

# Student Perceptions on Gender differences of ELT Teachers

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**ABSTRACT** *The effect of teacher gender on students of different gender is often shrugged off, as a lot of teachers themselves are not aware of gender biases and stereotyping in particular when these issues may not have been addressed effectively in their training programs, as not much research has been done on this particular aspect in recent years. Hence, it is an area that needs to be addressed in a more vigorous style particularly in the language learning arena, in order to explore and overcome any shortcomings that may exist with regard to gender differences. The purpose of this research is to identify the effects of teacher gender on students in terms of their perceptions as learners and thus cater to the following research question. Which teacher gender is preferred over the other by students among their language teachers and why? In order to do this, qualitative research design has been incorporated and data collected over a period of 2 months were analyzed and triangulated to accumulate the results which indicated that with regard to content delivery, female teachers topped off while male teachers flourished being spontaneous and more approachable in class. Furthermore, it was also found that both male and female students preferred male language teachers over female teachers due to the fact that they were perceived to be more “friendly” towards their students.*

**KEYWORDS** *Perceptions, gender, language teachers, female, male, students*

The characteristics associated with males and females have always been an interesting feature highlighted in a lot of literature because it is an undeniable trait of human existence. Similarly, the difference in gender roles in relation to an individual's capability and performance has been weighed immeasurably over the years and studied in a variety of fields such as medicine, education, politics etc. In this respect, in the language learning arena, particularly in socio-linguistics, this concept has been studied under three major topics, i.e.: the underlying gender stereotype role played by instructional materials, differences in gender of learners and the differences in gender of instructors themselves. “While unintentional, a teacher's inherent biases can perpetuate unfair stereotypes and may be manifested in discriminatory classroom practices (Aina& Cameron, 2011:13).” Similarly, a student's perception of the ability of teachers with regard to their gender due to the stereotyping in a particular culture or society may coherently affect their learning too. (Centra& Gaubatz, 1999). The assumption that “teachers with a higher level of schooling are better equipped to teach” (Jatoi, 1992: 9) in societies where women are discriminated in educational opportunities, tend to have the inherent belief that female teachers lack in academic content knowledge of teaching. However, in an ideal learning situation, student evaluation should be based on what the students learn from a teacher and not necessarily on their pre-conceived ideas or biases

(Centra& Gaubatz, 1999) and although gender effectiveness in a linguistic sense can have a generalized concept, where learning is concerned, it should be more focused on the factors that directly affect learning such as classroom interaction and motivation of students with regard to the gender of teachers.

Hence, it is highly relevant that this area be dealt with in the above context so that educationalists would benefit in the planning and implementation of a suitable learning environment based on the findings in the practical aspects of this concept. How do male/female students perceive their male/female teachers in terms of the effectiveness of their teaching?

### **Impact of Teacher gender on students**

According to Dee (2006), from as early as the 1970s researchers have identified the differences in the performance level of students with regard to their gender and as a consequence of this, the push for single sex education had intensified in many parts of the world. Subsequently, the nature versus nurture debate of student achievement progressed over the next couple of years which had ultimately led to the deeper exploration of factors that may affect performance level of students. One such factor that was given emphasis to, was the role of the teacher in this aspect depended on the gender of the teacher. Numerous research that followed confirmed that teachers sharing the same gender with students tend to affect students positively while opposites had a negative co-relation. “Students are more engaged, behave more appropriately, and perform at a higher level when taught by one who shares their gender” (Dee, 2006: 70). This seems to be a unanimous feature at different age groups.

In a study conducted by Dee (2005), it was revealed that when a class is administered by a woman, boys are more likely to be seen as disruptive when headed by a man, while girls were more likely to be bored with the subject. It was also noted that the toll on gender differences fell more on male students than on female students in general at adolescent level because there were more practicing female teachers at that level than male teachers (Dee, 2006). In addition, in a study conducted by Hopf and Hatzichristou (1999) with 1042 primary school students and 862 secondary students in Greece, it was found that there were significant differences in teacher gender when assessing students’ ability level. For example, female teachers were more motherly and showed more compassion and understanding towards all students in general compared to male teachers. In addition, a similar study by John’s and Wheatley’s indicated that the female teachers were even softer with female students and displayed more sympathy towards them (1990).

