

The Effect of EFL Learners' Gender, Proficiency Level, and Self-Perception on their
Preference for Teachers' Gender

Saman Ebadi

Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics

Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Email: Samanebadi@gmail.com

Nouzar Gheisari

PhD Candidate of TEFL, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Email: nouzargheisari@yahoo.com

Abstract

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In the EFL context of education, it is controversially argued that both gender and proficiency level of language learners can be influential in gender preference of language teachers. With reference to such controversial debates over gender preference of language learners, the present study aimed at eliciting EFL learners' preference for male and female English teachers under the co-educational context of English Language Teaching Institutes in Iran. This was realized through distributing a 15-item questionnaire among 400 language learners, 100 elementary male, 100 advanced male, 100 elementary female, and 100 advanced female language learners in Kermanshah province. The data was analyzed by calculating frequencies and percentages of all responses. The results of the statistical survey supported the assumption that language learners' preference for teacher's gender is influenced by teacher's professional capabilities, emotional satisfaction, language learners' gender, and level of proficiency. While those in lower level of proficiency were more interested in charismatic personality and emotional etiquettes of the teacher, those in higher level of proficiency were more interested in professional capabilities and language abilities. Meanwhile, with increase in proficiency, the inspiration for teacher's gender slowed down especially in female language learners. The findings of the study indicates that teachers must be aware of the personal and emotional etiquettes that learners of both genders and at different proficiency levels

aspire for. Also, policy makers and material developers must take such factors as teacher gender into consideration if they strive for enhancing educational quality.

Key Words: Gender, Proficiency level, ELT in Iran, Foreign Language Institutes

1. Introduction

Personal, psychological, and biological characteristics of teachers were not regarded as determining in the learning-teaching process in the classroom in the past. Today, with the rise of the effect of both psychology and sociology research in education, especially in language teaching classes, it seems that many personal- psychological and segregate- social factors must be considered when we deal with the issue of classroom management and success. Over the past years, the role of gender in the realm of SLA has emerged as a hotly debated issue. A considerable body of research has been introduced to SLA taking a close look at the place of gender both on part of the teacher and the learner. Drawing on Ellis (1994, 1997), it is of interest to claim that social factors could have a major impact on L2 proficiency, but they probably don't impact it explicitly. Gender of both teachers and students is among the attributes which seems to be of significance in language development from the viewpoint of students of both sexes (Duran, 2006).

Motivated by theoretical implications on the role of gender in language learning and teaching, the present study has attempted to probe this subject empirically in the context of Kermanshah English teaching Institutes. Despite the context of formal schooling system of Iran, where the schools are separate- sex, in English teaching Institutes, the instances of opposite -sex teachers and mixed-sex classes are quite normal making it feasible for both teachers and students to experience the same-sex and opposite-sex classes. On the one hand there is the public belief that students prefer the same-sex teacher due to their socio-cultural

beliefs, on the other hand, there have been controversial debates as to prove the extent to which gender of a teacher may influence students' attitude towards language learning, motivation, interest, and success. To verify this natural presumption objectively, throughout the present study, language learners' preference for the gender of English teacher and their considerations for this matter in English language Institutes across Kermanshah district have been put under investigation.

People participating in Foreign Language Institutes in an EFL setting like Iran spent a lot of money and dedicate a lot of time to the issue. Yet, most often they do not seem to achieve the required goal which is competency in English as is required in follow-up academic years. To this end, besides many factors which can be significantly determining in language learning including motivation, teacher's eligibility and competence, materials and technology among others, gender has by far proved to be a determining factor, too. Thus, conducting the present study seems to be significant since the researchers want to find out whether there is a significant relationship between gender preference and language proficiency of the learners. Hence, significant contribution can be made with regard to the match between attributes of gender and language proficiency in EFL classes in selecting the gender-appropriate teachers with regard to the degree of learners' proficiency. Moreover, following the principles of critical pedagogy, the EFL instructors themselves will critically look into issue and regard the required strategies to off-set the downsides of the gender factor cautiously.

The main issue the present study dedicated to was to see whether EFL (elementary, advanced/female, male) learners treat the gender factor of the ELT teachers differently. In so doing, there will be attempt to reach answers to the questions related to the choice for the gender of ELT teachers in the context of English language teaching Institutes across Kermanshah district. Attempt was also made to find out what kind of sociocultural, emotional, and personal attributes the EFL instructors each group of EFL (elementary male, elementary

female, advanced male, advanced female) learners prioritize most in the context of Foreign Language Institutes in Kermanshah region, and see whether there is a sort of trade-off between those three groups of attributes (socio-cultural, emotional, professional) or not.

The study, thus, aimed at answering the following questions:

1- Who do Iranian elementary/advanced, female/ male EFL learners prefer, a Female or a Male instructor?

2- What factors affect Iranian elementary/advanced, female/ male learners' preference for the gender of the English instructor?

