

The Influence of L2 English on Attitudes Towards Gender-Neutral Job Titles

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of L2 English on attitudes towards gender-neutral job titles. It aims to determine whether language influences perceptions of job titles. Data were collected via questionnaires from 67 participants aged 18–26 years, comprising American English native speakers, Arabic native speakers, and Kuwaiti learners of English. Results indicate that high-proficiency English learners tend to neutralize job titles instead of assigning gender markers, a behavior which is influenced by their exposure to English and cultural attitudes towards gender equality. Most native English speakers used neutral job titles instead of gender assignments. The two control groups demonstrated a significant difference in their responses, with Arabic monolinguals assigning gender markers based on the dominant gender in a particular profession. Additionally, language background and demographics affected these results. Attitudes towards gender markedness in job titles has received little attention from scholars studying Arabic–English bilinguals. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by exploring attitudes towards gender markedness in job titles.

Keywords: L2 English, bilingualism, occupational titles, social change, Kuwait

1. Introduction

Primitive people introduced *gender* to language as they were first beginning to communicate with each other. Researchers have been debating the origin of language and when humans first learned to communicate using language for many years. According to Balter (2015), language began between 50,000 and two million years ago, as the human genus began to develop. However, Balter (2015) stated ‘words leave no traces in the archaeological record’ (par. 2). With the introduction of language, humans learned to use gender, as it is one of the personifying instincts developed during the primitive period. According to Wheeler (1899), sex or gender was used as ‘the most prominent characterization and classification of persons, objects were not only personified but also freely sexualized’ (p. 529). According to the theory Brugmann’s presented in *Nature and Origin of the Noun Genders*, which was published in 1899, grammatical gender was introduced and then conventionalized. With this began the classification of gender, which used masculine and feminine suffixes and attached them to words in the Indo-European language (Wheeler, 1899).

As workplaces become more diverse, effective communication requires knowledge of second languages (L2) that foster inclusivity. However, attitudes toward language and gender can vary widely (Kutateladze, 2015), as shown by the gendered job titles that continue to pervade many industries. Despite this, there is inadequate insight into how cross-linguistic influence affects individuals’ attitudes toward gender neutrality in job titles.

In this study, we investigated the attitudes of American and Kuwaiti students toward gender neutrality in job titles and how the second–first language (L2–L1) relationship influenced these attitudes. Gender-marked job titles, such as those with suffixes like ‘-man’ or ‘-woman’ in English (L2) or ‘-a’ in Arabic (L1) (indicating a feminine word), can reinforce stereotypes and contribute to sexist language. Gender marking, which emphasizes the gender of a referent, is a linguistic phenomenon (Bovin, 2016). Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser (2016) defined *neutralization* as using non-biased language that avoids gender marking, such as using the gender-neutral term ‘police officer’. For example, L2 influenced L1 by being more gender inclusive. Many Arabic speakers would

freely use *mumarrīd* (male nurse) and *mumarrīda* (female nurse) for ‘nurse’. However, speakers who are not proficient in L2 will use *mumarrīda* (female nurse) only because they are influenced by their native language (NL) which is a gendered language, i.e., Arabic. An example of gendered language in English can be seen in the following exchange from the American television show, *The Sinner* (October 13, 2021).

Harry: ‘So, are you a fisherman... woman-type? Or a fisherwoman? Do you fish?’

Percy: ‘Actually, just so you know, the, uh... the women who fish prefer to be called “girl fishermen,” which... which, personally, I think is problematic on multiple levels. But what can you do?’

Willis and Jozkowski (2018) argued that sexist language reinforced gender stereotypes and contributed to sexist behavior. Some examples of sexist language include giving superiority to males and diminishing females, as well as using masculine words before feminine words in seemingly irreversible binomials like ‘men and women’, which are based on gender ideologies. In Arabic, some dialects use masculine pronouns to address males and females, as well as other gender markers. This ongoing practice of gender marking is so commonplace that many people do not recognize it as discrimination. Sexism in the Arab world is also evident in marketing, such as detergent advertisements and packaging, which typically address instructions to women only, reinforcing the stereotype that cleaning and domestic tasks are the sole responsibility of women.