Furthermore, even though teachers often express that they treat all students equally; regardless of gender they often underestimate the effects their gender and identity can have on students.

“The teachers’ identity as male or female is closely related to authority in the classroom and educators have expressed the concern that students often consider male teachers as authoritarian and female teachers as too soft and unable to control some undisciplined situations” (Madrid& Hughes, 2010: 3).

Although older research had suggested that students and teachers sharing similar gender had fared better in learning, there are contraindications to this philosophy, at present. A large sample- based study in the US shows that regardless of student gender, students taught by women do better than those students taught by men (Krieg 2005). In addition, a recent UNESCO Education for All report has pointed out that female teachers have an affirmative effect on both boys' and girls' level of achievement (UNESCO 2005).

It is also worthy to note that a few studies such as the one done in Netherlands by Driessen in

2007 have suggested that there is no relationship between teacher gender and student achievement at all (Chudgar & Shankar, 2008).

### **How teacher gender can affect student learning**

According to the major theories of language learning, two major aspects that highlight student learning are student teacher interaction and motivation. One of the most significant theories of learning, in particular with language learning is the social constructivist theory which claims that in order for knowledge to be established and internalized, there must be an amount of social communication between the learner and the teacher (Brufee, 1986). In addition, Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" highlights the social nature of learning, where the learner is supposed to be prompted by outside sources and gradually pushed forward by an instructor, further stresses on the importance of the role of the teacher in students' overall capacity to learn.

Furthermore, the cognitive theorists view of learning proclaim that in order to retain information a conceptual framework is necessary which can be maximized by reviewing information and sharing their understanding with others. Thus, the teacher's role in creating an environment that fosters discussion of concepts in the classroom would definitely matter in the process of cognitive development of students (Slavin, 1995). The use of questioning techniques and prompts would be some examples of creating an environment for intellectual development in an ELT classroom (Chafi & Elkhouzai, 2014).

Much of the previous research done on the communication between teachers and students in terms of both their genders reveal that when male teachers run classes of female students, or the vice versa for female teachers, there exists a gap between them and their students because of the psychological and sociological differences between genders. In addition, the lack of shared knowledge among them does in fact hinder communication between the teacher and students (Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2010).

Another groundbreaking factor of language learning is the motivational theorists' claim that teachers can inspire students to learn a language by creating an environment that fosters learning as well as encourage students by rewarding positive behaviour (Brown, 2005). Since, a healthy teacher-student team is contended to be the phenomenon behind a productive classroom environment, the

interpersonal relationship that teachers have with their students can stimulate their motivation to learn.

### **Methodology**

The participants in this study are local and international students who were doing their undergraduate and post graduate degrees at University of Nottingham, UNMC. This study also has participants from 10 different countries namely, Maldives, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Malawi, Ghana, Bahrain, Palestine, China and Indonesia. There are a total of 28 participants out of which 16 participants were interviewed face to face and the other 12 participants had presented a written version based on their experiences as students. Each participant did either the interview or the written version and not both. Also 17 out of the 28 participants are females while 11 were males. The age range of students were from 18 -26. The participants are allocated letters of the alphabet in this study instead of their names to protect their privacy. Hence, the 16 Interviewees have been referred to as IN1-, IN2-, IN3-, IN4-, and IN5- and so on with IN referring to Interviewees. Participants who had submitted a written version based on their experiences are referred here as PN1-, PN2-, PN3-, PN4- , PN5- and so on with PN referring to personal narrative. The sampling initially started with “convenient sampling” but as time progressed it had developed into “snowball” sampling with the help of the participants themselves, since the study required the participants to have experienced teachers of both gender.

