

Gender, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Education: Towards Plugging Gender Gap in the EFL Classroom in Algerian Universities.

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Abstract:

The objective of this scrutiny is to explore the extent to which the use of blogs in English as a foreign Language (EFL, henceforth) class plays a pivotal role in learning language information and skills. Its gist is to investigate how EFL students' gender identities conflate with their use of ICT different tools with particular reference to blogs. To grapple with the full range of issues about the negotiation of meanings in the classroom, we have opted for a triangular methodological apparatus including observation, interviews and at the end questionnaires to check the reliability of results obtained from the two first methodological steps, namely observation and interviews.

Prior to undertaking this investigation, we have gleaned that gender bias still flickers in and out the EFL classroom in the Algerian university. Some of the damaging stereotypes endorse the idea that solely females are superior EFL

learners, and that technology is a masculine domain, in which males dominate the field of ICT pulling females away.

Key words: **Community of practice-EFL classroom-gender-ICT.**

Introduction:

It seems conspicuous that teaching English as a foreign language is more than just explaining grammar and tossing a bundle of novel words to be learnt. With the explosive growth of internet and its proliferation, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the EFL classroom could be a crucial and a good way to afford opportunities to our students to employ the language with a communicative purpose.

A great majority of male students believe that they are encouraged to learn the linguistic skills to assert their social power and accentuate their presence, and they claim that 'Albeit we study English, we are Algerians'. Meanwhile, female students should practice the traditional feminine linguistic behaviours through collaboratively endorsing and elucidating each other's turns. For this very reason, we triangulate the crux of this survey and adequately implement blogs in the classroom to boost quality of teaching and learning. Besides the attempt to amalgamate both formal instruction and successful communication, we adopt blogs in the EFL classroom, which are *inter alia* a heuristic tool to complement the essential literacy skills, and make students' aware about their identities in the class. This may flatten out important details about gender issues in education. We endeavour to challenge the negative stereotypes and sex segregation in educational institutions.

By "gender issues", it fares better to say that we refer to the "*social and educational aspects of the pupils being male or female; that is to say, to the real and*

perceived biological, genetic, cultural, educational and indeed lifelong implications of the gender". (Portwood, 2000: 34)

As a matter of fact, EFL teachers have directed a tremendous importance to incorporating Information and Communication Technology in the curriculum. However, this study aligns with recent studies which have moved away from its central usage and concentrated on issues that relate the use of ICT and learning a foreign language with an attempt to unearth truths about the use of technology and a biased society.

Besides revealing some intellectual benefits of the use of technology in the foreign language teaching/ learning, we strive to determine the paramount importance of raising students' awareness of negotiating and constructing a bundle of gender identities, not only as EFL learners, but as total persons and social actors as well.

Overall, this study directs a spotlight on the research question: How are gender identities reflected in the students' attitudes towards incorporating ICT in the EFL classroom?

• ICT Use in the EFL Classroom:

• Generally speaking, ICT can be explained as any use of "computing devices such as desktop computers, laptops, handheld computers, software, or internet in K-12 schools for instructional purposes" (Hew & Brush, 2007: 225). Notwithstanding, we opt for claiming that ICT is rather the integration of technology by teachers for instructional delivery and preparation, and this can be considered as a significant tool for students.

• Incorporating technology in the learning/teaching of English as a foreign language process has become a novel and momentous trend in foreign language education all over the world. Technology is *per se* an important tool to supplement the traditional adoption of chalk and blackboard. More interestingly, EFL students'

use of ICT within the classroom goes far beyond learning linguistic skills and socio-cultural expertise through ICT; they tend to embrace a specific erudition about ICT related skills as well. Along this line of thought, this could equip the students as social agents to “*participate fully in all aspects of modern society*” (Kasper, 2000: 105).

- In order to obtain a tremendous breadth of coverage of all aspects of the integration of ICT and English as a foreign language learning, it seems significant to embark on realising how EFL students learn English, how they understand and assimilate into the world around them, and how these understandings influence the construction of gender identities as a social practice within the EFL classroom. This preliminary recognition might nuance the picture and elucidate how the different forms of ICT use may fit into the wider picture of the students’ identity and their English learning process.

- A host of studies have conducted the query of ICT and education in general to find out the challenges faced while the integration of technology into the curriculum and to employ apt methods to incorporate teachers’ educational programs with modern technologies. Yet, the bulk of this research is to tap to what extent achieving gender equality in the application of ICT would stipulate going beyond mainstreaming gender and gender sensitive pedagogical interests into higher educational arenas, particularly in the EFL.

