

## The Impact of Gender on Teacher's Feedback in Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL Classroom Discourse

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the teachers' feedback with their students from the point of view of gender and to see whether teacher's feedback is affected by the gender of students. The participants of this study were 120 upper-intermediate (60 female and 60 male) and 12 teachers in EFL conversation classes in different language institutes in Isfahan. Classes were either single-gendered or mixed gendered. In order to conduct this research and answer the research questions, 12 classes were observed and coding procedures to clarify the types of the feedback were employed by the researchers. In addition, patterns of interactions were investigated according to teachers' question types and corrective feedbacks. The results of the study showed that explicit feedback covering a wider range of feedback than implicit ones. Moreover, it was noted that in mixed classes, more feedbacks (both implicit and explicit) were employed. The findings could provide guidance for teachers in the language institutes for employ a fair amount of all the categories included in categorizations of question types, responses and feedbacks.

**Keywords:** gender, classroom discourse, EFL classrooms, types of questions, corrective feedback

### INTRODUCTION

A very fundamental categorization distinguished and abided by in all human societies is gender. Much earlier than any other categorization, it emerges in human life as a source of determining individual as well as social identity. Subsequently, language joins on the scene with clear distinctions of use across genders (see for example Kaplan, 1999). Gender permeates our everyday life and it affects our perceptions of others (Chavez, 2001) the concept is not only related to the biological sex but most of the time it largely deals with its underlying social and cultural meanings (Romaine, 1999; Pavlenko & Norton, 2004; Sunderland, 2006).

Being a social and learner variable, gender is considered to be one of the significant factors that may affect every aspect of the second language acquisition process (Dornyei, 2005). According to a famous second language learning researcher, Dornyei (2005), gender warrants a book size summary though to date, there is still no such volume for the issue. More currently, Litosseliti (2006) points out that education is one of the areas where gender is salient. The context is important since it encompasses “continuously developing social experiences” and “a huge range of gendered norms, practices, relations, representations and identities are (re)produced through institutions such as classrooms” (p.71). A year later, Decke-Cornill and Volkmann (2007) reiterate that gender studies should be considered as a link discipline of foreign/ second language education and that foreign/ second language education in turn can contribute to gender studies. However, in spite of the vast amount of studies that have centered on the various differences between the sexes including men’s and women’s conversational and interactional behavior research still seems to lack an extensive empirical analysis of how these differences are reflected in EFL classrooms. Given the fact that one can hardly deny the existing gender-specific distinctness in some areas, it is probably unnecessary to mention that dissimilarities are likely to appear in EFL education as well.

In addition to the issue of gender, it can be claimed that, one of the teacher’s major roles is to provide responses to learners’ produced utterances which “repair” or “call attention” to their errors (Brown 2007, p. 379). Teachers constantly evaluate and react to students’ utterances and errors when interacting with each other in the classroom. Teacher’s reaction and feedback to students is very influential in the students’ development and motivation as a language learner. When studying and analyzing classroom discourse, especially the teacher’s feedback to students’ responses, different approaches to discourse analysis have to be examined carefully. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) have been pioneers in discovering the secret of classroom discourse through a three part sequence (Initiation-Response-Feedback) that often occurs in classroom interaction. Therefore, this study contributes to the broad field of teacher’s feedback by examining the role of gender in the EFL classroom discourse.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Classroom discourse**

Initial effort in classroom discourse concentrated on the way in which the classroom teacher assists to create rules of communication in the classroom and how these rules of verbal interactions can constrict students’ ability to talk (Lemke, 1990). These verbal dynamics may assist as a fence to students in taking personal possession for the content, basically avoiding students from “producing the language by themselves” (Kelly & Bazerman, 2003, p. 446). Researchers have now and then concentrated on the idea that teachers often set themselves as authorities of acceptable classroom practices and scientific knowledge, while the study of classroom discourse has been developed through manipulating ‘students’ talk’ as well as teachers’ talk (Moje, 1997). The teacher’s role in simplifying influential classroom discourse in the classroom keeps on

being a main attention, particularly in the following subcategories: classroom interactions (i.e., level, complexity, and ecology) (Chin, 2007; Morge, 2005), classroom communication patterns (Burchinal et al., 2002), and teacher questioning (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

The three moves (or triadic) initiation- response- feedback (IRF) pattern in the literature on classroom discourse initially defined by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), is usually measured as the main unit of analysis. This pattern is completed of three cracks: linguistic interaction is initiated by teacher (totally guiding a question to a selected child), the student supplies an answer and the teacher answer back by a feedback. As a whole, IRF is a universal and main pattern and a vital characteristic of classroom talk by the revealed research on classroom interaction (Alexander, 2001; Liu, 2008; Lyle, 2008; Myhill, 2006; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Wilen, 2004). Furthermore, it is supposed as the chief indicator of the teacher-student interaction, since most communications in school occur through linguistic interactions started by the teachers (Hargreaves & Hislam, 2002; Wells & Arauz, 2006), with the teachers regulating the students' participation in the class activities through the management and control of linguistic exchanges (Burns & Myhill, 2004; Nystrand et al., 2003).

