

Choosing an English Teacher: The Influence of Gender on the Students' Choice of Language Teachers

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Abstract

Gender and teaching are gaining increasing attention in the field of higher education. The significance of teacher gender seems even more crucial in an environment based on gender segregation. In the scope of language teaching and gender, this study investigates the influence of gender on the students' selection of teachers in general, and language teachers more specifically. The participants, 146 English major students in an all-female college of education, were given a questionnaire of 32 statements--to be answered on a 5-point likert scale--and four open-ended questions; all of which aim at examining the difference between male and female English language teachers in terms of attitude, grades, teaching and even appearance. The statistics were analyzed in terms of frequency, mean and variance in correlation with the independent variables of age, social status, GPA and years in college. It was found that most students prefer male teachers as they believe that the positive personal traits of the male teachers far exceed those of the female teachers. Nonetheless, the statistics have revealed that both genders (and sometimes female more than male teachers) are good language teachers. Hence, reflecting the main finding: gender is not a criterion for good language teaching, but it is our students' criterion for choosing a language teacher.

Keywords: teacher's gender, students' choice of teacher, teaching qualities, teacher personality traits, EFL/ESL class in college

1. Introduction

Successful interaction between teacher and student very often provides the impetus behind effective language teaching and reinforces student motivation for language learning. As important a role as teachers play in the successful implementation of language teaching curriculum programs, this role may at times fall short when offering an authoritative voice on attitudes toward languages (in ESL/EFL), and especially toward the English language.

English teachers usually measure their successes and failures against norms created by others within their own profession. Still most teachers have unique teaching styles which are identified by how they deliver instructions, evaluate students, select content suitable for student level of competency, and support the needs of their students.

Language teaching institutions vary greatly in the types of teachers they employ. In some situations, there may be a choice between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English with varying levels of English language proficiency. Within both groups there may be further differences based on teaching experience, professional qualifications, personality traits, and other individual variances. An inevitable factor in all teachers that, to a varying degree, influences any aspect of classroom behavior, from the teaching task itself to basic daily communication between teacher and student, is the teacher's gender.

The impact of Teacher's gender in language classrooms is increasingly becoming a crucial subject among researchers. The results of many studies suggest that there is a strong relationship between language students' achievement as well as their attitude and motivation toward language and the gender of their language teacher (Manjari, 2005; Dee, 2006; Lavin et al., 2012). Apart from the dichotomy that characterizes 'gender' as a concept (as in biological male/female), the teacher's gender is linked to a host of other (mostly stereotypical) male/female personality traits and teaching styles that are usually determined and judged by the students who are

at the receiving end of the teaching process (see for example, Francis et al., 2006; Antecol et al., 2012; Rahimi et al., 2013). In fact, one cannot teach a subject without projecting some kind of an attitude or gender bias toward this subject to the students (Brosh, 1996).

2. Study Background

Curtain and Pesola (1994) suggest that foreign language teachers today require a combination of teaching styles, competencies and background traits that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers, and that strong professional development is critical. Not many educators, however, would consider gender-specific training to be one of the important aspects of a teacher's professional development (Dee, 2006). Yet, what seems to concern many students more than a teacher's teaching skills or physical appearance is his or her gender. In secondary level education, students tend to favor having teachers of the opposite sex because it renders the classroom's psychological environment more positive and comfortable (Lawrenz, 1987).

Gender is a teacher-related factor that is constantly researched due to the major influence it has on aspects of teaching and learning, such as teacher-student interaction (including miscommunication), teacher fairness toward male and female students, student engagement in class and ultimately, student overall performance at school. For example, in a study conducted in the University of Najran in Saudi Arabia, Mahdi and Al-Dera (2013) found that female Saudi teachers use less ICT when teaching language than male teachers. But no matter how closely linked research variables in studies of education and gender may be, examining mixed-sex classrooms are sure to have different outcomes than same-sex classrooms. While the purpose of the present study is certainly to extend previous research on gender-related differences in the classroom, what this study accomplishes differently is emphasize a different take on teacher and student attitudes toward teacher gender. The fact that the present study is conducted in a segregated context, that is to say same-sex classrooms that are taught by mixed-sex teachers, may break new ground into the complex issue of gender in the field of education, and higher education more specifically.