Occupational gender stereotyping, where respective professions are specifically allotted to a gender type, is common, leading to gender classification of professions. Based on the *social role theory* (Eagly, 1987), social perceivers have their views about the social or occupational groups allotted to people based on their sex or gender. Professions have certain related stereotypes, wherein the males occupy most of the leadership roles since it is perceived that the male gender possesses characteristics or traits required for leadership, including dominance and decisiveness. Meanwhile, the female gender is perceived to possess characteristics or traits required for caring for or helping people, including empathy, gentleness, or creativity. Other stereotypes reflect their social roles, such as employee or homemaker, wherein it is perceived that a homemaker is a role for females, while an engineer is a role for a male. Thus, a gender hierarchy exists wherein the male gender is ascribed to a higher status as compared to the female roles. Men are perceived as more dominant, competent, and worthy than women. Thus, most men acquire leadership positions with higher prestige and dominance, and with higher salaries than women, who have a lower status than men (Horvath, Merkel, Maass, & Sczesny, 2016). It appears that gender-inclusive forms of language can lead to gender and social stereotypes, which denote equality or inequality between people.

Our study builds on the work of Bovin (2016), Gesuato (2002), and Wessman (2007), but considers a gap in research regarding the Arabic language. Participants included those with colloquial Kuwaiti Arabic as their L1 and English as their L2, as well as participants who claim to be proficient Arabic-English bilinguals, to examine cross-linguistic influence (CLI), defined as ‘the influence that knowledge of one language has on an individual’s learning or use of another language’ (James, 2012, p. 858). This study aims to determine whether language influences perceptions of job titles. It sought to answer the following question: How does L2 English proficiency influence attitudes towards gender-neutral job titles? Below, we discuss the state of research on attitudes towards gender markedness in job titles.

2. Literature Review

Language labels words according to gender, as reflected in *grammatical gender languages*. According to Horvath et al. (2016), ‘the grammatical gender of objects affects the way these objects are perceived’ (p. 2). Since gender is a way of perceiving things or people, it is likewise applied to the social perception of jobs or professions. The word ‘fireman’ labels the profession as acceptable only for males, while ‘saleswoman’ is a profession that is only for females. The word ‘nurse’ has also been affected by grammatical gender languages, wherein nurses are supposed to be females instead of males. Language is therefore conducive to equality or inequality on the societal level. Usually, people in countries with grammatical gender languages are the ones most affected, like French, German, Italian, and Arabic. These countries have developed a language that perceives a specific profession as grammatically and socially masculine or feminine. In German, for example, a teacher ‘der Lehrer’ denotes the masculine gender, while the teacher ‘die Lehrerin’ denotes the feminine gender (Horvath, 2016).

Gender neutrality markers emerge in most languages, reflecting the societal developments that emphasize equal opportunities. While most societies, including Islamic ones, are patriarchal, there is a growing need to include women in the workplace (Shaheed, 1999). For instance, the patriarchal foundations of Kuwaiti society have promoted the idea that ‘gender differences are the natural consequence of biological differences, rather than being socially constructed’ (Al-Mughni, 2001, p. 150). Developments influence attitudes associated with NLS and TLLs, including terms used in gender markedness in workplaces. The perception that women are weaker than men is fading.

According to Gaucher, Friesen and Kay (2011), job advertisements are institutional-level contributors to gender inequality, wherein the male gender dominates most fields with higher status. This can be a barrier that prevents women from having the opportunity to participate in professions dominated mostly by men, as well as preventing men from participating in professions dominated mostly by women. Gaucher et al. (2011) mentioned the study conducted in the 1970s, wherein job advertisements of male-dominated professions discouraged women from participating or applying for the job. Job advertisements seemed to be sex-biased. Women were more prone to participating in male-dominated jobs when the advertisements are unbiased and not using grammatical gender language, especially if the male-dominated job advertisements referred to women as ideal candidates. In the United States, women were more engaged in applying for male-dominated jobs if the job description uses integrated columns instead of sex-segregated columns.

Similarly, the idea of women's roles being mainly domestic is changing as more women are now educated and participating in formal workplaces. Such changes influence attitudes toward words used in job titles in NLs and TLs. Although no society can claim to have achieved total equality, changes in the language used concerning the workplace are evident in many organizations and situations.

