



## Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigates constructing gendered identities and agency through classroom discourse in a foreign language context by drawing on data collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations in two Foundation Institutes in the Arabian Gulf. Informed by poststructural feminism, Foucault's (1972) power relations, and Butler's (2004) performativity theories, the article investigates how students' behaviors in the Gulf tertiary classroom affect their academic performance and their personality construction. The findings suggest that the students' gendered identities were shaped as an effect of their cultural construction, which remarkably affected the way they learn. The findings also illustrate how modern education has a positive influence on learners as a means to mitigate gender sensitivity issues inside the classroom. These findings have implications for educators and curriculum designers that the learner's identities and agency must be acknowledged in the first place, and the prior knowledge of gender influence on learning can enhance the educational process to be more effective.

### Keywords:

Gender, Identity, Agency, Foreign Language Learning, Foundation Program.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Empirical studies that focus on the construction of learner identities and learner agency represent a paradigm shift in SLA research. However, the construction of gender has not received the same attention (Butler 2004). This study addresses identity changes in mixed-gender English classrooms and how practically actualising them in tertiary education. It alerts that it is high time to take action.

This research analyses classroom discourses based on enabling students to construct their identities and practice their agency in classroom gendered dynamics. Recalling the significance of gender influence on a Muslim foreign language learning context, the researchers will exemplify how female learners are able to change their passivity and transform themselves into changing agents in mixed-gender classroom settings.

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The researchers introduce learner identity and learner agency within Foucauldian (1972) and Butler's (2004) frameworks. They also discuss the social restrictions in the Arabian Gulf context that female students encounter when dealing with male students inside and outside the classrooms. The researchers exemplify the experience of female students moving from single-gender education to mixed-gender education based on case studies carried out in two different tertiary institutions in the Arabian Gulf. The study focuses on the impact of teachers' intervention on empowering female student's positive participation. They also highlight the importance of creating classroom community for male-female mutual understanding. The researchers believe that the learner-centred approach is the most suitable approach that may make teachers' intervention possible and give students of both genders to voice their experiences and raise any problem they face in a mixed-gender environment.

The current study employs the qualitative approach because it suits the nature of the research questions. The researchers aim to explore students' experiences and behaviors, the process of transformation, and their identity and agency formation. The study draws on Foucault (1972)

# Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context

and Butler's (2004) theories. It adopts a case study design in two higher education institutes in Oman to observe students' discursive practices closely and construct their identity and agency. To gain insights, the researchers will conduct semi-structured interviews that may reflect students' experiences and cultural beliefs besides teachers' observations. The findings are expected to reveal these students' problems; accordingly, some suggestions and recommendations may be offered.

## 1.1 Rationale of the Study

Teachers in higher education in most Muslim countries may notice gender inequality and different power relations between the male and female students; this gap probably is due to how these students are brought up in patriarchal societies in which male hegemony prevails. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the impact of this unequal power relation on the academic performance of the two genders in general and on females in particular and to what extent teachers' intervention is possible and whether it could lead to any transformation in students' gendered identities. However, this gap does not mean females have inferior positions or are marginalized in Muslim societies. In fact, it portrays the cultural influence on the two genders, which may impact their performance inside the classroom. The researchers aim to instill positive attitudes toward the other gender without gender bias by stimulating them to interact in the classrooms regardless of gender differences to respect each other and make their language-learning experiences more enjoyable, practical and natural.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Many teachers may notice at the Foundation Programs that female students behave differently from male students. For example, female students are reluctant to give a presentation in the presence of male students since the female students may feel fear and shame and accordingly may be silent. This may negatively impact academic performance unless this gendered power relation is changed, and the female students have gained confidence in themselves, which could be attained by personality transformation. The researchers bear in their minds that this gendered power is culturally bound and could not easily be changed.

## 1.3 Significance of the Study

The researchers believe that this study is significant for Oman, especially as it attempts to bridge the gap in the educational field because, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, this sort of study is rare, and few researchers tackle this topic. It is also significant for teachers, curriculum designers, and shareholders to maintain the sensitivity of the females and their actions and academic performance.