- **The Pilot study:**

- Participants in this experiment are 42 tertiary English students, 22 females and 20 males all ranging from eighteen to twenty three years of age. In the reading/writing course, our students are invited to participate and collaborate in the writing of the teacher-student’s blog. The students are also asked to create their blog as a virtual learning diary to write down about the new notions they

have learned, things that they can do as males/females in the EFL class, the challenges they have and suggestions to the teacher.

• **ICT practice in the EFL classroom as a community of practice:**

- Deeming the EFL classroom and the blog as communities of practice, we try to imbue the students with the idea that participation within the Cofp is social and designates conviviality even in the absence of the direct contact with others. The community of practice (Cofp) plays a pivotal role in cogitating about the pliable nature of the EFL students' gender identity, since individuals are social actors who are constantly striving to anchor themselves in a wide range of different communities with different norms and values, and they will have; therefore, miscellaneous identity positions within these groups, both dominant and marginal.

- EFL students should first painstakingly recognize that the CofP is "*an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour*" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 464). The concept of the community of practice permits a rich, vital and supple tool for the close examination of the interaction of language and society and; therefore, "*for studies of female's and male's gender variations*" (ibid: 465). The basic premise of the community of practice framework is that individuals develop the manners of doing things together in the enterprise they engage in; being a family, teaching, learning, or playing music...etc. They develop the activities through refreshing common knowledge and beliefs. Of course, the communities of practice do not invent their way of speaking out of the whole cloth (Talbot, 2010), but orient to the different practices of larger speech communities, refining the practices of those speech communities to which individuals aspire. In comparison with the aforementioned theories such as the speech community one, the community of practice theory was more comprehensive

which allows for a penetrating examination, because it is based on psychology, sociology, anthropology and women studies.

- As an insight worth-attending to even now, EFL students construct their gender identities as a means of establishing the extent to which they participate in the online communities within the EFL classroom. Undeniably, the findings force us to claim that the communities of practice do exist in online spaces and the data reveal that the students have the tendency to participate in miscellaneous communities simultaneously as they are nested in the EFL community. Overall, our study is sparked by questions such as: “To what extent do EFL learners in Algeria engage in Cofps in online spaces and negotiate their gender identities?

- Adopting the online medium in learning English as a foreign language, students felt as participants, a sense of disarray deeming that ICT as having been seldom used in their learning process. Yet, the great majority of the students gain status and privilege as male/ female EFL learners. Aligning with the view of Norton (Pierce’s) (1996-2000), the construction of their identities might be the echo of how individuals understand their participation in the world, and how these involvements are negotiated and constructed over space and time. Thanks to the online resources in the classroom, EFL students’ negotiation and participation are fostered.

- **Blogs in Teaching/ Learning English as a foreign language:**

- Integrating internet and web resources in the EFL classroom is an area of ever-increasing interest. Online technologies afford the students with the ability to access and interact with a wide range of authentic texts such as electronic discussion and online journals (labeled blogs or weblogs). The use of blogs has grabbed the attention of a great number of researchers since the early 2000 s. A host of writers underpin the view which reads that the adoption of blogs tend to promote reading skills, develop writing capacities and boost intercultural

understanding for EFL students (Ducate and Lonicka, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2000). By this token, Ducate and Lonicka (2005) sustain that the use of blogs can help students to gain more proficiency at writing in the foreign language in terms of content and structure as well. Besides, the data corroborate Kramsch's (1985) findings in the fact that blogs make a wide range of discourse options available to learners, because EFL students tend to widen the space of micropublishing to a number of readers beyond their classmates.

- Our students are asked to create their blog as a virtual learning diary to write down about the new notions they have learned, things that they can do as males/females in the EFL class, the challenges they have and suggestions to the teacher. As observed, the benefits of the blogs were unobtrusive in the first half of the fifth semester inasmuch as 84% of female students reveal a greater level of anxiety in using them. Deeming the EFL classroom and the blog as communities of practice, we try to imbue the students with the idea that participation within the Cofp is social and designates conviviality even in the absence of the direct contact with others.