In English, efforts have been made to address gender-specific and gender-neutral job titles. Gender-specific titles indicate the gender of the person performing a job (e.g., 'stewardess' for a female flight attendant). In contrast, gender-neutral titles are used when there is no gender specification or the person's gender is unknown (e.g., 'firefighter', 'chairperson'). As communication increased, gender-neutral terms became more prevalent, recognizing male and female individuals in particular roles (Kutateladze, 2015).

Hord (2016) notes that proponents of gender-neutral language in education suggest using gender-neutral job titles. Maehara (2010) suggests that gender-neutral titles in workplace communication can make all parties comfortable, particularly women. In English and other languages, gender neutrality is increasingly seen as a necessary aspect of inclusive and respectful communication.

However, grammatical gender in the learner's L1 can affect learning and use of English as a TL, leading to the use of inherently feminine or masculine words in the production of gender-neutral titles (Kaushanskaya & Smith, 2016). In the learning process, L2 students may translate terms and sentence structures from their NL to effectively communicate in the TL (Budiharto, 2019). Therefore, attitudes towards using gender-neutral job titles maybe be influenced by both individual perceptions and L1.

Morphological expression of gender is associated with puzzling behavior among L2 speakers (Bobaljik & Zocca, 2011). While mismatches might be accepted, they may be detrimental to the confidence and willingness of L2 speakers to engage in a communicative process using the TL. Thus, L2 speakers' attitudes toward interacting in the TL can be influenced by their knowledge of gender-neutral terms, which can help minimize inconveniences and misunderstandings during communication, especially for those who are not yet fully competent in the TL.

For instance, Arabic influences on English as an L2 by NL speakers may be seen in the use of neutral job titles instead of gender markers by both native English speakers and high-English-proficiency Arab students. However, complex subject matter and forced term meanings may affect L2 students' attitudes and alter NL-based meanings due to difficulties in producing latent language structures.

Attitudes can be modified based on the communicative context, where gender neutrality may be prioritized in formal communication but ignored in informal situations. As a result, the fossilization of gender-specific and gender-neutral job titles among L2 learners can be challenging to eradicate, influenced by personal characteristics and the purpose of TL communication. Furthermore, L2 learners who lack competence in the TL may rely on attitudes about gender from their NL utterances.

Improving gender markedness of job titles in L2 learning requires exposure to instructional material that advocates for gender neutrality and highlights gender-specific roles. The teachers' attitude is also significant because it shapes students' perceptions and subsequent interest in using the correct terms. Broadening students' vocabulary also promotes their awareness of gender and words used to refer to men and women in specific roles (Wessman, 2007). One might use both neutral or gendered terms in one's life because they do not have vocabulary knowledge. For example, one might use both 'policeman' and 'firefighter' because they do not actually know an alternative neutral term for 'policeman' but do for 'fireman'.

Interacting factors, such as students' characteristics, background, and linguistic points of view, influence their attitudes toward gender neutrality, implying that teachers should consider the impact of L1 on L2 based on cultural perspectives and changes related to gender in the NL.

Our research takes a new direction by integrating language attitudes with gender studies related to gender-marked

job titles. While most studies have approached the topic from a sociolinguistic perspective, treating gender as a language variable, our study does not address the difference between men's and women's speech. Instead, we considered the effect of L2 usage on L1.

2.1 Gender Markedness in English

The grammar of some languages shapes our thinking and perception of gender. English, a genderless language, does not assign gender to nouns, while Arabic does (Boroditsky, 2003). In English, many words end with “-man,” such as ‘fireman’, ‘businessman’, and ‘congressman’, while very few end with ‘-woman’. Some masculine words are considered generic and applicable to women, who do not have equivalent feminine words (Bovin, 2016). For instance, ‘mankind’ in English refers to both genders. English is thus considered a man-centric language that reflects the norm (Titjen, 2018). English marks words for gender by adding suffixes to proper nouns (e.g., George/Georgina), occupational roles (e.g., actor/actress), historical titles and honorifics (e.g., Viscount/Viscountess), terms of address (e.g., master/mistress), and animals (e.g., fox/vixen). Moreover, neutral job titles are used only to refer to men in some male-dominated professions, such as clergy (Bovin, 2016). Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen and Sczesny (2007) reported that masculine markers are commonly used when the speaker does not know the gender of the referent or when the referents are both men and women.