2-Literature review

Research on gender factor in the classroom setting is not something new. In fact, gender-based research on teacher-student and student-student relationship has a long history. And, more attention has been given (and is still being given) to teacher-student and student-student interactions in both ESL and EFL classroom settings (Umar,2009).General usage of the gender began in late 1960s and 1970s, increasingly appearing in the professional literature of social sciences. Gender has been seen as a crucial factor which might influence, in one way or another, teachers' professional lives in general and their teaching profession in particular (Karimvand,2011). As Sunderland (2000,P.212) puts it, " gender in the EFL classroom" as a phrase which may conjure up in teachers' minds no more than complaints about the use of he, or about textbooks being sexist. But, closer examination suggests that gender operates at more than the level of materials and includes the English language itself, classroom processes, including learning processes, teacher-learner interaction, and learner-learner interaction. It is believed that social relations and the dominance of either gender (usually males) affects teacher's life (Karimvand, 2011). Freeman (1996) highlights the importance of understanding how male and female students and teachers affect their

interactions in the language classroom .In addition, according to Freeman (1996) teacher's perception has a direct influence on the teachers' attitudes and behaviors with respect to the students. Bennett (1982) in a survey found that students did not have different standards of reference for male and female instructors but women were perceived to be less authoritarian and more charismatic. Basow and Silberg (1987) revealed the results of students' evaluations of their professors in terms of teaching effectiveness and sex-typed characteristics, the study in which male students gave female professors significantly poorer rating than male professors and female students evaluated female professors less favorably than male professors . Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2011) found that Iranian high school girls preferred female English teachers for feeling comfort and rest and more secure in consulting their issues with in the formal context of education in Iran .

To this end ,the researchers have not found any research dealing with the gender factor from the viewpoint of EFL learners in Iranian Foreign Language Institutes where ,despite separate-sex formal schools, both EFL teachers and learners face opposite –sex learners and teachers in the EFL classes in the context of private Foreign Language Institutes . And still, the issue becomes more demanding when it involves the factor of proficiency level of students (elementary and advanced). Thus, To shed light on the issue, the researchers will try to find out what kind of gender Iranian EFL (female/male, elementary/advanced) learners prefer as favorable and what possible reasons they put forward as the support of their claims.

3. Methodology

5.1. Participants

The intended population included all those elementary/advanced English language learners , with the age ranging from 16 to 28 years, participating in different English language teaching Institutes across Kermanshah districts. As many as 400 EFL learners were (100

elementary male ,ME, 100 elementary female, FE, 100 advanced male, MA , 100 advanced female, FA in the present study) selected by random cluster sampling from EFL Institutes across Kermanshah district , 10 for each group from each Institute , that is from 10 Institutes and each one from one city. In the EFL context of Iran, language learners are typically divided into Starter (semesters 1 and 2), Elementary (semester 3,4,5,and 6),Pre-intermediate (semesters 7,8,9, and 10), Intermediate (semesters 11,12,13, and 14), Upper-intermediate (semesters 15,16,17,18), and advanced levels (semesters 19, 20, 21, and 22). In the present study, the participants who were labeled Elementary and Intermediate were regarded as Elementary level, and those who were labeled Upper-intermediate and Advanced were regarded as the advanced group. The starter group were not included due to their insufficient amount of experience in language learning. Since the generalization of the present study was of significance, attempt was made to be as rigid as possible in the sampling procedure. To make sure of the generalizability issue , the researchers applied random cluster sampling so that the selected participants from those areas to which research findings were going to apply would be included in the research. It is believed that 400 EFL learners (200 male and 200 female both elementary and advanced from 10 Foreign Language Institutes and each Institute from one city of the district) is a representative sample of those to whom the research result is going to apply, however.

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5.2. Design, instrument, and procedure

To carry out the study, a descriptive survey was conducted among 400 participants from 10 Foreign Language Institutes in Kermanshah district . First, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed among 30 elementary and advanced EFL learners in one Foreign Language Institute and their responses were collected, classified, and analyzed based on the emerged categories of the data. The census consisted of a fifteen-item questionnaire designed based on

the results of an open-ended questionnaire regarding preference for certain type of gender. The categorization of the responses showed that the reason of preference for either female or male gender on the part of elementary and advanced EFL learners were mainly related to 15 factors, namely, strictness in teaching, patience and tolerance, displaying either fear or embarrassment, punctuality and discipline, out-of-class business, strictness regarding within-term oral and written exams, good-temperedness and openness to criticism, feeling comfort and relaxation with the same-sex teacher, teacher's pronunciation and expression abilities, teacher's assessment and evaluation based on the students' expected level and knowledge (not based on ambitions and illogical expectations), being affected by the opposite-sex teacher, relaxation and comfort in consulting problems with the same-sex teacher, being influential and effective in student's progress and improvement, and applying diversity of teaching techniques in the classroom, some of which attributed to a significant extent to female and the others to the male teachers .

