



Debating Co-Ed Classes: The Case of Saudi Female ESL Students at Root Hall

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Abstract

While most of the countries are attempting to improve their educational systems to meet the necessities and characteristics of an era that is characterized by globalization and mass communication, Saudi Arabia is taking a big leap towards major transformation in all fields including education under the vision of 2030. One of the biggest challenges were changing the state of being caught up with whether to reinforce or get rid of gender-segregation into women empowerment. In other words, whoever qualified will take the lead in any project regardless of the gender. However, the idea of having females students in leadership position is novel to the society as classrooms are still single gendered. Saudi female students' first experience with co-education is usually within undergraduate level in medical majors or during scholarship outside the borders of Saudi Arabia. Recent research has shown that there is an immense pressure from reformers and intellectuals who not only want to change the content of the curriculum, the way by which it is taught, but also reinforcing coeducation. Krieger (2007) asserts that, "The university, hopes to eventually enroll 2,000 graduate students, will be the first coeducational higher-education university in the country" (Krieger, 2007, p. 3). It is believed that by improving the ESL methods in higher education, which reinforces coeducation, would better the educational system and prepare female and male graduates who will be able to compete with their global peers. However, up to now, there has not been any investigation that unveils the correlation of the language proficiency among Saudi ESL female students and the implementation of a coeducational system in the Saudi universities. This study has investigated three Saudi ESL students who are taking their English classes at Root hall, ISU and their perceptions towards mixed gender classroom and its impact on their English language development. The results showed that co-education has built their confidence to communicate, negotiate with their peers of opposite gender; hence, their English language proficiency.

Keywords: *Co-education, ESL, ELTE, TCs*

1. Introduction

In the age of mobility of knowledge, cultures and transnational discourse have deeply penetrated language classrooms in the form of new practices, new context, and even new educational system. In Saudi Arabia; in particular, empowering female in work place is imposed and encouraged. However, the Saudi educational system still needs to follow the same pace.

One of the most heated debates; not only among Saudi educators, but also worldwide; is single-gender education. There is no doubt that this separation is based on Arab culture and traditions. Moreover, being a Muslim country, people are governed by the interpretations of Islam. Islam discourages social interaction between men and women. Thus, gender separation is strictly enforced in the Saudi educational system. In other words, the religious and cultural elements have reached the educational system and resulted in single-gender schools and colleges.

According to AIMunajjed (2009), the Saudi government has been investing great deal of time and energy in improving the educational system and encourages women enrollment in its schools and universities. She asserts that the education sector is one of the fields where women have witnessed great progress. There is no doubt that the percentage of women receiving education has increased since the 1960s. In fact, social restrictions on women are enabling them to stay in school longer than men and receive higher education (Cordesman, 2003).

2. Single-gendered Education

Single-gender education does not exist only in Islamic societies. It has been applied in the United States and Europe by having single-gender schools. In some schools they apply it in certain core courses which are called parallel education. According to that, there have been studies conducted to



analyze with single-gender schools produce better educational out comes, but each has its advocates and critics. One of the most revealing researches on single-gender versus co-education is Single-Sex Versus Coeducational Schooling: A Systematic Review. This study was conducted in 2005 under the commission of federal Department of Education. The study concluded that there is not enough evidence to suggest single-gender education is better than coeducation.

On the other hand, Dr. Rosemary Salomone (2006) examined the research surrounding single-gender education and concluded saying that “one of the key arguments supporting single-sex programs is that they created an institutional and classroom climate in which female students can express themselves freely and frequently.” Another study from UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies claims that students can discuss issues with their teachers/professors and spend more time on them without making the other gender feeling awkward. Besides, it is also thought that issues, related to classroom management and discipline, diminish in a single-sex classroom. However, the study covered only the effectiveness of single-gender classrooms in high schools without including higher education.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in Middle East that separate men and women in higher education. In subjects where they need a male professor, they use videoconferencing. Each one of these classrooms is attended by the male professor and his male students. A fixed remote-controlled video camera is provided as well as a receive-only telephone line. Through my four years study and Riyadh University, I had to have at least two video conferencing classes each semester. Using this method there was no group discussion possible and was hard for me to see the blackboard on the television screen. Moreover, it is still restricted for women in Saudi Arabia to take some subjects such as engineering, journalism and architecture. In other words, the single-gender education imposes limitations on women in Saudi Arabia. Baki (2004) argued that single-gender education has a negative impact on Saudi economic development as it failed to prepare Saudi women for international markets. She also suggested that “the education system needs to be re-evaluated. Preserving society and culture is important, but the extent of preservation needs to be revisited in order for education to prepare both men and women for life in the global economy.”

I align myself with Baki and strongly believe that gender separation in classroom has more disadvantages than advantages. Gender separation is really a big issue in Saudi Arabia. The problem here is not the Islamic regulations and laws that foster this type of segregation, the issue is the overlapping of Arab ancient traditions and customs with the Islamic religion. As stated by Hamdan (2005), “Women’s issues in Saudi society are often mistakenly connected to Islamic teachings.” (p. 45).

3. Limitation of Women’s access to job market

In fact, the first issue which is single-gender education has led to another issue in Saudi women education. The Saudi Education system plays a significant role in limiting women’s access to job market. Women’s entry into certain field is still restricted in specific fields of discipline. Women cannot study engineering, journalism, and architecture. Law is recently offered with the opening of Sultan University which is a private institution. Other than that, it is still restricted for women in Saudi Arabia to specialize in engineering, journalism, architecture, aviation, etc. In other words, the single-gender education imposes limitations on women in Saudi Arabia. Cordsman (2003) asserts that “according to available data, women are being trained by and large for teaching and clerical jobs and this is limiting their access to the labor market,” (p. 23). However, many families sent their children to private interior schools in London and Washington DC for formal schooling and intensive language programs. Moreover, upper class families sent their daughters to study abroad. Recently, those families still send their daughters to study abroad when they are excluded from studying certain fields like journalism, aviation and engineering. Money of those female graduate fail to find the opportunity to apply what they have learned in labor market since the jobs related to engineering and aviation is still preserved for men. The main jobs available are still of teaching and nursing in addition to medicine, computer programming, and public administration.

...these occupations are an extension of women's domestic roles, and utilize the stereotypical women's qualities of caring, nurturing, and service to others. They are also deemed culturally and religiously appropriate because they help maintain gender segregation through women's work with other women in segregated work environments.

(Sabbagh, 1996).



This leads to another essential problem. Education limits women accessibility to certain job markets. It also produced the idea of men dominance over woman in certain job fields. This does not only fail in preparing women to be active participant in public life but also fail in preparing male students to accept the idea of the significance of the female role in public life, in global market, and even in education. It negatively affects the role imposed on male and female professors.

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