The English Department (TED henceforth) in the women's college of Basic Education, Kuwait is populated by approximately 4000 female students and 25 teachers, 7 of whom are male and 18 female. TED offers a four-year program, which leads to a BA in English education and in turn equips students to be English teachers in the primary stage in public schools. Recent research in this particular segregated setting has shown that students have a strong tendency to prioritize the attainment of high grades with the least effort (Algharabali et al., 2015). To help fulfill this priority, students at TED put in great efforts into selecting the appropriate teacher, one who is usually unnecessarily generous in student evaluation and grading. Our purpose in the present research is threefold:

- 1) To establish whether there is gender bias involved in the students' selection of their teachers;
- 2) To investigate students perceptions over who they think has more effective teaching skills and is more professional, male or female teachers; in other words, to find out whether or not students' expectations are affected by the teacher's gender;
- 3) And finally, In case the findings indicate teacher gender associated preferences, what could be the reasons for such preferences?

3. Gender Dynamics in the Classroom

The last two decades have seen various modern and somewhat conflicting theories with regards to teacher/student gender dynamics in the classroom and its effects on teaching and learning. Appleby (2014) states that patterns of gender are clearly an affective part of the educational construction, as gender has always been associated with language teaching and learning. She adds that the importance of gender lies in the knowledge that gender is connected directly with different opportunities and barriers which shape the composition of the language teachers. According to Dee, the teacher's gender not only shapes communication between teachers and students, but is also an important factor in portraying the teacher as a 'gender-specific role model' (2006). He argues that students are more likely to actively engage in class, be on their best behavior and perform at a high standard when the gender of the teacher matches theirs; test scores seem to confirm this theory (2006). However, Francis et al. (2006) suggest that teacher/student gender matching is unnecessary, claiming that it does not really lead to effective teaching and better academic performance and instead prioritized the individual abilities of a teacher.

Other theorists looked at the aspect of teacher gender not in terms of being matched with their learners, but rather as a factor that impacts teaching skills and in turn influences learner performance. Bernat and Lloyd (2007) found that women were more interested in multilingualism than men. William (1975) claims that a well-balanced

classroom atmosphere and proper administration rely on two facets: knowledge and teaching skills, which are necessary for success in the foreign language classroom. Furthermore, when combined with the aspect of teacher and student gender, knowledge and teaching skills seem to have varied outcomes, which in some instances indicate that female teachers have inspiring effects on female students (Krupnick, 1985). For example, female language teachers encourage students to talk longer than when students are in classes led by male teachers. Additionally, in a study on teacher gender and student performance in mathematics in Spain, Escardibul and Mora (2013) have found that students who were taught by female teachers had better test scores (but see Antecol et al., 2012, who suggest an opposing view). Sunderland focuses more on student gender dynamics (rather than teacher gender) and points to an imbalance in classroom participation opportunities, arguing that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) male students tend to be given more time and more chances to present their contribution which is usually well received by teachers (1992: 88-9; also see Krupnick, 1985; Dee, 2006; Antecol et al., 2012). In addition, Mahdi and Al-Dera (2013) investigated the use of technology by 46 language teachers in Saudi Arabia, and found that male teachers are more involved in the use of ICT than female teachers. Hence, many aspects of teaching and learning seem to be affected by gender.