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Next, based on the emerged categories, the final questionnaire with 15 items in Likert was developed. It deserves notice that the first item was expected to determine the subjects' choice for gender of the teacher and the 14 remaining items were to collect the reasons for their choice. To insure the participants' understanding of the items, the questioner was developed and administered in their native language; Persian.

Next, two experts reviewed the items and assured of the validity of the questionnaire. Also, to make sure that underlying structure of the questionnaire does not suffer from multi-collinearity – too high correlations among all variables- correlation matrix was applied. The result of Bartlett's chi-square of 174.34 was significant ($p < .05$). Thus it could be concluded that the assumption of lack of multi-collinearity was also met.

Then the questionnaire was piloted by 30 EFL learners from another Foreign Language Institutes in Kermanshah . To make sure of the dependability of the instrument, its reliability

was also checked for using SPSS (version 18). Conducting reliability test on the answers to the pilot sample showed that the Cronbach's alpha reliability indices was .89 which is a preferable amount of reliability value. Also, the results of statistical analysis for reliability showed that mean inter-item correlation value was 7.2 with values ranging from .56 to .71. This suggests quite a strong relationship among the items.

6. Data analysis and results

After gathering the data, frequency and percentage for all the responses were computed. The data were then tabulated under each item of the questionnaire (see appendix). Throughout this section the items will be explained in turn. In the present study, ME is an abbreviation for male elementary, MA for male advanced, FE for female elementary, FH for female advanced, MT for total male, and FT for total. Also. In the present study, elementary/advanced terms have been used interchangeably with lower proficiency/ higher proficiency.

The first item of the survey was meant to collect participants' overall tendency on the choice of male or female English teacher. As it is shown by the table 1, at a lower level of proficiency, both male and female EFL learners most prefer to have same-sex teacher although the tendency among male EFL learners is higher than that of female EFL ones (52.0 versus 36.0, Me & Fe respectively). Furthermore, the proficiency of the learners seems to have counterbalancing effect on the degree of preference for same-sex teacher in both male and female EFL learners (52.0 versus 42.0 for ME & MA , and 36.0 versus 18.0 for FE & FA respectively). That is the degree of proficiency has a counteracting effect on tendency for gender preference among EFL learners with more significance among female learners than male ones. The interesting point is that , among the advanced learners, female learners most prefer to have a male teacher than a female one (34.0 versus 18.0 respectively) whereas male learners still prefer to have a male teacher than a female one (42.0 versus 20.0 respectively)

which could be an indicator of the fact male learners have such preference because of the sense of masculinity and dominance. In a nutshell, EFL learners of both sexes, prefer to have a same-sex teacher when they are at lower level of proficiency but such tendency slows down as they develop in proficiency. At a higher level of proficiency, however, both male and female teachers prefer to have a male teacher but the results are more demanding for the female group.

Table 1: Preference for gender of English Teacher

		Female	Male	No Difference	Total
ME	Frequency	10	52	38	100
	Percent	10.0	52.0	38.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	20	42	38	100
	Percent	20.0	42.0	38.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	30	94	76	200
	Percent	15.0	47.0	38.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	36	16	48	100
	Percent	36.0	16.0	48.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	18	34	48	100
	Percent	18.0	34.0	48.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	54	50	96	100.0
	Percent	27.0	25.0	48.0	100.0

The second item was to check out whether participants thought that female English teachers were stricter in their teaching. According to table 2, regarding the strictness of female teachers in classes, more than half of both ME and MA learners either disagree or totally disagree with the idea. For ME learners, 26 percent agreement, 50 percent disagreement, and 24 percent with no ideas, and for MA learners, 30 percent agreement, 52 percent disagreement, and 18 percent with no ideas respectively indicates that, regardless of the proficiency degree, most male learners do not believe in the strictness of the female teachers. As for the female learners, the data didn't seem to be of significance both for elementary and advanced learners (38 percent agreement/full agreement, 26 percent disagreement/full disagreement, and 36 percent with no ideas for FE learners, versus 38 percent agreement/full agreement, 40 percent disagreement/full disagreement and 22 percent with no ideas for FA learners respectively), the

interesting point being that among the female learners, those with higher proficiency are less in line with the idea of female teacher strictness (26 versus 40 percent of disagreement/full disagreement for FE and FA learners respectively) which could be an indicator of the fact that proficiency as a variable among female learners is a trade-off variable for gender preference, something which the research data doesn't support for the male learners- 50 versus 52 percent of disagreement/full disagreement for ME and MA learners.