The use of pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ with occupational terms such as ‘nurse’ and ‘pilot’, respectively, can be awkward; this raises the question of whether we should modify these terms with ‘male nurse’ and ‘female pilot’. However, not all occupational terms require modification. For example, women's titles, such as ‘Duchess’ and the professional role ‘actress’, contain the suffix ‘-ess’ to indicate a female person (Titjen, 2018, p. 23). Another gendered suffix in English is ‘-ette’, which appears in words such as ‘bachelorette’. Symbolically, an unmarked term has more power than a marked one, leading to the idea that the unmarked form is usually masculine. Political correctness has affected gendered suffixes, with writers and speakers taking steps to avoid sexist language (Titjen, 2018, p. 24). Nowadays, attitudes toward sexist language are changing, and some gendered suffixes are falling out of use (e.g., ‘actor’ refers to both men and women).

Nursing is traditionally viewed as a female profession, though male nurses are often referred to as ‘male nurses’ (Bovin, 2016). The history of nursing as a profession began in the Victorian era when Catholic nuns volunteered to help in hospitals and were referred to as ‘sisters’, a term that continues to be used in many countries. As a result of this professional history and the fact that most nurses are women, people tend to associate women with nursing (Egenes, 2018). Research by Hedreen (2023) shows that jobs are often stereotyped based on gender, creating mental associations between specific occupations and genders. The women's movement of the mid-twentieth century led to using more neutral job titles that do not include gender references. Gesuato (2002) found that women tend to use more neutral words than men, and feminists have opposed gendered job titles because they reflect sexist attitudes. This perspective reflects linguistic relativity, which suggests that our words can influence our thoughts and actions (Cottier, 2018). Changes in attitudes towards women's occupational roles have led to gender equality and the renaming of some job roles in English, such as ‘headmaster/headmistress’ becoming ‘principal’ or ‘headteacher’ (Titjen, 2018, p. 34).

2.2 Gender Markedness in Kuwaiti Arabic

Arabic grammar distinguishes between masculine and feminine genders, with words ending in *-a* (i.e., *tāʾ marbūʿa*) typically considered feminine, while those without *-a* are usually considered masculine (Schulz, 2004, p. 113). Arabic feminine words can be categorized by meaning (e.g., *bintun* meaning ‘daughter’), form (e.g., *mufīdatun* meaning ‘useful’), or convention (e.g., *nafsun* meaning ‘soul, self’) (Haywood & Nahmad, 1965). Although grammatical gender can affect semantic processing and other cognitive processes (Maciuszek, Polak, & Świątkowska, 2019), the gender assigned to a given noun is often semantically arbitrary, such as *bāb* (meaning ‘door’, masculine) or *shajara* (‘tree’, feminine), except when it reflects natural gender, as in *walad* (‘boy’, masculine) or *umm* (‘mother’, feminine) (Alkohani, 2016). In Kuwaiti Arabic, personal pronouns include masculine pronouns (*inta* meaning ‘you’ for males), feminine pronouns (*intay* meaning ‘you’ for females), and common plural pronouns for both male and female speakers (*intaw* meaning ‘you’ for both, *uhma* meaning ‘they’ for both, and *iḥna* meaning ‘we’ for both) that are conceptually similar to English.

During the early twentieth century in Kuwait, occupational titles could not be feminized because only men could work. Therefore, occupational titles were masculine until women entered the workforce. A later change allowed feminine designations in occupational titles (Bin Salama, 1969). Unlike English, Arabic assigns gender markers to job titles. For instance, the term ‘engineer’, a neutral term used for both genders in English, has two equivalents in Arabic—*muhandis* (m.) and *muhandisa* (f.).

The Arabic spoken in Kuwait is similar to standard Arabic in that some feminine words include *-a*, and some do

not. Feminine nouns are identified by their form (e.g., *shōka* ‘fork’, *duwwa* ‘brazier’) or usage (e.g., *nār* ‘fire’, or *shams* ‘sun’). The process of urbanization in Kuwait has caused a shift in gendered job titles, with some titles continuing (e.g., *mudīr* ‘manager’), some being discontinued (e.g., *mṭawwa’a* ‘female Quran teacher’), and some being replaced by Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) forms (e.g., *mḥassin* > *ḥallāq* ‘barber’). Kuwait underwent radical changes in all aspects of life, particularly after the first oil well was discovered in 1938. Prior to that, the economy was based on maritime occupations. However, the replacement of seafaring occupations after the discovery of oil had a significant impact on the Kuwaiti vocabulary. Since seafaring was (and still is, to some extent) a male-dominated profession, the job titles assigned to those who work on ships have no female equivalents (e.g., *gallāf* ‘shipwright’, *nahhām* ‘boat’s singer’, *mjaddimi* ‘boatswain’, and *nōkhhidha* ‘dhow captain’).