## 1.4 Research Objectives

1. To explore male and female students' discursive behaviors to see to what extent they differ.
2. To investigate how students' behaviors in the Omani tertiary classroom affect their academic performance.
3. To explore how students' classroom interactions affect their personality transformation.

## 1.5 Research Questions

1. In what way are female students' discursive behaviors different from male students?
2. How might the students' behaviors affect their academic performance in the Omani tertiary classroom?
3. In what way may students' interactions in the classroom impact their personality transformation?

## 2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper adopts the theory of poststructural feminism and power relations by Foucault (1972) and Butler's (2004) performativity theories. The concept of performativity is considered a tool of analysis to investigate distinguished subject formation. Moreover, it enables us to show how power relations operate in identity expression and location (Butler 1993). These theories will be highlighted and discussed. The paper will analyze the learners' identities and agency through their discourses.

Furthermore, the researchers present the theoretical framework for this study based on the conceptualization of identity, stressing that identities are fluid, shifting, and ever-changing (Foucault, 1983). Thus, the researchers believe that gender is dynamic and not static, following Butler (2004). Butler's performativity theory is rooted in gender identities (Butler, 1990).

### 2.1. Literature Review

This section aims to review the literature related to this paper's main areas of interest. The areas are poststructural feminism, the status of women in Oman, power relations, performativity theory, learners' identities and agency and discourse. Gender is a central theme in this study.

To start with, it is essential to define gender to differentiate it from sex. Gender, as claimed by Connell (2002), is a social structure, while sex is related to biology. Gender is part of social arrangements and governed by everyday activities or practices. Gender identities mirror people's interpretation of themselves as female and male in terms of cultural definition (Wood and Eagly, 2015). Therefore, the article focuses on the social power relations and activities between the two genders rather than biological differences. The targeted students came from single-sex schools and acquired different communicative styles.

For this reason, the researchers claim that university students incorporate their community's cultural beliefs about

## **Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context**

gender into their own views and thus construct their identities accordingly. Studies then began to move from viewing gender as an individual trait which could be generalized to observing it as a social construction within specific cultural contexts, for example, see Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992). To achieve a clear picture of the different power relations, the researchers need to analyze the students' discourses since language forms convey different meanings and accomplish various communicative functions according to the speaker, the setting, the cultural context, gender, power relations, and a wide range of other social phenomena (Freed, 1995) cited in Davis and Skilton-Sylvester (2004). As the study draws on Foucault and Butler's theories, the following sections illustrate their theories.

### **2.1.1. Poststructural Feminism**

This study draws on poststructural feminism, which is, as argued by Pierre (2000), based on several philosophical notions: language; discourse; rationality; power, resistance and freedom; knowledge and truth; and subjectivity. As a matter of fact, feminism is divided into three categories: liberal, where women want to be similar in all rights to men; radical, where women want to be superior to men and poststructuralism, which will be discussed below. Since the researchers believe that gender is dynamic and fluid, they adopt poststructural feminism, where the development of gendered subjectivity is seen as a continuous process of interaction between individuals and communities (Gallant, 2008). Another reason for adopting poststructural feminism is its link with identity. As Macleod (2009) argued, one of the most significant values of poststructural feminist work in education research is the prominence given to the concept of "identity" and the social and discursive processes of constructing identity. According to Azzarito and Solmon (2006), poststructuralists consider gender and race as phenomena that are not natural and fixed but believe that they are socially constructed discourses which aim to discipline the social status of the body as superior or inferior. Therefore, the researchers draw their study on poststructural feminist principles to explore how gender, subjectivity and power are constructed by viewing the world differently. The study is interdisciplinary, and thus they combine theoretical perspectives from both Butler (1999, 1997, 2004) and Foucault (1972, 1980, 1981).