Table 2: Female teachers are stricter in teaching

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	14	12	24	30	20	100
	Percent	14.0	12.0	24.0	30.0	20.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	12	18	18	36	16	100
	Percent	12.0	18.0	18.0	36.0	16.0	100.0
MT MT	Frequency	26	30	42	66	36	200
	Percent	13.0	15.0	42.0	33.0	18.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	6	32	36	14	12	100
	Percent	6.0	32.0	36.0	14.0	12.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	12	26	22	36	4	100
	Percent	12.0	26.0	22.0	36.0	4.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	18	58	58	50	16	200
	Percent	9.0	29.0	29.0	25.0	8.0	100.0

The third question puts forth the idea that male teachers are more patient in their job. Combining "fully agree" and "agree" items for all four groups, we come to the conclusion that a highly significant number of each group is in line with the idea that male teachers are more patient in their teaching career(80.0, 62.0, 58.0, & 60.0 percent of agreement/full agreement for ME, MA, FE, & FA respectively). With regard to male groups, ME versus MA, it seems that the proficiency level could be a counterbalancing factor since 80.0 percent of elementary male participants compared to 62.0 percent of advanced male participants claim that male teachers are more patient in their teaching career. The point of significance here is that majority

of both elementary and advanced female participants agree/fully agree with the better patience of male teachers in the teaching process (totally 59.0 percent in agreement/ full agreement, 22.0 percent in disagreement /full disagreement, and 19 percent with no idea) which deserves more caution and care as one of the teacher etiquettes.

Table 3: male teachers are more patient in teaching

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	26	54	10	6	4	100
	Percent	26.0	54.0	10.0	6.0	4.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	26	36	12	14	12	100
	Percent	26.0	36.0	12.0	14.0	12.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	52	90	22	20	16	200
	Percent	26.0	45.0	11.0	10.0	8.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	26	32	24	6	12	100
	Percent	26.0	32.0	24.0	6.0	12.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	10	50	14	14	12	100
	Percent	10.0	50.0	14.0	14.0	12.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	36	82	38	20	24	200
	Percent	18.0	41.0	19.0	10.0	12.0	100.0

To test the assumption that opposite-sex students do not ask their questions because they feel shy, item number four was presented. Participants' responses in table 4 show that altogether 24 percent admitted the assumption, while 67 percent of the participants either disagreed or fully disagreed .58 ,66,68 & 76 percent of disagreement /full disagreement versus 26,26,24, & 20 percent of agreement/ full agreement of the ME, MA,FE and FA group respectively show that the assumption is not valid among the groups at all. More interestingly, female groups were more against the issue than male ones, 68 versus 58 percent of disagreement /full disagreement for the FE and ME group and 76 versus 66 percent of disagreement/full disagreement for the FA and MA group.

Table 4: Students avoid asking opposite-sex teacher their questions due to embarrassment

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	6	20	16	34	24	100
	Percent	6.0	20.0	16.0	34.0	24.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	6	20	8	26	40	100
	Percent	6.0	20.0	8.0	26.0	40.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	12	40	24	60	64	200
	Percent	6.0	20.0	12.0	30.0	32.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	6	18	8	38	30	100
	Percent	6.0	18.0	8.0	38.0	30.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	2	18	4	42	34	100
	Percent	2.0	18.0	4.0	42.0	34.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	8	36	12	80	64	200
	Percent	4.0	18.0	6.0	40.0	32.0	100.0

The next item was to measure students' agreement with the assumption that female teachers are more punctual and disciplined. Responses to this item seems to verify this claim since 50 percent of ME, 38 percent of MA, 48 percent of FE, and 56 percent of FA participants are in line with the idea. 50,38,48,& 56 percent of agreement/ full agreement versus 24,42,30,& 28 percent of disagreement/ full disagreement for the ME, MA, FE, and FA group respectively show that , except for the MA group, great majority of participants of the other groups are in line with the assumption. For the MA group, 42 percent of disagreement /full disagreement versus 38 percent of agreement /full agreement and 20 percent with no ideas manifest that MA learners don't believe in the punctuality and discipline of female teachers. This might be due to the fact that MA learners are more interested in the content materials and teaching techniques than punctuality and organization. However, one surprising point is that majority of ME participants believe in the assumption.

Table 5: Female teachers are more punctual and disciplined

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total

ME	Frequency	22	28	26	16	8	100
	Percent	22.0	28.0	26.0	16.0	8.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	8	30	20	20	22	100
	Percent	8.0	30.0	20.0	20.0	22.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	30	58	46	36	30	200
	Percent	15.0	29.0	23.0	18.0	15.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	18	30	22	22	8	100
	Percent	18.0	30.0	22.0	22.0	8.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	20	36	16	22	6	100
	Percent	20.0	36.0	16.0	22.0	6.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	38	66	38	44	14	200
	Percent	19.0	33.0	19.0	22.0	7.0	100.0

Item No. 6 proposes that female teachers' higher responsibility and involvement with family problems affect their teaching practice. Based on the data collected, it is observed that 51 percent of the participants showed disagreement/ full disagreement, 18 percent had no ideas while 30 percent agreed/fully agreed with the idea put forward which doesn't seem to be significant enough to support the assumption as a whole. 42,26,30, & 22 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 36,54,56, & 60 percent of disagreement/full disagreement of the ME,MA,FE, and FA group respectively show that no significant relationship between the assumption and either proficiency or gender of the participants could be found. Interestingly, the ME group were more in line with the assumption than the others. Overall, the idea of preference for a male teacher due to female teachers' in- family issues and responsibilities is rejected since 51 percent of the participants showed either "disagreement" or " full disagreement"