To place teaching skills and student academic performance aside for an instance, let us put forth the question: how do students generally perceive the idea of a teacher's gender? Lawrenz (1987) has indicated that the students' perceptions of how favorable they thought their teacher is displayed gender-opposites attract. In other words, female students favored being taught by male teachers, and the other way around. Lavin et al. (2012) point out that students equate teaching effectiveness with gender-related features or stereotypes among teachers while also emphasizing that; in fact, specific teacher-related traits take precedence based on the gender of the student. That is to say, to male students certain traits in a teacher seem to be more important than others, and vice versa. Often, female learners pay more attention to instructors' creativity in delivering the lesson and to their enthusiastic attitude for the subject matter, as well as to being well organized. However, male learners seem to focus on other evaluative areas, such as whether the instructors are fair, responsible and humorous (Ogden et al., 1994).

On a slightly different note, Raacke and Raacke studied a sample of 5070 professors from 117 colleges and universities in the U.S. (2007). The data were collected based on the following categories: the total number of ratings, overall professors' qualifications, professors' average easiness, helpfulness and clarity, and the professors' physical attractiveness. The results of their study indicated a significant correlation between the overall professors' qualities and physical attractiveness (2007). In addition, Raacke and Raacke found that students from different grade levels considered the category of physical attractiveness to be a desirable characteristic. In fact, the college professors' physical attractiveness category was rated based on a number of characteristics (not only looks): the professors' reputation, student/teacher interaction, grading distribution, and fairness in the classroom (J. B. Raacke & J. Raacke, 2007). Female teachers were rated more attractive than male teachers; as well as, the ones who explain the lesson more clearly (2007). Other data along a similar vein (available on www.ratemyprofessors.com), point out that professors received high evaluations from their students once acknowledged as physically attractive by these students (Riniolo et al., 2006). And yet, although Raacke and Raacke reported a significant correlation between instructors' attractiveness and how highly they are evaluated by students, the instructors' clarity and efficiency in delivering the subject matter, helpfulness in un-clearing assignments and stimulation in problem solving remain highly valued by the students. Similarly, Sheehan and DuPrey (1999) add that teaching effectiveness is based on the instructors' supplementary handouts, the delivery of informative and interesting lectures, and a well-prepared lesson plan.

After reviewing previous studies, the importance of studying the teachers' gender and its influences emerge as an issue that not only affects teaching methods and the learning process, but also affects students' attitudes and learning assumptions. The present study will investigate the effect of teacher's gender on student's (female only) attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language, and expectations they have for teachers of a certain gender. Chamber (1999) found that learning is better achieved when the learner has a positive approach towards the language and the learning process. Furthermore, Gardner and Lambert (1972) in their broad study provide evidence that positive outlooks toward learning a language enhance proficiency as well. Hence, the significance of this study lies in demonstrating the effect of gender on the students' willingness to learn, and their expectation in association with a teacher's gender.

4. Methodology

This research paper was carried out during the spring semester 2014/2015. The participants are English language major students at the College of Basic Education (CBE), a college that trains and graduates female teachers mainly for primary levels. A questionnaire which was developed by the researchers was distributed to these

participants after conducting a pilot study, where the reliability test resulted in a high 8.3. Approximately 200 questionnaire sheets were distributed in two days to all the students who were attending the classes being taught by the researchers. Of which, 146 sheets were fully answered and found reliable. The researchers administered the questionnaire to ensure there was no ambiguity in any of the questionnaire items.

The questionnaire consisted of 32 statements with response set in 5-point likert-scale. The statement covers different areas of teaching, personal teacher traits and appearance. In addition, the participants were asked about their age, year in college and GPA. Gender was not included as this college is an all-female college; hence, the participants are all female students. The questionnaire also included 4 open ended questions aiming at collecting data that would help get further insight into the issue. The data collected from the questionnaire were entered in SPSS and analyzed to obtain mean, frequency and significance, where significance is calculated at $p \leq 0.05$.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire will be presented in light of the research questions stated above. While 49.3% of the students stated that gender is not a criterion for better teachers, 43.9% stated that male teachers are always better as opposed to 11% who believe that female teachers are always better teachers (see Chart 1, below). Significance was found in a one-way ANOVA by age where $p=0.009$, and by age and social status $p \leq 0.05$. It appears that the youngest age group is the most neutral when it comes to teaching and gender, and the married oldest group of participants believe that male teachers are 'never' better language teachers. At this point, it was necessary to overview the characteristics of a 'better' language teacher in the viewpoint of students.