### **2.1.2 The Status of Women in Oman**

After his ascendancy to the throne, the late Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said, embarked on his enlightened project to build the Sultanate of Oman as a strong and modern state. He was determined to make a change. This change has a great impact on education as a key to prosperity. Schools were opened to both genders; a blossoming cultural renaissance followed this. As a result, Omani women and men contributed to reconstructing their community in all aspects of life. Education helped the Omani women to eliminate their subordination and gender stereotypes and embarked actively

on building their nation. This aligns with the Human Resource Development Strategic Plan drawn by the Ministry of Economic Development, Sultanate of Oman, which comprises the vision of developing women, promoting their status and facilitating their integration into the total social progress. According to Varghese (2011), Oman is going through radical changes in strategic development; therefore, it recognizes the fact that Omani women have to be more powerful to have a better future in all domains of the country. Omani women today are ministers, university teachers, engineers, doctors .... etc.

### **2.1.3. Power Relations**

This study is based on Foucault's ideas about power (1972, 1980, and 1981) and Butler's (1990, 1996) gender performativity theories. This section sheds light on power relations and the effect of social power on individual behavior. Therefore, the researchers will tackle Foucault and Butler's theoretical notion of power and its impact on students' gender, behavior and learning. Foucault's theory contradicts the idea that certain people can possess power while others cannot. In this regard, the researchers believe that the FI students are capable of possessing and practising power. Foucault (1993) believes that "governing people is not a way to force people to do what a governor wants, (p. 203). This means the teacher-student relationship, instead of coercing students to do whatever they want, may target to empower learners to express themselves and speak their minds as learners.

Moreover, students may think critically and evaluate themselves, their instructors, the materials taught and their learning procedures. Foucault (1981) considered power ubiquitous at all levels, such as family or state relations of education or production. As for Butler (1990), gender is related to acts or sequences of repeated acts determined within regularity. According to Jackson (2004), Butler's view about identity is how power and discursive practices contribute to the construction of the subjects. Butler (1996) also stated that identity categories such as race, class and gender could not be controlled. Reflecting on this view, teachers know that students' identities are fluid. Their positive feedback may help students construct their identities and practice their agency.

### **2.1.4. Performativity Theory**

As mentioned earlier, this study aims to attempt a new reification of gender, which is a prerequisite to cope with the new life of the university where there is a mixed-gender education, at the university, where students encounter new challenges and experience co-education. Therefore, students must reconstruct their gender identities within the new dynamic social and power relations setting. According to Butler (2004), performativity theory tries to discover how gender identities are constructed (and unconstructed) within discourse, power relations, historical experience, cultural practices and material conditions. Therefore, following

## Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context

Butler (2004), gender performativity entails changing the normal gender categories, which try to regulate people to accept gendered subjectivity. Moreover, Butler's (1990) theory of gender is the notion of performativity, a proof of identity that produced "the repetition of acts". In her opinion, gender is maintained due to repeated actions and activities.

Furthermore, she stressed the role of power relations in constructing marginalized identities and empower them. The researchers acknowledge that Islamic principles must be considered when discussing feminism in the Omani context. It is worth mentioning that Butler's theory of performativity is based on different theories, for example, Foucault's theory of power relations and Hegel's theory of Phenomenology.

### 2.1.5. Learners' Identities and agency

To construct identity, students must perceive themselves as learners in a new and different learning context. As van-Lier (2007) argued, student perception and self-recognition are essential in self-development and identity, influencing the learners' relationships with their environment. Agency is defined by (Ahearn, 2001) as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Since this definition is provisional and not comprehensive, the researchers add that it may include students' ability to take the initiative and act in a way that shows their self-regulation. This study focuses on poststructuralism; therefore, it could be considered a critical study.

It is noticeable that collaborative learning is a trend nowadays which shifted second language studies from teacher-centered approach to learner-centeredness. This way, the agency becomes one of the main requirements in such classrooms. Students may become intrinsically motivated and autonomous learners by constructing their own agency and identities. The researchers differentiate *students' sense of agency* which means students' dreams, ambitions, and goals, from *students practicing agency* which means their ability to change, achieve and turn that sense of agency into real and true fulfilled goals.