### **Results**

Qualitative data analysis was used in this study to find consistent patterns from the various perspectives of students that were brought up from the interview data and these were triangulated with the personal narratives and the findings were compared with the researcher’s notes. Common themes in the interviews and personal narratives were highlighted to check for consistency and complementary concepts. At first, male and female perceptions were analyzed separately and after that, features that were significant from the whole study are presented. Important findings are listed and further elaborated in the discussion. Finally, researcher’s conclusions were drawn and possible implications and limitations of the research are discussed in detail. The results of the interviews and written articles are categorized under 2 main concepts which form the foundation for this study, namely female students’ perceptions of ELT teachers and male students’ perceptions of ELT teachers. The themes listed under each concept were placed in order of frequency (how frequent) these themes had levitated both from the interview data and the written versions derived from the participants of this research. They were also evaluated by the weightage given by students in terms of emphasis. (i.e.: approximately how much of details they gave/ how much time they spent while talking about it or how many words or paragraphs they spent to describe a concept which fits into a certain theme)

#### **Female students’ perception of English Language Teachers**

The following themes are selected from the interviews and personal narratives as the main features highlighted by female students who participated in this study, in terms of the frequency and weightage given by them.

### **Attitude and interaction with students**

A total of 15 female participants, from the 17, which was a surprisingly large number, had affirmed that male teachers interacted better than female teachers with them in the sense that they were friendlier, less strict and more approachable. One student was neutral here saying that both genders were equal in their interaction with her while another had claimed that male teachers had intimidated her while she felt more comfortable with females. However, some students also had specifically mentioned that female teachers were more biased, take things too personal and favoured some over others in addition to being moody and pointed out that this was a reason why they had less rapport with their female teachers.

IN-1: Male teachers tend to be friendlier in nature.....I feel closer to male teachers....

IN-2: I feel kind of hesitant to talk to the female teacher about some things..... cause I might say something..... I am afraid to ask a female teacher again cause she might think that she is not teaching properly.....

### **Teaching Style**

According to 13/17 participants in this research, female teachers were more focused than their male counterparts. They knew exactly what they had to do in class and usually come prepared for the lesson. They also focused on the intricate details of language, concentrated on the rules of grammar and makes sure that their students are thorough with the basic rules. One participant was neutral again here and did not choose any gender over the other as she recalled both had equally been focused. Another two participants had tilted the scales on the side of the male teacher saying that he was better at delivering the lessons. One student had said that the female was better at delivering the lesson but the male was more rule-bound.

IN- 5: Female teacher.... we have like a guide book she taught based on the book. She also taught us grammar the way we understand ....she also ....more persistent

IN-6: female teachers .....based on the lesson plan everything goes into the plan... while the male teacher....like he saw the condition of the class....the class kind of boring then he change....more flexible

### **Classroom management**

The majority of participants 14/17 had affirmed again that male teachers had better classroom control while 3 students had contradicted with this, saying that females were better at class control. However, it was interesting to note that the reasons for their belief were different. From the 14 students, only two out of the 14 had mentioned that male teachers used fierceness and aggressiveness to control while the rest had attributed control as part of their positive teaching ability.

IN- 4: Female teacher was able to control the class more...more strict

IN- 8: Male teacher controlled the class.....he will still joke with us but when it is serious we still respected him.....but she (female) didn't really understand us in that way .....

### **Content knowledge and experience**

Almost half of the female students who participated in this study, 9/17 had mentioned that they had more confidence in their female teacher's knowledge and experience over the male teacher because of the way she delivers the content and also her emphasis on them learning the content which is syllabus oriented. It is as if they fully trusted her to guide them with her professionalism and expertise. However, 2 students felt that male teachers had more content knowledge and were more experienced. Two participants had also mentioned that gender made no difference in their perception of teacher capability while 4 students had not mentioned this at all.

IN-9: Female teacher is more serious in teaching so I think that she is more experienced in teaching.

PN-7: She generally devotes adequate amount of time for intricacies and elaborate details of the content matter.

### **Marking and Feedback**

From the 11 female participants who had mentioned marking and feedback, 6 participants affirmed that male teachers were more lenient and just in marking and two have further elaborated that they gave more detailed feedback on how to improve. Two participants had concluded the opposite being true while the rest of the six participants did not stress on this aspect at all.

IN-3: From the male teacher I got lots of comments when the female teacher didn't really give any comments...this is good or excellent (female) but the other guy (male teacher) explained how to improve....