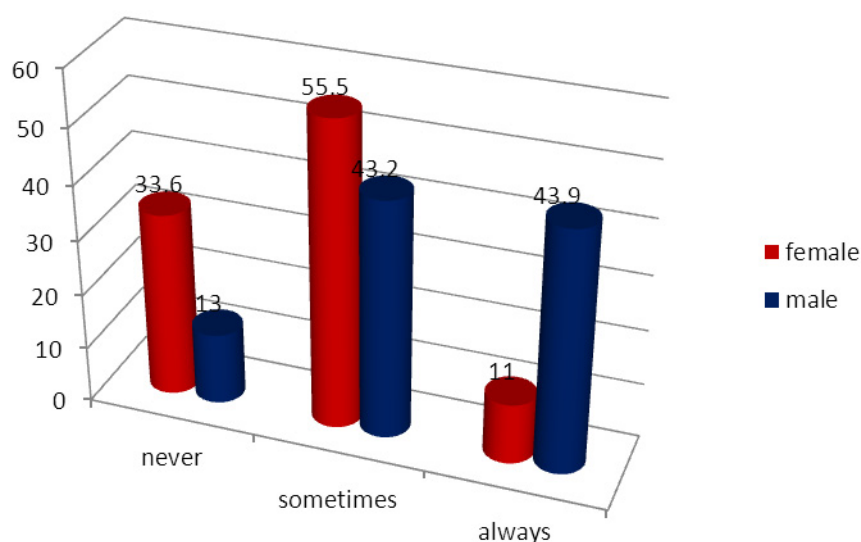


Chart 1. Answers to the statement 'male/female teachers teach better'

As shown in Chart 1, male teachers are mostly viewed as better teachers.

When it comes to organization, 44.5% of the participating students stated that female teachers are always organized, while 43.8% stated that male teachers are sometimes organized. Significance was found when this statement interacted by year in CBE by social status ($p=0.03$). It appears that first year divorced students believed that female teachers are 'never' organized. A two-way ANOVA by social status by GPA shows that single students with low GPA agree significantly that female teachers are often more organized. In addition, the students have implicated that both male and female teachers always know the subject matter well, yet female teachers know more (45.9% and 56.8%, consecutively). Significance was found in a two-way ANOVA by social status by GPA where $p \leq 0.001$, as married students with GPA of 2.00-2.99 significantly believe that female teachers often know more about the subject matter than male teachers. While female teachers are more affective when it comes to organization and knowledge of the subject matter, other characteristics show different outcomes.

The statistics show that the students believe that both male and female teachers are sometimes able to understand the students' educational needs (41.1% and 45.2%, successively). When students were asked which gender presents a better language teacher, the students identified that both genders were sometimes good language teachers, demonstrating that gender is not a criterion for good teachers. Significance was found in a two-way ANOVA by age by social status as single students from the youngest age group mostly believe that male teachers are always better language teachers. Both male and female teachers are found to be fluent in English 'sometimes' with an average of 51%. Hence, for the majority of students, language proficiency and the ability to teach language are not the criteria of a good teacher in general. Their choice seems to be influenced by other factors.

The majority of students held that male teachers are friendlier than female teachers. While 59.6% of the students stated that male teachers are always friendly, 43.3% stated that female teachers are hardly ever friendly. Moreover, 58.9% of the students thought that male teachers are always friendly, as opposed to 45.2% of the participants who believe that female teachers are 'never' patient. Most students (56.2%) reflected their belief that male teachers always have a sense of humor, while 40.4% stated that female teachers hardly ever have a sense of humor. The majority of the participating students believed that female teachers are 'sometimes' kinder than male teachers; however, a striking 61.7% stated that male teachers are 'always' kinder than female teachers. It appears that the students believe that the male teachers' personal traits are better, and this might be the reason behind their choice of male teachers as better teachers in general.