### 2.1.6. Discourse

Poststructural theories of power relations and discourse demonstrate that the construction of subjectivity is endless continuous practice (Jackson, 2004). According to her, people cannot escape power relations and discourse that constitute their identities. Ball (1990), following Foucault's views, illustrated that discourse is a key notion that summarizes "what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority" (p. 2). Moreover, for Mills (2003) discourse is a system which frames reality as perceived. While in Foucault's perspective, discourse means knowledge, social relationships, and fundamental contexts. Foucault's idea about discourse is that it forms both subjectivity and power relations. Based on the above, the researchers conclude that students' discursive practices shed light on how their identities, power relations and subjectivities are constructed.

### 2.1.7. Previous Research and the Gaps

As claimed by Varghese (2011), the Arab region lacks studies dealing with women's issues, such as empowerment and human resources. To the researchers' best knowledge, few have written about gender construction and its role in the educational sector in Oman.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This section is guided by the research questions stated above; therefore, it adopted the qualitative approach to best answer them. It introduces and includes a discussion of the methodology adopted and the research design which is the most suitable to answer the research questions stated earlier. The researchers triangulated the data collected to reach the answers to the research questions. The researchers overviewed the design, starting with a plan of the key methods; classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The research tools will be provided and justified. In what follows, the researchers address the specific data collection procedures. This is followed by an overview of methods used for data analysis. Furthermore, ethical issues were considered. The next parts illustrate the tools utilized and the participants involved in the research.

### 3.1. Data Collection Procedures

#### 3.1.1. Methodological Design

This study uses a case study approach (Yin, 2009). The case study has several definitions. For example, Nisbet and Watt (1984) cited in Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) have defined it as "the study of an instance in action" (p.72) while Creswell (1994) believed that it is a single instance of a bounded system, for example, a child, a school or a community. In this regard, the researchers adopted Yin's (2009) definition because it is more comprehensive. Yin (2009) argued that the borderline between the phenomenon and its context is unclear; a case study is known to be a study of a case in a context. Moreover, it is essential to establish a case in point within its context. Therefore, a case study can be either tightly bounded or less bounded. In this study the case is the two foundation classes in Omani higher tertiary institutions.

The researchers adopt the case study because, as pointed out by Cohen et al., (2011) it provides an exclusive example of actual people in factual situations, enabling the audience to understand and interpret the ideas. The instruments of the study are discussed in what follows.

#### 3.1.1. Instruments

The data were collected through two instruments; semi-structured interviews and classroom observations by two researchers. They used interviews and classroom observation. The interviews were used to gather data that observations from students could not notice. Interviews are important instruments to gather data for a qualitative method in applied linguistics. Researchers emphasize the essentiality of the

## **Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context**

interview in Applied Linguistics. For example, Nunan (1992) argued that researchers have generally used the oral interview as a research instrument in applied linguistics. Dornyei (2007) also claimed that an interview is a common tool in qualitative research. Moreover, Cohen et al., (2011) argued that "Interviews are a widely used instrument for data collection" (p. 409). They added that interviews are flexible communicative channels. Therefore, the researchers used verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard channels. Observation, as claimed by Shank et al., (2014), is a simple but more powerful procedure for collecting data and documenting what you collect. Almost all qualitative researchers use this important tool. To obtain the data needed, we adopted semi-interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are designed to reveal participants' views about specific experiences they have come across and explore their subjective perspectives. Semi-structured interviews remain unique among other types of interviews as they provide relevance to the topic and keep responsive to the participants' concerns. Usually, all participants respond to the same set of questions, and the interview is recorded. Semi-structured interviews are used in this study because they allow room for learner agency and go in line with the researchers' philosophical stance. The researchers used semi-structured interviews as they go hand in hand with the constructionist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm views participants in their social domains as agents who can create their own reality. They struggle; they take the initiative and transform due to their sociocultural context. In the constructivist paradigm, truth has many faces and represents the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that constitute participants' identities.