Table 6: Students prefer to have male teachers since female teachers are less patient for their involvement in family issues and responsibilities

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	24	18	22	24	12	100
	Percent	24.0	18.0	22.0	24.0	12.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	14	12	20	36	18	100
	Percent	14.0	12.0	20.0	36.0	18.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	38	30	42	60	30	200
	Percent	19.0	15.0	21.0	30.0	15.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	10	20	14	34	22	100
	Percent	10.0	20.0	14.0	34.0	22.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	4	18	18	46	14	100
	Percent	4.0	18.0	18.0	46.0	14.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	14	38	32	80	36	200
	Percent	7.0	19.0	16.0	40.0	18.0	100.0

The notion put forward based on the data in table 7 claims that female teachers are more serious with oral and written evaluation. With reference to the data presented in the table below, 47 percent agreed/ fully disagreed with the idea of female-teacher serious evaluation plan , 18 percent had no idea and 34 percent showed disagreement/full disagreement which seem to be roughly significant to support the assumption . 40,36,58,&56 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 40,46,20, & 30 percent of disagreement/full disagreement of the ME,MA,FE, and FA group respectively give us interesting results. According to the data, the female groups are in line with the assumption while the male groups, especially the MA group, are against the assumption. That is , despite male participants, female ones give priority to female teachers with regard to strictness in oral and written evaluation. This might be due to the fact that female language learners are more sensitive to exams and their attainments.

Table 7: Female teachers are more serious in regular oral and written evaluation

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total

ME	Frequency	10	30	20	24	16	100
	Percent	10.0	30.0	20.0	24.0	16.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	12	24	18	32	14	100
	Percent	12.0	24.0	18.0	32.0	14.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	22	54	38	56	30	200
	Percent	11.0	27.0	19.0	28.0	15.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	28	30	22	16	4	100
	Percent	28.0	30.0	22.0	16.0	4.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	18	38	14	24	6	100
	Percent	18.0	38.0	14.0	24.0	6.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	46	68	36	40	10	200
	Percent	23.0	34.0	18.0	20.0	5.0	100.0

Item No. 8 puts into question the assumption that male teachers are more good-tempered and open to criticism. The data given below indicates that of the total participants, 56 percent agreed/fully agreed, 19 percent disagreed/fully disagreed, and 24 percent of participants had no idea with the assumption which show that, with a narrow difference, male teachers are good-tempered and more open to criticism than female ones. 62, 62, 46, & 56 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 14, 26, 14, & 22 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME, MA, FE, and FA group respectively show that the assumption is valid. No significant correlation between the assumption and proficiency level is found, while for gender, male participants, with a narrow difference, embrace the assumption more. In sum, the assumption is verified by all the participating groups.

Table 8: Male teachers are more good-tempered and open to criticism

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	32	30	22	12	4	100
	Percent	32.0	30.0	22.0	12.0	4.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	28	34	12	22	4	100
	Percent	28.0	34.0	12.0	22.0	4.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	60	64	34	34	8	200
	Percent	30.0	32.0	17.0	17.0	4.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	18	28	40	14	0	100
	Percent	18.0	28.0	40.0	14.0	0.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	20	36	22	16	6	100
	Percent	20.0	36.0	22.0	16.0	6.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	38	64	62	30	6	200
	Percent	19.0	32.0	31.0	15.0	3.0	100.0

Regarding Item no.9 which intended to check whether language learners are more comfortable with the same-sex teacher, the data show that overall 38.5 percent agreed/fully agreed, 36.5 percent disagreed/fully disagreed and 25 percent had no idea with regard to the issue. Comparing total agreement and disagreement, 38.5 versus 36.5 percent, it is clear that the assumption could not be valid in the context of EFL Institutes in Kermanshah district as far as mixed gender classes are concerned. 28,34,44,&48 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 38,38,32,36 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME, MA, FE, and FA groups respectively manifest that no relationship between proficiency level and the assumption could be found. However, female groups are more supportive of the issue than male ones. 31 versus 46 percent of agreement/full agreement for males and females respectively could be an indicator of the fact that female learners are more comfortable with the same-sex teacher than their male counterparts.