IN-5: female teachers are more stingy in marking...

### **Overall Preference**

From the 17 female participants, 9 participants had preferred male teachers over the female teachers while 4 had chosen their own gender and 4 other participants did not prefer either gender over the other.

IN-8: I will prefer male teacher because I think they are more honest and they have more knowledge...

PN-6: Male teachers because female she can be driven by her emotions sometimes and gives marks although the student hasn't really done a great work

### **Male Students' Perception of English Language Teachers**

The following themes are selected from both the interviews and personal narratives as the main features highlighted by male students who participated in this study.

#### **Attitude and interaction with students**

8 /11 participants of this study had confirmed that male teachers were friendlier and more approachable in classes than female teachers and most of these classes were mixed gender classes. They had also mentioned that females were stricter in general with them. However, 2 participants had claimed that the opposite was true for them while another had claimed that he felt that the male teachers would judge him in a negative way if he had to ask for extra help and that the female teacher was softer with him.

IN-14: Male teachers are more sociable compared to the female.... Female more strict and male teachers interact with the class more....

IN-16: I would ask a female teacher questions because the male they would make me feel useless or 0 knowledge or something...

#### **Teaching Style**

Although, this theme had appeared in both the interviews and personal narratives, interestingly enough, the weightage in terms of emphasis on this theme varied between IN and PN. Interviewees seemed to dwell more on this aspect while personal narratives stressed more on other aspects such as attitude, communication, classroom control, and knowledge and experience of teachers. Perhaps this could be because IN s were semi-structured and had some guidance while PNs were freer in this aspect.

With regard to the results from this study, 9 /11 male participants pointed out that their female teachers were more specific and focused on the delivery of content than male teachers and they also were stricter, more rule bound, organized and would ensure that the syllabus is delivered well, never deviating students with playful activities. 2 participants did not choose any gender over the other as they recalled both had equally been focused.

IN-10: For male teachers...I find that they find it easy to explain some stuff.... like reading comprehension.....

IN-14: male teacher more relaxed, like if you want to learn you do but female teachers like you have to learn this ...you have to do...you have to study this.....

#### **Classroom Management**

Classroom management was a popular theme again with male participants. From the participants 10/ 11 had confirmed that males had better classroom control over female teachers and interestingly enough again it was pointed out here by most students (8/11) that it was not the teacher's fierceness or aggressiveness that brought better management and control but students tend to behave well because they were less strict with them as mentioned earlier in the 1st theme here.



IN- 11: Male teachers had more control of the class compared to female teachers

IN- 15 :female teachers were strict but male teacher's time students were more carefree.

### **Marking and feedback**

The fourth theme in terms of frequency and weightage, among male participants came to be the marking and feedback they receive from teachers. Again an interesting aspect was that the INs focused a lot on this aspect while PN s had not put a lot of ground on this. From the 11 participants, 6 had mentioned that male teachers were more lenient in marking, up to date and also gave better feedback while two students had negated this and had claimed that their female teachers had been better markers overall and one student had pointed out that it was due to his environment that he had a better rapport with females. 3 of the PN s had not mentioned this at all.

PN-14: marking of females were more to the book.... male teacher is more relaxed...sometimes I feel like he is biased... he will give more marks...

### **Content Knowledge and experience**

Although most of the interviewees had not brought this up much, the personal narratives had put a lot of emphasis on this aspect. Hence, it is considered by the researcher as relevant here. Out of the 11 participants, only five had considered knowledge and experience as a factor that is important to define a teacher. Three of these participants had expressed that the female teachers were equipped with better content knowledge and delivered it well. Moreover, one participant had pointed out that the level of education is higher in males than females which made them better teachers and motivated him to do better. Another participant also claimed that his male teachers' accents were better than females in general and this had particularly motivated him to become a better learner.

IN-11: Male teacher had more ....was confident of his knowledge....female teacher would admit that she was wrong if I point it out....

### **Overall Preference**

From the 11 male participants in this study, 6 participants had chosen males over female teachers while 2 were neutral and 3 students had preferred female language teachers.