The interviews were conducted with students to encourage them to express their feelings about learning and to explore how they judged their classroom (and sometimes outside classroom) experiences. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each student by the end of the semester. Interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes.

### **3.1.2. Participants**

The study participants were a group of adult students enrolled at the Foundation Institutes (FIs) in a foreign language context. These male and female learners are from different English language levels and almost come from the same cultural background. They are between 19 – 25 years old. Almost all of them speak Arabic as their mother tongue and English as a foreign language. The majority of them are females who study in English programs at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. They study reliable published course books like Cambridge Unlock and Pathways (National Geography).

### **3.2. Validity and Reliability**

Both validity and reliability can be applied to different types of research; however, how they are addressed in

different approaches varies (Cohen et al., 2011). According to these authors, there are several types of validity and reliability. Researchers must be attentive since threats to validity and reliability are not easy to avoid. In general, validity deals with whether the methods, approaches, and techniques used truly communicate the problems being explored or not, while reliability is concerned with how well the researchers have carried out the research project.

### **3.3. Triangulation**

Triangulation, as it applies to research, includes the application and examination of the data sources and the methods used in collecting the data to investigate the research questions.

### **3.4. Ethical Issues**

Considering ethical issues that concern individuals is a must. As noticed by Cohen et al., (2011), researchers need bear in their minds their demands as scientists while investigating and finding the truth and the rights of the participants of the study so as not to be threatened. Oxford (2011) confirmed that because data collection, analysis and interpretation may be sensitive, participants should be fully aware of the study's aims and nature. Participants should be informed about their rights and the right to withdraw at any time. Bearing these factors into consideration, the researchers contacted the Directors of the Foundation Institutes (FIs) to allow them to interview the students enrolled in FI classes. It was clearly stated that the data collected would not affect their performance or the grades of their English grades.

### **3.5. Conducting Interviews**

It is very important to mention that the researchers are male teachers in a conservative community and that it would be difficult to interview female students and record their voices. Therefore, the most important thing was to pave the way for this interview for the female students to feel comfortable. Moreover, it was essential for all students to be aware that the interview and their responses had nothing to do with their performances in the classroom and had no relation to their grades. The students interviewed were 8 males and 10 females (9 students from each institution). They were all Omanis and FI students between 19 -22 years old.

### **3.6. Classroom Observation**

Cohen et al., (2011) viewed classroom observation as essential for exploring the observable behavior of the students, such as gendered interaction. This type of observation is important in such a sociocultural context. Observation as a tool suits the purpose of the current study as it provides in-depth data, strengthening the triangulation process. The researchers noted down their observations and field notes on a daily bases and used to exchange ideas with each other.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND DATA ANALYSIS**

##### **4.1. Interviews**

The researchers applied thematic analysis following (Braun and Clarke, 2006), who thought this approach was flexible and known in many different descriptive studies. Moreover, they thought that thematic analysis led to different and in-depth interpretations of the data collected. The researchers used the five steps of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke. These are:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generation initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes.

The researchers familiarized themselves with the data and then coded the data (Appendix 1). After that, they classified the themes and reviewed and defined them. In what follows, the students' discourse is analyzed. The names given below are not their real names (F female, M male).

**Faiza (F):** *My family will not allow me to travel to the UK for my master's degree.*

While the student was telling this to the interview, the tone of her voice disclosed her frustration and disappointment. The researcher interpreted her family's attitude towards studying abroad within the Omani sociocultural context. However, this is not the norm nowadays since many Omani females have studied abroad. Her family seemed to act against her sense of agency, which frustrated her.

**Badriya (F):** *My family would send me to a single-gender university if it was available because they don't want me to study in a mixed-gender classroom.*

From her response, the researcher interpreted that this student belongs to a conservative and traditional family because co-education has become a norm in Higher in Oman. This transition to a mixed-gender classroom is not familiar to some families.