Table 9: Students are more comfortable with a same-sex teacher in class

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	8	20	34	14	24	100
	Percent	8.0	20.0	34.0	14.0	24.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	16	18	28	26	12	100
	Percent	16.0	18.0	28.0	26.0	12.0	100.0
MT MT	Frequency	24	38	62	40	36	200
	Percent	12.0	19.0	31.0	20.0	18.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	18	26	24	20	12	100
	Percent	18.0	26.0	24.0	20.0	12.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	8	40	14	26	12	100
	Percent	8.0	40.0	14.0	26.0	12.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	26	66	38	46	24	200
	Percent	13.0	33.0	19.0	23.0	12.0	100.0

The item that follows represents participants' reaction to the assumption that male teachers are more capable in correct pronunciation and better speech. According to the data presented in table 10, 48 percent of the participants which includes a great majority either agree or fully agree with the assumption, manifesting the fact that such belief exists among the language learners, but not the female ones. 58,62,30,& 42 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 16,28,30, & 42 percent of disagreement full disagreement from the ME, MA, FE, and FA groups respectively show that male groups are more in line with the assumption than female ones. With regard to proficiency, however, the FA group are more in line with the assumption than FE groups, which in itself requires more concern, since elementary participants can't be a good judge on pronunciation and speech due to their not having yet been fully exposed to authentic input .

Table 10: Male teacher are more able in correct pronunciation and better speech

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	38	20	26	12	4	100
	Percent	38.0	20.0	26.0	12.0	4.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	30	32	10	22	6	100
	Percent	30.0	32.0	10.0	22.0	6.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	68	52	36	34	10	200
	Percent	34.0	26.0	18.0	17.0	5.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	14	16	40	22	8	100
	Percent	14.0	16.0	40.0	22.0	8.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	14	28	16	32	10	100
	Percent	14.0	28.0	16.0	32.0	10.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	28	44	56	54	18	200
	Percent	14.0	22.0	28.0	27.0	9.0	100.0

The rationale behind item no. 11 was an attempt to reexamine the suggestion that male teachers' evaluation questions are on the basis of students' expected level and knowledge and not unrealistic ambitious expectancy. As the data show, 46.5, 19.5, 34 of agreement, disagreement and no idea of the total participants respectively, it is clear that male teachers give the questions which are based on the expected level of knowledge of the language learners. In fact (46.5 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 19.5 percent of disagreement/full disagreement) leaves no doubt behind with regard to expected level of knowledge in the questions from part of male teachers. 62,54,46,& 24 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 14,14,18, and 30 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME,MA,FE, and FA groups respectively , however, show that the FA group is not in line with the assumption. 24 percent of agreement, 30 percent of disagreement and 46 percent of neutrality from the FA participating group show that they don't believe in the idea, whereas the FE group are somehow in support of it, the point which is of interest.

Table 11: Male teachers' questions are based on expected level of knowledge of the learners

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	24	38	24	10	4	100
	Percent	24.0	38.0	24.0	10.0	4.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	24	30	30	12	4	100
	Percent	24.0	30.0	30.0	12.0	4.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	48	68	54	22	8	200
	Percent	24.0	34.0	27.0	11.0	4.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	16	30	36	14	4	100
	Percent	16.0	30.0	36.0	14.0	4.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	8	16	46	24	6	100
	Percent	8.0	16.0	46.0	24.0	6.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	24	46	82	38	10	200
	Percent	12.0	23.0	41.0	19.0	5.0	100.0

The findings regarding preference for opposite-sex teacher don't seem to verify the assumption strongly as a whole. Overall, the percentage of agreement is less than that of disagreement (26.5 versus 36). Besides, 37.5 of the participants were neither for nor against the assumption. 44,14,22,& 26 of agreement/full agreement versus 34,40,26, & 44 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME, FE, MA, and FA groups respectively clearly manifest that the assumption is not valid. Just the ME group is more in favor of the issue which might be because of the fact that , as newcomers to the EFL context of Institutes, they feel some agony facing opposite-sex teachers.

Table 12: Language learners prefer to have an opposite-sex teacher because they are more affected by opposite sex

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	28	16	22	22	12	100
	Percent	28.0	16.0	22.0	22.0	12.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	2	12	46	26	14	100
	Percent	2.0	12.0	46.0	26.0	14.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	30	28	68	48	26	200
	Percent	15.0	14.0	34.0	24.0	13.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	10	12	52	16	10	100
	Percent	10.0	12.0	52.0	16.0	10.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	16	10	30	40	4	100
	Percent	16.0	10.0	30.0	40.0	4.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	26	22	82	56	14	200
	Percent	13.0	11.0	41.0	28.0	7.0	100.0

Table 13 is related to the assumption that if language learners happen to face a problem, they would feel more relaxed to consult a same-sex teacher. 38.5 of agreement/full agreement versus 40.5 disagreement/full disagreement , as a whole, doesn't seem to verify the assumption . In terms of proficiency, the results, also don't seem to make any difference with regard to the correlation between degree of proficiency and being at ease with the same-sex teacher consultation. 28,28,44,54 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 50,50,26,36 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME,MA,FE and FA groups are found respectively. For gender, however, it seems that the assumption is valid. 44 versus 26 percent of agreement/disagreement for the FE group and 54 versus 36 percent of agreement /disagreement for the

FA group indicates that female groups are mainly at ease consulting their problems with the same –sex teacher, a point which is more sociocultural and emotional.