- **Gender Identities and Attitudes towards ICT in the EFL Classroom:**

- One of the conspicuous power imbalances that exist in the adoption of Information and communication technologies is the disparity between men's and women's access and use of computers which still remains one of the crucial inequalities running throughout the educational arena. Unfortunately, gender segregation still fluctuates and women are still co-opted in the field of technology. The generis objective of this study is to promote the image of ICT in education, particularly in the EFL classroom, and to increase women's participation by incorporating female students to engage in the ICT- practice and gain more confidence when using technological tools in learning English as a foreign language.

Prior to challenging gender segregation in using ICT in education, we think that we should scrutinize gendered attitudes and identities in relation to technology.

• The following table will reveal the students' attitudes towards the incorporation of technology in the EFL classroom:

• Questions	• Yes	• No
• The integration of technology in you EFL classroom increases your motivation.	• 90%	• 10%
• The use of blogs makes you active in the learning process.	• 75%	• 25%
• Technology is boring and unnecessary.	• 25%	• 75%
• It is exiting to learn English via technological devices.	• 90%	• 10%
• Using internet in the EFL classroom make the learning more enjoyable.	• 90%	• 10%
• Films, videos can enhance and develop your language skills.	• 85%	• 15%
• Do you think that male domination of ICT prevails in the EFL classroom?	• 65%	• 35%
• Are you interested in the use of technology?	• 85%	• 15%
• Do you feel that there is gender segregation in the use of ICT?	• 70%	• 30%
• Do you gain autonomy in the classroom in response to the integration of ICT?	• 40%	• 60%

• **Table 1: Male students' Attitudes towards ICT.**

• Questions	• Yes	• No
• The integration of technology in you EFL classroom increases your motivation.	• 35%	• 65%
• The use of blogs makes you active in the learning process.	• 15%	• 85%
• Technology is boring and unnecessary.	• 75%	• 25%
• It is exiting to learn English via technological devices.	• 65%	• 35%
• Using internet in the EFL classroom make the learning more enjoyable.	• 50%	• 50%
• Films, videos can enhance and develop your language skills.	• 60%	• 40%
• Do you think that male domination of ICT prevails in the EFL classroom?	• 72.72%	• 27.28%
• Are you interested in the use of technology?	• 45%	• 55%
• Do you feel that there is gender segregation in the use of ICT?	• 90.90%	• 9.1%
• Do you gain autonomy in the classroom in response to the integration of ICT?	95.45%	4.55%

Table 2: Female Students' Attitudes towards ICT.

As reported by the questionnaire at the end of the semester, 95.45 % of female students champion the fact that gender parity in ICT in the EFL classroom provides them with more autonomy and intrinsic motivation to break silence and inhibit digital exclusion because of the inherent sexism in patriarchal cultures that intimidate the female, albeit the fact that young boys and girls seem to be similarly

involved and interested in adopting ICT tools. Accordingly, ICT provides them with a tremendous breadth of participation in the EFL community of practice to assert themselves and negotiate power through education.

One of the blatant advantages of using technology in learning the foreign language is the establishment of opportunities for EFL students to employ language in authentic contexts. This will foster students who endeavour for autonomy in the target language classroom (Kessler, 2009). By autonomy, we intend to refer to the state of acting freely with a sense of intention and choice. Quite generally, the term “autonomy” might be confused with “independence” in a host of occasions. Independence means that you do not rely on others for personal support and nourishment. By way of contrast, autonomy refers to acting freely with a sense of will and volition. In this respect, Deci and Flaste (1996) that it is thus possible for a person to be independent and autonomous (i.e., to freely not rely on others), or to be independent and controlled (i.e., to feel forced not to rely on others).

It should be borne in mind that gender identities are not at odds with the foreign language learning process. Unfortunately, the conflicts of contradictory beliefs about being males and females flicker in and out the EFL classroom (in some Algerian universities), and this may *inter alia* engender language learning handicaps (Babou, 2013). To make the picture more vivid, many EFL male students think that learning a foreign language may often necessitate a modification of one’s gender identity and performance or denying the Arabic culture, in order to guarantee participation and reification in the new culture, which is the English one.

Interestingly, the great majority of our male students report that the amalgamation of technology in the classroom is *per se* a pivot to enable them to construct a set of their thinks beyond the remit of the EFL classroom and employ the target language freely and impulsively.