On the other hand, the teaching characteristics category is also involved in the choice of a better teacher. 50% of the students stated that male teachers always review the lessons properly; whereas 32.2% trust that female teachers always review the lesson properly. Likewise, most students noted that male teachers never discriminate between students, while only 21.2% noted that female teachers never discriminate. Chart 2 reflects the statement 'male/female teachers do not discriminate between students'.

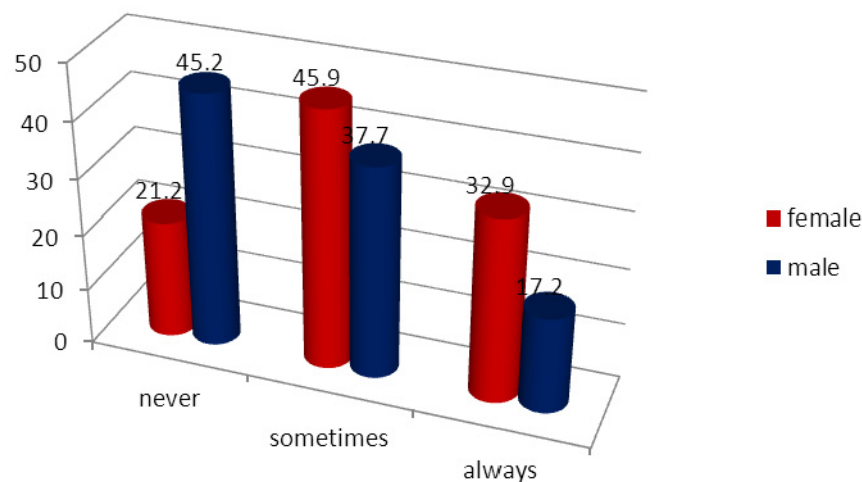


Chart 2. Percentages for the answers to the statement 'male/female teachers do not discriminate between students'

As shown in chart 2, most students believe that female teachers discriminate between students.

When students were asked which gender is more prepared for their lesson, 49.3% felt that male teachers are always prepared, as opposed to 36.6% who believed that female teachers are always prepared. A two way ANOVA by age by social status revealed high significance ($p=0.04$) as single students from the youngest age group mostly believe that male teachers are more prepared than female teachers. Similarly, 24.7% of the participants stated that they take female teachers more seriously, and 38.4% would take male teachers more seriously. High significance was found in a one-way ANOVA by social status, as divorced students 'never' take female teachers seriously ($p=0.04$).

Do students learn more from male/female teachers? While the majority of students do not seem to believe that gender affects the amount of learning, 42.5% of the participating students stated that they learn more from male teachers. Grades seem to influence the choice of teachers' gender where 49.4% of the students stated that they attain better grades from male teachers, yet 46.5% indicated that they hardly ever attain better grades from

female teachers. Significance was found where in a one-way ANOVA the students with the lowest GPA think that male teachers always provide better grades.

When answering the open-ended questions, students revealed a similar outcome to the one obtained from the statements. The majority of students indicated that the quality of teaching is the most important factor for choosing a teacher. In second place came the teachers' attitude and personal traits. Some students commented that kindness and respect for others are the criteria for their choice of teacher. They added that a teacher should give space to students to express themselves, instead of intimidating them. Grades came as the third most important factor.

The students were asked about the influence of gender on the way English teachers act in class, most students (81.2%) did not believe that gender had an effect on the method of teaching or the language of knowledge. However, when the students were asked about their preference of gender, the majority (81%) stated that they would prefer male teachers as opposed to 23% who thought that female teachers are better (see Chart 3, below).

