnaires confirmed the same; 92.5 percent affirmed that materials were free of gender stereotypes. However, in one classroom, the researchers observed that the text used involved a great deal of gender stereotyping. Furthermore, the teacher did not employ the text to raise students' awareness toward gender stereotyping; in contrast, he reinforced the gender bias existent in the textbook. The interviewees, as well as 92.5 percent of the participants in the questionnaires, maintained that they use gender-neutral language in the classroom. A male interviewee highlighted the importance of using gender-neutral language; however, he declared that many other teachers demonstrate gender bias and use sexist language in their classrooms. The interviewee stated, "Sorry to say that many language teachers are sexist. The head of a department or a manager is always a *he*." The interviewee's statement fits Davis's (1999) claim that teachers' language is considered to be gender-biased. Davis's (1999) argument was illustrated in the majority of the observed ESL classrooms where the generic "he" was used exclusively: "Several times the students and the teacher used the generic 'he' to refer to both genders." Similarly, a female participant's response to the questionnaire was, "I would like to educate my male colleagues about the negative influence of their subconscious stereotyping. Even the language discourse they use is gender biased. This is especially relevant in our Lebanese culture."

All the participants claimed that the only form of gender bias existent in their classrooms was student-to-student gender bias. This finding agrees with Davis's (1999) statement that gender bias among and between students is common. However, none of the observation reports revealed incidents of student-to-student gender bias during the observed ESL sessions. Davis (1999) suggested that teachers should discuss issues of gender bias openly with their students and establish some unbiased gender principles related to their class. Furthermore, learning and practicing gender-equitable behaviors will teach students to deal with gender disparity. Unfortunately, observation reports in

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the study showed that the teachers' language discourse and classroom practices might actually promote gender bias among the students rather than eradicate it. The results unveiled teachers' classroom practices that implicitly, though unintentionally, would reinforce gender bias in the ESL classroom.

Moreover, the results revealed the effect of the cultural models on students' classroom behaviors. These findings coincide with the literature reviewed (Young 2004), which shows that cultural models inform members of a specific culture what ways of doing or being are typically appropriate.

The findings of the study showed a discrepancy between the interviewed participants' responses and the observation reports. The majority of the participants confirmed that their instructional materials are free of gender bias; however, the observation reports indicated a great deal of gender stereotyping and gender bias in the textbook used for instruction. These results are in keeping with the literature reviewed (Sunderland 2000; Zittleman and Sadker 2002; Frawley 2005), which found many language textbooks to be gender biased.

### **Pedagogical Practices**

All the interviewees affirmed that they employ instructional strategies that are in line with the communicative approaches to language teaching. The majority of the participants declared that they are learner-centered. Seven interviewees, as well as 60 percent of the respondents to the questionnaires, maintained that they employ cooperative learning procedures in their classrooms. The majority of the participants stated that they group students according to their various abilities in heterogeneous groups. One male teacher declared that he allowed his students to group themselves; students either group themselves in same sex groups or mixed sex groups. Another male interviewee confirmed that he avoids engaging students in cooperative work at all, "in order not to disturb the whole floor." His response to this question contradicted his assertion that he employs the communicative approaches to language teaching: "The communicative approaches give me the result I want, which is they feel at home when they discuss anything. I believe in practice more than theory."

The results of the study showed a discrepancy between teachers' responses and the observation reports. The majority of the observed classrooms were teacher-directed, and only one female teacher employed in her classroom several strategies consistent with the communicative approach to language teaching. Among the observed classrooms, that teacher's classroom reflected the least gender bias. All her students were actively involved in classroom interactions, and the two genders were treated equally. These findings coincided with the literature reviewed (Roop 1989; Park 1996); good teaching requires qualified teachers who are able to stimulate active learning, rather than passive learning. English teachers should thoughtfully orchestrate classroom activities; by doing so, they can strengthen female students' self-confidence as meaning-makers. Students' active involvement in the process of language learning is the most powerful means of acquiring it.

### **Teachers' Perception of Students' Learning Abilities**

Three interviewees declared that during their ESL teaching experience, they observed that female students have higher ability than male students with respect to ESL learning.