Literacy has increased dramatically in Kuwait due to rapid urbanization, modernization, and social development. As a result, the standard form of the language competes with the vernacular. Education and exposure to MSA and English have replaced older borrowings used by educated speakers with MSA neologisms and English loanwords, which undergo phonological and morphological changes as they become integrated into the language system. For instance, the job title *dakhtar* (a local corruption of ‘doctor’) in pre-oil Kuwait has been replaced by the pan-Arab equivalent *ṭabīb* and the English borrowing *diktōr*. Other job titles borrowed from various languages and Arabic dialects in the early 20th century include *abḷa*, ‘female teacher’ (from the Turkish *abla* ‘sister’), *bancharchi*, ‘tire repairman’ (from British English ‘puncture’ + *-chi*, a Turkish suffix denoting occupations), *khātūn*, ‘female nurse’ (from Persian *khātūn* ‘lady, noblewoman’, now outdated and replaced by the English ‘sister’), and *m’allim* ‘shawarma maker; handyman’ (from Egyptian Arabic *mi’allim* ‘master; foreman; shopkeeper’).

Traditional music in Kuwait includes gender-specific roles, such as *ṭaggāga* for female drumbeaters and *mkabbis* for male lute players; these titles reflect traditional performing arts, where female lute players were uncommon. Conversely, the masculine form *ṭaggāg* is never used in traditional music because it is reserved for female drumbeaters. Today, however, female lute players are often referred to as *‘āzifat ‘ūd*, the standard Arabic phrase for ‘female lute player’.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining a questionnaire with option boxes and blended mode data from WhatsApp to investigate people’s attitudes toward gender and language. Formal online ethnographic interviews were also conducted with some participants. This study drew on previous research by Bovin (2016), Gesuato (2002), and Wessman (2007), with some modifications.

3.1 Participants

To understand the bilingual situation, students aged 18–26 years were divided into three groups based on their NL. The first control group comprised six native Americans speaking only English, while the second control group included seven native monolingual Arabic speakers. The third group involved 54 high-proficiency English learners from Kuwait University, who were the focus of this study. As Kuwait was under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some native-American English speakers were contacted online to participate in this study, selected based on their native English speaking proficiency. The results of the tested group were compared with those of the control groups to establish whether languages influence how people view gendered job titles. Participants’ English proficiency was tested online according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale. L2-proficient participants could reveal whether their L2 (i.e., English) influences their behavior. Figure 1 shows how often English language learners speak English. Information regarding the study’s actual purpose was withheld from the participants to prevent them from modifying their behavior and responses based on their perceptions of the study’s purpose. Instead, they were informed that data were collected for a language study. All personal information collected from participants was coded and was kept strictly confidential.

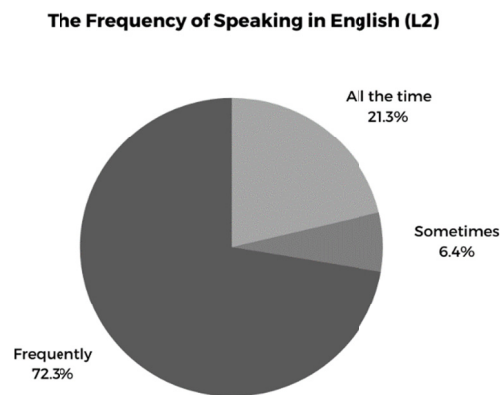


Figure 1. The frequency of speaking in English as L2 (proficient English learners)

3.2 Instruments

The study utilized an electronic questionnaire on demographic and linguistic backgrounds distributed to participants via social media platforms. Two questionnaire versions were used, one in English and the other in Arabic, with each group addressed in their L1. The questionnaire was divided into three parts:

- 1) Participants were provided with job descriptions (e.g., a person who works at the fire station) and asked to provide a suitable job title.
- 2) Occupational titles were listed, and participants were asked to determine the gender of these titles using multiple-choice questions (e.g., businessman, police officer, doctor).
- 3) Two qualitative questions were included about nursing and firefighting (e.g., Explain your choice (male/female) for nurse and firefighter. Why did you choose this option? Please elaborate).