Table 13: Language learners are more relaxed to consult the same-sex teacher on their problems

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	8	20	22	28	22	100
	Percent	8.0	20.0	22.0	28.0	22.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	10	18	22	30	20	100
	Percent	10.0	18.0	22.0	30.0	20.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	18	38	44	58	42	200
	Percent	9.0	19.0	22.0	29.0	21.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	12	32	30	16	10	100
	Percent	12.0	32.0	30.0	16.0	10.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	10	44	10	18	18	100
	Percent	10.0	44.0	10.0	18.0	18.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	22	76	40	34	28	200
	Percent	11.0	38.0	20.0	17.0	14.0	100.0

Item 14 considers the statement that same-sex teachers have an effective role in learners' improvement and progress. The results from the table 14 are indicative of the fact that the assumption is valid especially among male learners. 72,64,30, & 42 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 4,12, 24, & 26 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME, MA, FE, and FA groups respectively show that male groups are more in favor of the assumption. For the female groups, the FA group embraced the assumption more than the FE group which could be indicator of the fact that increase in proficiency has a counterbalancing effect in this regard.

Table 14: Same-sex teachers play an influential and effective role in students' progress and improvement

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	34	38	24	2	2	100
	Percent	34.0	38.0	24.0	2.0	2.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	22	42	18	12	6	100
	Percent	22.0	42.0	18.0	12.0	6.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	56	80	42	14	8	200
	Percent	28.0	40.0	21.0	7.0	4.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	8	22	46	12	12	100
	Percent	8.0	22.0	46.0	12.0	12.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	6	36	32	20	6	100
	Percent	6.0	36.0	32.0	20.0	6.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	14	58	78	32	18	200
	Percent	7.0	29.0	39.0	16.0	9.0	100.0

The final item of the questionnaire had to do with students' response concerning the employment of various teaching techniques. The data of table 15, overall, is in line with the assumption. 54, 26, and 20 percent of agreement, disagreement, and neutrality respectively indicate well that male teachers employ various teaching techniques in class. 68,56,44, & 48 percent of agreement/full agreement versus 14,30,30, & 30 percent of disagreement/full disagreement from the ME,MA,FE, and FA groups respectively show that the assumption in general is valid among the participants. However, male groups are more in agreement with the assumption than female ones. For proficiency of the participating groups, the ME are more supportive of the issue than the MA group.

Table 15: Male teachers apply more various teaching techniques in class

		Fully Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Fully Disagree	Total
ME	Frequency	40	28	18	12	2	100
	Percent	40.0	28.0	18.0	12.0	2.0	100.0
MA	Frequency	34	22	14	28	2	100
	Percent	34.0	22.0	14.0	28.0	2.0	100.0
MT	Frequency	74	50	32	40	4	200
	Percent	37.0	25.0	16.0	20.0	2.0	100.0
FE	Frequency	32	12	26	18	12	100
	Percent	32.0	12.0	26.0	18.0	12.0	100.0
FA	Frequency	22	26	22	18	12	100
	Percent	22.0	26.0	22.0	18.0	12.0	100.0
FT	Frequency	54	38	48	36	24	200
	Percent	27.0	19.0	24.0	18.0	12.0	100.0

7. Discussion

As it was specified earlier, Item no. 1 was the key item for representing the total frequency of male and female choice of teacher and the successive items were to screen the subjects' reasons for gender preference. EFL learners of both sexes prefer to have a same-sex teacher when they are at lower level of proficiency but such tendency declines as they develop in proficiency, with the male learners more willing than female ones. At a higher level of proficiency, however, both male and female learners prefer to have a male teacher.

The degree of such dependence, however, in the FE group seems to be higher than that of the ME group possibly due to their tougher emotional dependence and need for confidence. Still, the intensity of the same-sex preference in the ME group might be due to their masculine

priority for the same-sex teacher since they might not be psychologically ready to accept the opposite-sex teacher or might be because of sociological and social attitude of the context towards the female sex. For the advanced groups, the situation is somehow different. Whereas the MA group prefer the same-sex teacher, the FA group prefer the opposite-sex teacher, the point which clearly shows that, with increase in proficiency level, the attitude towards teacher gender changes. The MA group, the same as the ME group, have no belief in female teachers' strictness, don't believe to be at ease with the same-sex teacher, and no preference for consulting the same-sex teacher in face of problems, all signs of masculinity and cohesiveness in the male groups regardless of their level of proficiency. Despite the ME group, however, they have no belief in correct speech and better pronunciation of the same-sex teachers. Compared to the MA group, the FA group are more vulnerable to change with increase in their proficiency level as they prefer the opposite-sex teacher, and highly oppose the idea that learners are affected by the opposite-sex teacher. But mostly value the professional capability of male teachers. All the groups hold the belief that male teachers are more patient than female teachers, which might be due to the social context of the learners or might be a gender-specific trait. Regarding punctuality and discipline, all the groups mostly agreed that female teachers are more punctual and disciplined than male ones, again a social factor visible in the context of Iran.