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A male teacher explained this view by stating that girls are probably better off in the ESL classes because of their efforts to be superior to boys: "Maybe they would like to prove that they are better than others, as a kind of superiority." The other teachers asserted that there is no difference in the learning ability of the two genders; some interviewees observed that the difference lies in the students' learning preferences and the amount of hard work exerted by the females. Of the questionnaire respondents, 72.5 percent indicated that boys and girls achieve equally in the ESL classroom; however, three participants believed that girls achieve higher than boys because of their hard work: "They have the tendency to work hard" and "I think they are more attentive and quiet." Many interviewees affirmed that female students work harder than male students. However, none of the participants attributed the male students' achievement to hard work. A female teacher stated, "When boys excel, they are more outstanding than girls." These findings correspond to Jones and Myhill's (2004) suggestion that good academic results of female students are attributed to hard work, while boys' good results are attributed to high intellectual abilities.

### **Teacher–Student Interactions**

All interviewees maintained that they provided their students with equal opportunities to participate in classroom interactions, with 82.5 percent of questionnaire respondents claiming that they do not interact more with their male students than their female students. However, the classroom observations showed that in the majority of the ESL classrooms, most of the teachers' interactions were with the male students: "The teacher did not try his best to engage the entire classroom in the discussions," "The boys were very loud and started calling out answers without raising their hands," and "The students who were calling out the answers to the previously done exercises were mainly males." These findings correspond with Sadker and Sadker's (2003) claim that male students have more access to academic talk and interactions than female students because they are more assertive in capturing their teachers' attention.

The majority of the interviewees agreed that male students dominate in the ESL classrooms. The interviewees attributed the male students' dominance to their cultural background by offering comments such as, "Males are brought up to be males," "They have this macho thing that they have to show off ... it's cultural," "Boys dominate to mark their territory; I think it's because of culture," and "They are used to being dominant everywhere. ... It's an upraising issue, the way they were raised. They try to make the girls more obedient." These statements were refuted by 67.5 percent of the questionnaire participants, however, who opposed the notion that boys dominate in ESL classrooms. The classroom observations showed that, most of the time, the male gender was dominant.

### **Overcoming the Problem**

The majority of the interviewees confirmed that they follow procedures to counteract gender bias in their ESL classrooms. Seven interviewees maintained that they discuss issues of gender bias with their students. A male teacher stated, "We discuss such issues in class, especially when something comes up." This assertion was refuted, however, by the classroom observations, which revealed a great deal of gender bias. Also observed was that the boys were outspoken and the girls very quiet. Moreover, when girls spoke or read aloud, their voices were low, and they seemed hesitant and

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intimidated. Whenever the male students spoke, they seemed assertive, outspoken, and self-confident. In responding to one of the female students' answers to a question, the male teacher said, "What a logical mind you have," causing the girl to look embarrassed and prompting her to try and rephrase her idea, but she could not. The most powerful means of preventing classroom talk and interaction by females is by intimidation. Some females can become intimidated and eventually stop speaking when they feel that their comments are discredited, particularly if that discredit comes from the classroom instructor. The aforementioned girl described as having a "logical mind" was observed not attempting to participate in any further discussion in that particular class, and remained quiet for the rest of the session.

Study results further indicated that a discrepancy existed between the interviewees' responses and questionnaire respondents as compared to the observation reports. The majority of the participants asserted that they follow procedures to counteract gender bias in their classrooms; however, the observation reports revealed that gender bias was reinforced rather than counteracted in the observed ESL classrooms.

Results also indicated that there was consensus among the majority of the participants that their education and teacher training did not include gender issues. These results are similar to those of Sanders (2002), who maintained that gender equity is still in its earliest stages of consideration.

### **Conclusion**

This study indicated that the participants were unaware of the various forms of gender bias that existed in their ESL classrooms. All the participants maintained that they did not practice gender bias; however, the classroom observations revealed the existence of the problem. The researchers concluded that gender bias elicited by the teachers and reinforced in the ESL classrooms was occurring on a subconscious level for the instructors. The literature reviewed in this study confirmed that gender bias hinders students' aspirations and achievements. Educational institutions should bring the problem of gender bias to the limelight and equip all educators with strategies to eliminate it for the sake of the educational well-being of both genders.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Implications for future research could be summarized as follow:

1. Results of the study revealed many discrepancies between participants' responses to questionnaires, interviewees' comments, and researchers' observation reports; thus, future research is needed to probe these discrepancies.
2. The sample size of the study was small; eight teachers were interviewed, and 40 participants responded to the questionnaires. Future research needs to involve a larger sample to strengthen the results.
3. Future research needs to comprise a variety of schools of various socioeconomic statuses Lebanon.
4. Further research also needs to explore the role of the communicative approaches to language teaching in promoting and fostering equitable ESL learning environments.

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Last, but not least, further research about gender bias and ESL learning is imperative to ensure that all students, male and female, can access optimal learning experiences in the ESL classrooms.

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