3.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

First, we identified our target audience, and divided them into three groups based on their NL and proficiency in English. We recruited participants from Kuwait University, where we were affiliated, via social media platforms during the partial COVID-19 lockdown in early 2021. Participants provided full consent to answer the questionnaire independently on their devices without supervision. Proficiency in English was determined with an online proficiency test for English language learners before they completed the questionnaire. A mixed-method approach was used with an English questionnaire sent to the test group first, followed by an Arabic version three days later to detect cross-linguistic influence (CLI). The three-part questionnaire had no fixed duration and took less than 10 minutes to complete. The first two parts aimed to determine, through quantitative analysis, whether participants assigned gender to job titles. Qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret the influence of demographic and language background on participants' responses. The data were analyzed to determine percentages, and the results of each group were analyzed separately to make comparisons and answer the research questions.

4. Results

4.1 Control Group

Most native English speakers used neutral job titles instead of gender assignments. Across the entire sample, a neutral term was used for 'nursing', 'policing', 'firefighting', and 'airline pilot'. Additionally, most participants indicated that 'nurse' referred to both genders, while 16.7% believed it referred to women.

Table 1. Most native English speakers used neutral job description (first part of the questionnaire)

Job description	Masculine job title	Feminine job title	Neutral job title
Nursing	0%	0%	100%
Policing	0%	0%	100%
Delivering mail	16.7%	0%	83.3%
Firefighting	0%	0%	100%
Business	16.7%	0%	83.3%
Secretary	0%	0%	100%
Teaching	0%	0%	100%
Treating people in hospitals	0%	0%	100%

Table 2. Most native English speakers used neutral job titles (second part of the questionnaire)

Job title	Masculine job title	Feminine job title	Neutral job title
Businessman	100%	0%	0%
Doctor	0%	0%	100%
Police officer	0%	0%	100%
Nurse	0%	16.7%	83.3%
Firefighter	0%	0%	100%

Among native Arabic speakers, the entire sample used the masculine form for the terms ‘police work’, ‘mail delivery’, ‘firefighting’, and ‘flying a plane’. Furthermore, the entire sample indicated that ‘firefighter’ referred to a man, and the majority indicated that ‘nurse’ suggested a woman. The two control groups demonstrated a significant difference in their responses, with Arabic monolinguals assigning gender markers based on the dominant gender in a particular profession. In contrast, English monolinguals used neutral terms and indicated that gender assignment was not expected.

Table 3. Native Arabic monolinguals (first part of the questionnaire)

Job description	Masculine job title	Feminine job title	Neutral job title
Nursing	14.3%	71.4%	14.3%
Policing	100%	0%	0%
Delivering mail	100%	0%	0%
Firefighting	100%	0%	0%
Defending in courts	71.4%	0%	28.6%
Secretary	0%	85.7%	14.3%
Teaching	0%	85.7%	14.3%
Treating people in hospitals	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%

Table 4. Native Arabic monolinguals (second part of the questionnaire)

Job title	Masculine job title	Feminine job title	Neutral job title
Businessman	100%	0%	0%
Doctor	28.6%	0%	71.4%
Police officer	71.4%	0%	28.6%
Nurse	0%	85.7%	14.3%
Firefighter	100%	0%	0%

4.2 Proficient English Learners (English version)

Table 5 displays the results for the first part of the questionnaire, in which all participants (100%) provided neutral job titles for professions such as ‘nursing’, ‘teaching’, ‘treating people in hospitals’, ‘flying an airplane’, and ‘secretary’, without assigning any gender markers. Most participants (93.6%) also used a neutral job title for ‘policing’, while only 6.4% used a masculine job title, ‘police officer’. For ‘firefighting’, a few participants (10.6%) used a male job title instead of the neutral term. Assigning masculine markers for ‘delivering mail’ was more common than for previously mentioned professions, with 21.3% using ‘mailman and postman’ and 78.7% using the neutral term ‘mail carrier and post carrier’.