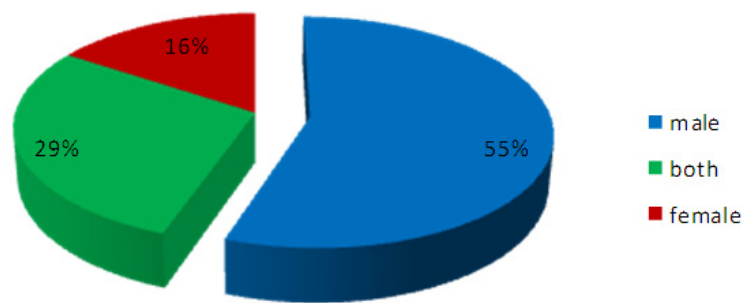


Chart 3. What influences does the gender of the teacher (male or female) have on the way they act in English classes

As can be seen in Chart 3, the majority of students prefer male teachers.

The students who prefer male teachers implied that male teachers are lenient; they listen to students and understand their circumstances. Many students noted that male teachers have a better sense of humor, and are more patient. A few students stated that female teachers could sometimes be moody, and project her feelings (good or bad) in class, while male teachers are more in control of their emotions and thus are rarely moody. The students who would favor female teachers provided three main reasons; namely, female teachers treat students like a mother would treat her children; female teachers understands our circumstances as females; and students feel less intimidated to speak in class as they have not had previous male teachers in schools, given that they were never taught by male teachers previously in schools.

5.2 Discussion

Our current research has mainly aimed to look into the impact of teacher's gender in language teaching classrooms amongst EFL learners at college level in Kuwait. A thorough investigation of the previously mentioned findings seems to go hand in hand with the literature indicating a strong relationship between the learners' attitudes towards language learning and the language teacher's gender. A direct questioning of the students' evaluative aspects of their language teachers seems to indicate no gender-based bias in their selection of certain teachers over others. Yet, when digging deeper into the issue with less direct questioning, a number of interesting findings have ultimately signaled some profound gender-related issues that tend to direct our sample towards the preference of male teachers over their female counterparts. These findings may be overviewed as follow:

a) Male teachers are generally viewed as better teachers when compared to female teachers. The findings can be emphasized by the statistical results showing a significant discrepancy between the students evaluating their female teachers as 'never' better than male teachers with an average difference reaching 20%, as well as a discrepancy reaching 33% between those who view male teachers as being always better than their female

counterparts (See Chart 1). A combination of the above results appears to indicate a strong overall positive view of male teachers held by the study's sample. Such positive view weakens amongst married older students.

This finding has further paved the way to our study's next question, that is, in what way are male teachers better than their female counterparts? Findings of a number of stated reasons can be summarized as follows:

b) The Teachers' organizational skills: Generally speaking, female teachers are viewed as having better organizational skills as opposed to their male counterparts. This view seems to be emphasized by single students with lower GPA. Divorced students appear to disagree to a lesser extent. Hence, the teachers' ability to organize the course material seems to be placed at a less important level with regards to the students' choice of their course teachers.

c) Teachers' knowledge of the course materials: Up to a certain extent, female teachers are viewed as more knowledgeable of the subject matter when compared to their male counterparts. Such positive view tends to get even stronger amongst married students with higher GPA. Once again, the findings in this regard indicate that knowledge does not necessarily reflect the students' preference of their teachers.

d) Other features that do not seem to influence the students' preference of male teachers over female teachers include teachers' ability to understand their students' educational needs, proficiency of the taught language and an overall capability in teaching the language. The finding shows a close evaluation of teachers of both genders across those teaching skills in particular.