**Samia (F):** *My family doesn't mind sending me to a mixed-gender education institution because they think it empowers me.*

This student's response reveals the result of His Majesty's Sultan Qaboos' enlightened project, which changed Omani society. It seems that she is constructing her positive identity and practicing her agency which may pave her path without facing any trouble in a mixed-gender study environment in any potential work environment.

**Ali (M):** *Everything is new to me. The shift from a single-gender education to a co-education was not easy for me. I was curious to know how things would unfold, but to be in the same class with girls and to speak and answer questions was a big challenge for me. That is the way I always keep silent. I want to speak and to participate but it is too difficult.*

This male student's response illustrates that transitioning from a single-sex education to co-education is sometimes abnormal for both genders. The negative effect of mixed gender on this student is obvious; therefore, teachers' intervention is required in such cases to explain to them the normality of the mixed gender context.

**Maha (F):** *It is a scandal to speak in front of men in the classroom.*

The word 'scandal' in her speech demonstrates the power of the social norms governing female behavior. This student is from a rural area which shows the difference between those who live in rural areas from those who live in urban areas. The latter are more open-minded, and they may adapt easily.

**Rawan (F):** *I am studying business, I tried to study education, but I failed. I am a girl, and teaching is the best job for me, my family, and my future life. I don't know if I will be allowed to work in a mixed-gender context or not. I love teaching, and it is the best, as I will work in a girls' school.*

The above female student's speech reflects a very good example of stereotyping gender roles in some conservative societies.

**Raja (F):** *I want to speak English well and get a good job with a high salary. English will help me to do that. I don't want my future husband to give me money. I want to depend on myself, unlike my mother. Sometimes she is helpless and frustrated. English is one of my weapons to do so. Men are different, they can do any job, but for us, we need a certificate.*

This is a good example of Oman's change through education. The above female student seems to have constructed her identity and constructively practiced her agency. Obviously, she is aware of the different roles of women before and after the Omani cultural renaissance.

**Safa (F):** *I gave a five-minute presentation; I was confused and went blank. I didn't know how I completed my presentation. I skipped some important parts. I was perplexed. When I practice at home, it's easy, but when I stood in front of the class, all the eyes were on me. My heart began to beat so fast,*

This student has a shaky character which entails the intervention of the class teacher or the academic advisor to stabilize her character and help her build her learner identity in order to be able to behave naturally in mixed-gender classrooms.

**Abdu (M):** *It is difficult to speak. We don't know a lot of English. It is difficult to say what we want to say. The presence of the girls makes things even more difficult or impossible. I don't want to make mistakes; I don't want the girls to think I am stupid.*

According to this student, the difficulty is twofold: linguistic and gender. He is afraid of making mistakes in front of his classmates, especially females. He is trying to keep his face. The teacher can solve this problem by asking some easy

## Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context

questions for him to help untie his tongue and let him gain confidence. This way, the teacher may help him construct his learner identities and enact his agency properly.

**Asim (M):** *Sometimes teachers want us to practice our language with the girls in the class. But this is something that we have not done before. When forced to do so, we do not feel at ease. In fact, I want to do so, but it is out of my hand. That is why when I speak, I do this mostly with boys. It is comfortable for me.*

The gender influence is clear, which clearly affected this student's identity and inhibited it partly due to the unfamiliar or new context he found himself in. His desire was to be a fluent speaker of English, but for him, that was out of reach. His phrase: *I want to do so*, reveals that he had a sense of agency. However, he needed to reach to turn it to the level of practicing his agency. Only then would he reach the stage of a fluent speaker. Also, his identity was not well constructed. Moreover, this can be enhanced by the teacher's intervention. Being informal and creating a positive classroom atmosphere could be conducive to learning and help them communicate freely.

**Faisal (M):** *Before giving a presentation, my teacher told me to hold a piece of paper with a list of keywords as a reminder. But because I did lots of practice at home and everything went well there, I thought I wouldn't need that when presenting in the classroom. However, when I stood in front of the class, I was afraid, didn't know how to start, and didn't know what to say. I avoided looking at the girls, panicked and regretted not listening to the teacher's advice.*

The naivety was clear in this student's speech. It seems that he lacked the ability to face the audience, especially females, which put him in an embarrassing situation. The good thing was that he was aware of his mistake of not abiding by his teacher's advice.