IN- 16: I would prefer male teachers because female teachers are more strict.... he will be more fair to me...knowledge she has but sometimes she is acting like more serious.



### **Preference for Male Language teachers**

The overall preference for male language teachers was significantly higher than their counterparts with a total of 15/22 and the top 3 reasons for their choice were as follows.

IN- 12: I would choose male teachers because interaction is easier with them.

The study aimed at finding student preferences of the gender of English Language teachers and the possible reasons for their selection. Out of a total of 28 participants, only 6 students were neutral regarding the preference for a particular gender of their teachers while 22 students had preferred one gender over the other.

### **Preference for Male Language teachers**

The overall preference for male language teachers was significantly higher than their counterparts with a total of 15/22 and the top 3 reasons for their choice were as follows.

1. Students found male teachers more easy going, friendly, approachable and flexible
2. Male teachers were more lenient in marking
3. Male teachers had better classroom control.

### **Preference for Female Language teachers**

This study showed that the overall preference for female teachers were lower compared to male teachers with a total of 7/22 and the top 3 reasons are as follows.

1. Female teachers delivered the content better (by the book)
2. Females were stricter with marking so a few students felt that that they could focus better
3. Female teachers would adhere to the rules strictly and make sure that the content is adequately covered

It is quite interesting to note here that the reasons for the preference of female teachers over male teachers, given by a few students were the very reasons why other students did not want female teachers to teach them. For e.g.: Most participants did not like their teacher to be so rule bent and focused on completing the syllabus all the time.

Also, one of the most significant outcomes of this research was that the common stereotyped notion which is also backed by previous findings that female teachers were friendlier and softer (Dee,2006) was found to be not the case, as far as the majority of the participants of this study were concerned. Similarly, males as being more aggressive or authoritarian in classrooms (Madrid& Hughes, 2010) have no basis here as well when a total of 23 from the 28 participants of both male and female students had disregarded this aspect.

Another finding that is crucial here is the fact that both male and female students had perceived that female teachers were more focussed into completing the syllabus and getting students to become better oriented with the rules of grammar and content while male teachers had a more flexible approach to teaching and learning. A total of 22/ 28 participants had vouched for this aspect, in this study.

It was also clear that the majority of participants, both male and female students had chosen the male teacher as the better teacher for them. Even some of the participants who had agreed that female teachers had better content knowledge and were more focussed and capable as a teacher had still preferred the male teacher because they felt more at ease with male teachers than female teachers. Hence, the most striking feature derived from this study is that with regard to preference of one gender over the other, there is little distinction between male and female participants in the sense that they both had similar reasons for their choice. Simply put, the fact that they had better interaction with the male teachers than the female teachers was more important than the rest of the features that support teaching and learning.

Hence, this finding correlates favourably with the social learning theorists who claim that in order for knowledge to be established and internalized, there must be an amount of social communication between the learner and the teacher. (Brufee, 1986) In the same sense it also relates well with the behaviouristic and motivational theorists view that language learning is enhanced by creating an environment that fosters learning as well as encouraging students by rewarding them with positive behaviour. (Brown, 2005) Since, the friendly and approachable attitude of male teachers had made students of both gender to prefer them to females in this study confirms both of these theoretical viewpoints.

### **Conclusion**

This research aimed at exploring the perceptions of students of different gender towards their male and female language teachers and tried to find out the reasons for student preferences of one gender over the other. The analysis of the data revealed that male teachers were more effective as language teachers, according to student perception, because of their general approach to students of both gender. Perhaps, it could be something to do with the male nature. However, in an educational perspective, this could mean that in general, language teachers should be more flexible and less rule bent, in teaching. This study also favours the behavioural and social learning theorists concept that the basic principle for being a successful educator is the fact that the teacher must be a human- being first rather than a robot that is programmed to do its chores because at the end of the day, what really matters is a teacher's willingness to reach out to each individual child rather than any other factors involved.

### **Limitations of the study**

Since this research was done with participants of different cultures and background, the results may not apply to a particular country or background. Also, there may be differences with regard to the concerned teachers' educational level, background and training as well. Hence, a more focussed and customized study that considers such factors could provide a more accurate result in general.

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