The result of the present study was in line with a number of previous relevant studies . In line with Bennet (1982), the study found that male teachers were more authoritarian while the female teachers were more charismatic. Also, in line with Basil and Silberg (1987), regarding teaching effectiveness and professionalism, the study participants gave a poorer rating to the female teachers than the male ones. Moreover, in line with Aliakbari and Jamalvandi(2011), the study found that female learners feel more secure when they discuss their problems with the same-sex teacher possibly due to tougher emotional dependence and need for confidence.

8. Conclusion, implications, and suggestions for further research

From the participants response to the questionnaire it can be claimed that students' preference is influenced by both teachers' professional capabilities , students' sociocultural attitudes and emotional satisfaction , their gender, and to some extent, their level of proficiency. As far as professional capabilities and emotional satisfaction are concerned, all participating groups, to varying degrees, believe in the male teacher's higher patience, openness to criticism, enjoying better pronunciation and expressive speech, raising questions based on standards and expected level of knowledge, their employment of various teaching techniques in classes, and having an influential and effective role in learners' progress and improvement. When it comes to female teachers, all participants , to varying degrees, think that female teachers are more punctual and disciplined , not affected by out-of-class involvement and family businesses, approachable, and somehow serious in oral and written evaluation. Moreover, all the participating groups have no belief in avoiding asking questions from the opposite-sex teachers due to embarrassment.

Having noticed the participants' responses, it is obvious that participating groups prefer male teachers for their professional capability and , on the other hand, aspire for female teachers for their discipline and emotional characteristics. However, variables such as gender and proficiency can have their own impact on attitude of the learners. As far as proficiency and gender is concerned, elementary learners of both sexes prefer the same-sex teachers for their feeling comfortable with them, their influence, and their role in progress and improvement in the learning process.

The results convincingly manifest that gender preference of the learners in EFL contexts has relationship with gender and proficiency level of the learners which has some implications for teachers, policy makers and syllabus designers involved in ELT.

Teachers must be aware of the personal and emotional etiquettes that learners of both genders and at different proficiency levels aspire for. Besides, they need to improve the features which are critical for the learners, that is, in line with principles of critical pedagogy, the teacher's awareness of some personal, psychological, and social etiquettes is quite necessary.

As for the policy makers, they must take into consideration the results of such studies and see gender factor as a determining factor which can significantly affect the performance of a certain group of the learners. Therefore, regarding high-stake policies of a particular society in teacher employment and development, policy makers need to be more cautious if they aspire for rewarding results in the higher context of education.

Syllabus designers can also benefit from the findings of the present study. Since gender of the teacher is significant for the learners, they need to develop materials in a way that causes trade-off with the teacher variables. Regarding proficiency of the teachers and their abilities for higher levels, providing materials which encourage more interaction and more involvement of the learners can, to some extent, make for gender factor of the teachers.

Regarding the limitations of the study, some suggestions can be put forward for those who are interested in replicating the study. The first limitation was that the study was conducted in the context of Kermanshah province. Conducting the present study in other contexts, due to different sociocultural variables, may give out different results. Therefore, conducting the present study in other contexts is suggested to see whether the same findings come about. Furthermore, the present study was conducted in the informal context of education in Foreign Language Institutes. Conducting the same study in the formal context of education may result in different results since the social distance between the teacher and students in the formal context of education, where teachers claim more authority, is more than the distance between learners and teachers in the informal contexts.

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Appendix

Translated Version of the Questionnaire

Dear Learners:

We appreciate it if you answer the following questions with patience and care. Writing your name and other personal details is not required. Just specify your gender and proficiency level.

Gender: Female/Male

Level of Proficiency: Elementary/Intermediate/Upper-intermediate/Advanced

1. Which of the following alternatives do you prefer to be your English teacher?

- a. female b. male c. no difference

2. Female teachers are stricter in their teaching and classroom behavior.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

3. Male teachers are more patient in teaching affairs.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

4. Learners don't ask questions from male teachers because of feeling of fear or embarrassment.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

5. Female teachers are more punctual and organized than male teachers.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

6. Learners prefer to have male teachers since female teachers are not patient in their teaching due to their housework affairs.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

7. Regarding exams and formative questions during the semester, female teachers are stricter and more diligent.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

8. Male teachers are more good-tempered and open to criticism.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

9. Male teachers are more eloquent and have a better pronunciation.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

10. Overall, learners are more at ease with female teachers in class.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

11. Male teachers ask questions which are appropriate for the knowledge level of the students.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

12. Learners prefer to have opposite-sex teachers because they are more effective than same-sex teachers.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

13. Learners can easily discuss their problems with female teachers.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

14. Male teachers play a key role in educational growth of the learners.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea

15. Male teachers' teaching methods enjoy more variability than female ones.

- a. Agree b. Strongly agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. No idea