Bashir-Ali (2006) sustains that some EFL learners feel the need to eschew and deny their L1 cultures to assimilate in the mainstream of English academic discourse. In support of this, Sunderland (1996) demonstrates that patriarchal values will be brought into the classroom by students and teachers via gendered practices and identities. By way of explanation, some of the EFL male students report that 'although we study English, we are Algerians' (Babou, 2013). By analogy to gender segregation in the use of ICT, some of our male students exhibit anxiety and some negative stereotypes towards English deeming that females are superior EFL learners and they sometimes face a specific identity struggle when they strive to learn English and construct their gender identities outside of the Anglophone world. For this very reason, using technology in the EFL classroom conspicuously foster and develop males' confidence in speaking and debating more than in the traditional classroom (i.e., speaking session without computers and internet). As expected, 75% of male students who participated in the use of blogs' experiment exhibit a blatant tendency to eschew their reluctance to speak in the oral performance course. Identity merely means how individuals come to construct themselves, of course with respect to those surrounding cohorts. Gender researchers have recognized, across the social sciences, that gender cannot be assessed as fixed or stable category because this would be generalizing the myriad experiences of women and men. Gender is constructed through the social practices that people display in the miscellaneous communities in which they are members. Gender is, furthermore, what individuals do, not what they have (Wardaugh, 2009). It is a set of social practices and behaviours emanated from certain ideas about what a particular culture at a particular moment in time reads as "masculine" or "feminine".

Technology is an important site of gender negotiation where both masculine and feminine identities are constantly de (constructed). Technologies are welded into students' gender identities in the manner we negotiate them. Technologies are

welded with students' gender identities in the manners they negotiate cornucopia of meanings as they are nested in the EFL and online communities of practice. Along this line of thought, Abdelhay (2008) states that "*Identities are rooted in what we do rather in the social categories, the community of practice model can better capture the multiplicity of identities at work in specific situations, more fully*" (p, 129). The use of ICT pulls both male and female students to the core of the EFL classroom. Teaching gender and language from the new perspective of the 'community of practice' framework matters in the EFL education.

Conclusion:

Teaching gender and language from the new perspective of the 'community of practice' framework matters in the EFL education, it allows us to understand how learners readjust the meanings of masculinity and femininity, to negotiate their identities, not as a bundle of fixed binary rules, but as a tractable practice to convey their *status-quo* in the EFL classroom which adopts ICT. Achieving gender equality in the application of ICT would stipulate going beyond mainstreaming gender and gender sensitive pedagogical interests into higher educational arenas, particularly in the EFL context.

Prior to sneaking gender issues in the EFL classroom and elucidating the concepts of "gender identities" and "the negotiation of meaning", the results in the dawn of this study demonstrate that some female students exhibit a specific identity conflict when confronting the *de facto* use of ICT in the EFL classroom. Notwithstanding, the great majority of female students display their reluctance to persist in following the stereotype of the digital divide with regard to technology. They try to cope with the use of the technological tools in learning the foreign language by unravelling the issues and complexities of ICT and females, not as something of a *cul-de-sac*, but rather as a challenge to the technophobic and less positive attitudes amongst females. Drawing on Wenger's practice theory, the

conventional notion of femininity and masculinity, which has been for a long time claimed as sharing bipolar meanings, have been in fact, altered. It means that femininity is not necessarily synonymous with femaleness in the same way as masculinity no more equates with maleness (Abdelhay, 2008). In a similar vein, individual identity is not built in a vacuum; it is co-constructed with a group of identities. In tune with recent gender studies, the emphasis shifted from the fixed and ready-made gender identity. Instead of looking at how selections of identities change in a number of different circumstances, linguists began to concentrate on figuring out the fluidity of gender identity. Gender identity is no longer tackled as fixed or unidimensional, but rather as a vital process, incarnated and reincarnated as the situation changes, time mutates, and the relationships are negotiated in the social practices of the community of practice.

Albeit female students generally seem as strained and uncomfortable when using computers in the class, it is has been blatant that they have been striving to resist the structural constraints and cultural/ social abstractions about being 'women'. Hence, EFL female students negotiate and maintain their membership in the use of technology which is considered as peculiar to males. Along this line of thinking, we opt for borrowing Canagarajah's (2004) concept "subversive identities" in which females endeavour to master and develop their technological capacities when learning for the sake of resisting the unfavorable identities which might be imposed on them. We cannot deny that females' technological relegation is not at odds with the Algerian classrooms' stereotypes, but the findings force us to state that female students as social agents who can subvert and challenge the social and structural constraints that might plot them in undesirable ways when negotiating their identities as EFL students as well.

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