### Researcher's Classroom Observation

Observation is an important tool used in collecting information in both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Denscombe (2007) claimed that it "offers the social researcher a distinct way of collecting data" (p. 207). While Cohen et al., (2011) defined observation as a tool widely used to collect data which may take many forms. In the researchers' opinion, it is different from other tools because it gives them chances to gather data happening naturally in social events and enables them to look at situations that occur in situ rather than depending on the purpose. Robson (2002, p. 310) cited Cohen et al., (2011, p. 456) pointed out that people may not do what they claim to. Therefore, by employing this instrument, the researchers may compare what gender identities the students claimed to have with their real identities. For example, whether they are stable and confident while giving presentations or reluctant and shaky. According to Denscombe (2007, p. 207), observation is

divided into systematic and participant observations. The focus of the former is on interaction in settings similar to classrooms (Croll, 1986, Flanders, 1970), and (Simon and Boyer, 1970). The latter is participant observation, which is associated with sociology and anthropology. It is mostly used to explore the culture and interactions of the participants. In what follows, the researchers analyzed what they had observed.

Since the classroom setting concerns the community's cultural background, students sit in a way that may not conflict with this culture; therefore, the classroom is divided into two main rows. male students sit in a row, and female students sit in another row. The researchers noticed that in both institutions, during presentations, both genders avoid eye contact with the other gender.

Moreover, the researchers noticed that if few students of one gender are in one class, they suffer from isolation or loneliness. Usually, female students avoid any interaction with males even if they request to do an activity related to practicing English which entails teachers' positive intervention by creating a healthy situation that does not violate the social norms. An example of an incident closely related to cultural background is when a female student refused to give a presentation in front of the class because her husband's friend was a student and was present in the class. In such cases, the teacher may explain such situations are expected to be encountered in the potential work environment in the wider society which is mixed gender by nature. Therefore, the aim of these classroom presentations are to equip and empower them for that.

The researchers observed cases where the students from both genders felt reluctant to participate in classroom activities and remained muted. These incidents were mainly observed at the beginning of the first semester. The teachers' interventions may help construct their identities and exercise their agency in such cases. It is worth mentioning that this kind of changing identities is not an easy task because it is culture-bound, so it needs repetition and encouragement in a parental manner. Besides, creating a social-like setting in the classroom where all the members of that society respect and encourage each other.

### 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the impact of gender on the learning performances of FIs. The study was carried out in two higher education institutions in Oman in spring 2022. The researchers used a qualitative research tools to triangulate the data by employing semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. The study reveals that gendered identities were rooted in the students' cultural backgrounds and affected how they learn. It also shows the positive influence of education and that it was able to mitigate gender sensitivity, and that it was not difficult to change their identities for the betterment despite cultural beliefs.

## Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context

This study contributed to the general knowledge by addressing a sensitive issue concerning the role of culture, gender and agency in learning. These issues were talked within students' point of views. What has been stressed in this study is the place of gender in students' performance and how to raise their awareness and help them construct their learner identities and enact their learner agency.

### 5.1. Pedagogical Implications

1. The study findings have confirmed that the learner's identities and agency must be acknowledged.
2. Prior experience and knowledge of gender influence on learning can help the teachers to be more prepared.
3. The instructor can have a bigger role in helping learners construct their identities.
4. Both genders experience challenges but not necessarily behave in a similar way in constructing their identities.

### 5.2. Limitation of the Study

The most obvious limitation is the short research period since gender identity issues could take longer time to address. Further longitudinal research is recommended.

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**Dr. Osman Hassan Osman et al, Constructing Gendered Identities and Agency through Classroom Discourse in a Foreign Language Learning Context**

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**Appendix 1**

Emergед selective codes and their categories are:

Gendered classroom interaction
Gender and agency
Gender and identity
Gender roles in the classroom
Self-regulation