Table 5. Proficient English learners' responses to job description (first part of the English questionnaire)

Job description	Masculine job title	Feminine job title	Neutral job title
Nursing	0%	0%	100%
Policing	6.4%	0%	93.6%
Firefighting	10.6%	0%	89.4%
Delivering mail	21.3%	0%	78.7%
Teaching	0%	0%	100%
Treating people in hospitals	0%	0%	100%
Flying an aircraft	0%	0%	100%
Secretary	0%	0%	100%

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to assume the gender of specific job titles using multiple-choice questions. Table 6 shows that 83% of the respondents believed that 'businessman' referred to a man, while 17% thought it referred to both genders. However, the majority of participants stated that 'doctors', 'police officers', 'nurses', and 'firefighters' could be used to refer to both genders.

Table 6. Proficient English learners' responses to job title (second part of the English questionnaire)

Job title	Male	Female	Both
Businessman	83%	0%	17%
Doctor	4.3%	0%	95.7%
Police officer	10.6%	0%	89.4%
Nurse	0%	10.6%	89.4%
Firefighter	10.6%	0%	89.4%

4.3 Proficient English Learners (Arabic version)

Table 7 displays the job titles utilized by English learners for Arabic job descriptions. The table reveals that most English learners employed masculine and feminine job titles in the first part of the questionnaire, as Arabic is a gendered language. However, a few participants used only one form referring to a specific gender. For instance, 21.3% of them used a male job title in Arabic for 'firefighting', 'delivering mail', and 'airline pilot'. Additionally, a few participants used only the feminine form for teaching *mu'allima* (female teacher), nursing *mumarriḍa* (female nurse), and secretary *sikirtēra* (female secretary).

Table 7. Proficient English learners' responses to job description (the first part of the Arabic questionnaire)

Job description	Masculine job title	Feminine job title	Both masculine and feminine
<i>tamrīd</i> 'nursing'	0%	6.4%	93.6%
<i>shurṭa</i> 'policing'	12.8%	0%	87.2%
<i>maṭāfi</i> 'firefighting'	21.3%	0%	78.7%
<i>istilām albarīd</i> 'parcel delivery'	21.3%	0%	78.7%
<i>ta'lim</i> 'teaching'	0%	8.5%	91.5%
<i>ṭibb</i> 'treating people in hospitals'	12.8%	0%	87.2%
<i>tayarān</i> 'flying an aircraft'	21.3%	0%	78.7%
<i>sikirtārya</i> 'secretary'	0%	12.8%	87.2%

Table 8 displays the answers to multiple-choice questions. Most participants answered that the job titles 'doctors', 'police officers', 'nurses', and 'firefighters' could be used for both genders. Additionally, 21.3% reported that 'businessman' could be used for both genders despite ending with *-man*. Additionally, a few participants (4.3%) responded that 'nurse' refers to a female.

Table 8. Proficient English learners' responses to job title (second part of the Arabic questionnaire)

Job title	Male	Female	Both
Businessman	78.7%	0%	21.3%
Doctor	2.1%	0%	97.9%
Police officer	6.4%	0%	93.6%
Nurse	0%	4.3%	95.7%
Firefighter	10.6%	0%	89.4%

5. Discussion

5.1 The CLI

The study found that English language learning influenced participants' use of gender markers in their native language. Proficient English learners tended to use neutral occupational titles instead of gender markers, similar to native English speakers. While Arabic monolinguals assigned gender markers based on the dominant gender in the occupation, most English learners responded with masculine and feminine job titles. Participants' demographic and linguistic background influenced their answers. Most participants spoke English frequently, and ten spoke in English all the time. The frequency with which they spoke English influenced participants' views of the profession and made them aware of the difference between gender labelling in English and Arabic. Moreover, 14 participants lived in an English-speaking country, which influenced their responses and similarities to native English speakers. In contrast, Arabic monolinguals only used the feminine form because they considered a "nurse" a female worker. The results support the hypothesis that proficient English learners use neutral terms rather than assigning gender markers.

The three-day gap between the English and Arabic questionnaires influenced participants' responses. In the English version, the use of neutral terms was high. Few answers were different in the Arabic version, which followed the English version by three days. As Arabic is a gendered language, some responses were not identical to the English version. For example, 6.4% of respondents used a male job title for 'police officers' in the English version, while 12.8% used a male job title in the Arabic version. This difference answers the research question of whether language influences how people see job titles. However, the difference was not significant in the context of CLI.