So what could be the reason for the overall preference of male teachers over female teachers?

a) A number of personal traits such as friendliness and kindness appear to attract the students towards male teachers over their female counterparts. The study reveals that the majority of the students find male teachers friendlier and kinder than female teachers. Male teachers were also associated with a higher level of sense of humor, whereas female teachers were associated with less patience. Male teachers are also viewed as being less prejudiced than their female counterparts.

b) As for teaching skills, male teachers are viewed as always properly reviewing covered material, alongside higher levels of pre-lesson preparedness. The latter seems to be more prominent amongst younger single students.

c) Another dimension across the teachers' evaluative views as held by the students is the learning outcome, with the two main facets, namely, the amount of learning and the attainment of grades. In this regard, the students expressed their ability to learn more from their male teachers, hence obtaining better overall grades. A possible reason for a better learning outcome could be a more serious attitude towards learning when the subject is taught by a male teacher rather than a female teacher. Our results seem to challenge Dee's 'gender-specific role model, whereby it is expected that students are more likely to actively engage in class, and be at their best behavior, when the gender of their teacher matches theirs (2006: 70). Such state tends to be reinforced by divorced students who clearly do not take female teachers as seriously as they do with their male teachers. This view could be a result of living and interacting in a strictly male-dominated society, whereby the male figure represents the voice of authority, as manifested by Kuwaiti's patriarchal society. Despite the fact that our statistics have led to some marital and aptitude (GPA) factors, the findings appear to be unsystematic and should, therefore, be further investigated in future studies.

In an attempt to extract further possible reasons for such a higher preference of male teachers over female teachers through a number of open-ended questions, the students have further added a few other positive personal traits such as male teachers giving their students more opportunity to interact in class, treat their students more respectfully, and grade them fairly. Once again, the findings opposes previous claims indicating that female teachers are perceived as an inspiration to their female students, and encourage their female students to participate at a higher level than when the class is led by a male instructor (See Sunderland, 1992; Krupnick, 1985; Dee, 2006; Antecol et al., 2012). Although a striking percentage of about 80% find gender to be of no influence on the language teacher's skills and knowledge, the vast majority seems to prefer male teachers over female teachers for a number of reasons, such as male teachers being more flexible, and having more control of their emotions. On the other hand, the few students who express their preference toward female teachers find them acting as a mother figure, and placing them in a less intimidating class environment, probably, as a result of having experienced extreme gender segregated educational background.

6. Conclusion

The current study reveals a number of strong stereotypical perceptions held by female college students in Kuwait. Not only does gender lead to stereotyping of their teachers' personal attributes, but also it extends to the

prejudgment of their teachers' professional skills in teaching. The data reflected bias in the choice and evaluation of teachers in term of gender. Male teachers are viewed as being better prepared for lessons, help their students to learn more, better understand their students' educational needs, know how to engage the students in class activities, get less emotional in class, and are more objective in their grading. According to our sample, female teachers are viewed as more knowledgeable and well-organized, yet apparently dis-preferred for some other reasons. From a personal perspective, male teachers hold more positive personal traits, including friendliness, kindness, and fairness. Female teachers, on the other hand, cannot distance themselves from their own personal life, and as a result, their moods and emotions interfere with their own profession. Consequently, it might be safe to conclude that our study supports the concept of 'gender-opposites attract' (see Lawrenz, 1987) from our female students' perspectives. It is crucial however, to find out whether a similar trend may be traced across the male student population. We can therefore conclude that female students at college level hold some strong gender-based biases when selecting their course teachers. Moreover, the students believe male teachers are more efficient than their female counterparts, a judgment based on a number of professional and personal traits associated with teachers of the two genders.

Such strong biased views must never be taken lightly by the educators and policy makers in the country. Let us not forget that, teachers are, not only seen as information deliverers, but also as facilitators, who should be trusted and accepted by the learners in order to ease the teaching-learning process (Al-Darwish, 2006). We therefore call for the investigation of the reasons behind such stereotypical views of female teachers as held by their female students, and try to banish our female students' fears and views accordingly. As attitude and integrativeness seems to control the degree of the learner's motivation, and motivation and aptitude determines the degree of the success of learning (Gardner, 1985), it should be extremely crucial to endorse gender policy in education by revising the current gender policies implemented in the country nowadays. Although we tried, as researchers who have a profound intuition of the community's social and educational background, to associate the students' views of their male versus, female teachers, we admit that it would be unfair to safely state them firmly at this point.

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