In contrast to Gesuato (2002), the results show no gender differences regarding who uses more neutral terms. There was a simple contradiction in answering the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire comprised brief questions to determine whether participants chose neutral or gendered job titles. The second part offered three options (male, female, and both) for some job titles to allow participants to determine the gender of each job title. In the first part, some participants used a gendered job title (e.g., 'fireman' and 'policeman') because L1 strongly influences their process of learning L2 (English) so they tend to use gendered terms like 'policeman' instead of 'police officer'. However, in the second part, the same participants chose neutral designations ('firefighters' and 'police officers'). This result contradicts the existence of multiple choices that limit participants' answers, which is the opposite of the first result. This constitutes a limitation to our study.

5.2 The CLI Businessman as a Generic Term

Findings suggest that some masculine job titles are considered gender-neutral despite having the suffix '-man'. For example, 'businessman' was considered gender-neutral by 17% and 21.3% of respondents in the English and Arabic versions, respectively; this supports Bovin's (2016) earlier findings that some masculine words are considered generic due to the lack of feminine words. The idea that men are more involved in business and the uncommon usage of 'businesswoman' may contribute to considering 'businessman' to be a gender-neutral term. Interestingly, the phrase 'business class' in Arabic, *darajat rijāl al-a'māl*, includes the Arabic word 'men', while there is no equivalent phrase such as *darajat nisā' al-a'māl*, or 'businesswomen class'.

5.3 Nursing and Firefighting

Native English speakers and English language learners share the belief that nursing should not be associated with a particular gender, despite its feminine connotations. This view is also shared by Arabic monolinguals exposed to gender-neutral language. However, the latter group tends to associate nursing with women due to their mental representation of nurses as 'sisters' in Kuwait.

Native speakers and learners of English agree that it is better to use a neutral term; 'firefighters' can apply to both genders. According to an American male student aged 22 years, 'applying a sexist title to a job would force people to think that jobs that require physical strength and power should always be dedicated to men'. Although English learners believe that 'firefighter' sounds masculine and is associated with men, they prefer using it over 'fireman'. Assigning masculine markers to male-dominated jobs, such as firefighting, is discriminatory toward women. Instead, Arabic monolinguals assigned a masculine marker (e.g., fireman *rajul 'iṭfā'*) and justified their answers by specifying that Kuwait did not have any female firefighters and that the equivalent of 'firewoman' in Arabic sounded odd. The findings of native Arabic speakers show that speakers are influenced by their gendered language, which makes them gender mark job titles. The current study is consistent with a study by Bovin (2016), who demonstrated that neutral terms are more common currently. However, the results do not prove that neutral job titles mainly refer to men.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate L2–L1 influence on gender-marking job titles among proficient English learners in Kuwait. The results showed that some Arabic speakers use gender markers based on the dominant gender, reinforcing gender bias. The findings have important implications for research on English as a foreign language/L2 and the bilingual mind. Future studies should explore the CLI between English and Arabic and investigate the use of job titles for political positions in Kuwait. Additionally, it would be interesting to build on this study and examine the change in the use of occupational titles for domestic workers in Kuwait. For ‘housemaids’, many of whom come from the Indian subcontinent or the Philippines, we found a trend in the Kuwaiti dialect toward addressing them more politely.

The present study has some limitations. The results cannot be generalized because of the small sample size. Moreover, some responses were discarded because participants did not complete the second questionnaire. It is critical to mention that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; hence, our investigation was limited. We have only highlighted the similarities and differences between our research and previous studies in terms of results. Future studies should include more participants and explore the CLI between English and Arabic. Furthermore, political job titles in Kuwait, such as ministers and members of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, need to be studied to determine whether English language learners use masculine titles for political positions.

Depending on factors such as culture, personal beliefs, and exposure to diversity and inclusion initiatives, attitudes toward gender-neutral job titles can vary greatly. It is likely that gender-neutral job titles will continue to be adopted as society becomes more aware of the importance of gender equality and inclusivity. In this way, gender stereotypes can be broken down, a more inclusive work environment can be created, and all individuals can have equal opportunity.

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