The analysis of classroom discourse must rely on methods which are able to capture its complexity. In specific, three features must be measured. First, the fragmentation made by an evaluation guided on solar triadic patterns should be prevented. Studying situations rather than classrooms, Berry (1981) progressed reasons for the extension of the interaction more than the triadic pattern. This is the case, for instance, of a three move pattern that participants do not consider satisfactory and they continue with other certain interactions. Moving this idea to classroom discourse, Wells (1996) claims that a larger unit, the interactive sequence, can allow for a better grasp of the meaning of teacher-pupil interaction. In his description, an arrangement involves a nuclear triadic discussion, initiating the interaction and one or more certain interactions, mediated as essential by the participants to accomplish the discourse started with the nuclear one. In this way, researchers preserve the triadic IRF pattern as the main unit of classroom discourse, also reflect if one pattern is meaningful in itself or if it activates an arrangement.

The second characteristic is related to the multiple voices for distribution of classroom discourse. A severe investigation of interactive arrangements permits researchers to conquer the concentration on the two-way interaction, which is usual of a single triadic pattern, between the teacher who declares the question and the student who responds. The concentration on a dyad in classrooms is in fact completely fake (Molinari & Mameli, 2011). In these situations, talk is very energetic and students speak concurrently; even if the teacher chooses the student who is named upon to respond, the others can think on the question and step in. Eventually, the relational and emotional meanings (Skidmore, 2006) transferred by the third turn need to be evaluated. What the teachers mention as well as how they say it concur in disqualifying or qualifying the content of the student's answer and the speaker him/herself.

Evaluating both spoken and non-spoken pointers (as well as facial expressions or voice intonation) of talk is a way of catching the relational meanings of language.

### **Classroom discourse and the role of questioning and feedback**

Verbal teacher-student and peer interactions are major means to construct meaning (Mercer, 2010; Oliveira, 2010; Webb, 2009). Interaction quality and language use have significant consequences for students' learning processes and results (Lipowsky et al., 2007), learning motivation, active engagement and interest (Sierens et al., 2009). Anthony and Walshaw (2008) distinguished two main teaching tactics in creative classroom discourse: responsibilities between the teacher and students and clarifying discourse participation rights, where the purpose is involving students in classroom discussion and supporting students' opinions, e.g. through giving separate feedback in a creative way to move thinking forward. A large number of studies on science inquiry and mathematical argumentation claim the importance of these activities in creating productive classroom discourse (Furtak et al., 2012; Kovolainen & Kumpulainen, 2005). The two activities can mainly be conceptualized by productive designs of teacher questioning and meaningful feedback (Jurik et al., 2014).

**Teacher questioning:** teacher questioning is a potentially essential subcomponent to attain influential classroom discourse. Therefore, teacher questioning in investigating settings frequently varies in function and form in comparison with questioning in non-inquiry environments (Roth 1996; Gallas 1995). Teacher questioning in inquiry settings unlikely pursues encouraging students to elaborate on their ideas and provoking students thought (Lemke 1990).

**Teacher feedback:** Teacher feedback is considered substantial for learning and inspiration. Also, it informs students on the correctness ('yes', 'right') of a response, mainly when it includes information about what characteristics of the response are correct or incorrect and how any mistakes can be mended or normally maintain the learning process.

### **Corrective feedback**

Corrective feedback has lately been within the framework of studies of other L2 education and ESL contexts, as many researchers have observed particularly into its role and nature in L2 learning and teaching (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Havranek, 1999; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ohta, 2000; Oliver, 2000). A great section of this research has been inspired through the theoretical claim that a massive amount of L2 learning occurs by exposing in comprehensible input, learners may need negative evidence (i.e., information about ungrammaticality), in the pattern of feedback on error and explicit instruction, when they are not able to determine only by exposing how their interlanguage varies from the L2 (e.g., Bley-Vroman, 1986; Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985, 1988; White, 1987). While corrective feedback is salient enough to allow learners to notice the gap between their target language forms and interlanguage forms (Schmidt & Frota, 1986), the subsequent cognitive contrast may activate an unrest and

rearrangement of the target language grammar (Ellis, 1994; Gass, 1997). An additional result of corrective feedback may improve learners' metalinguistic consciousness (Swain, 1995).

### ***Corrective feedback in SLA***

The efficiency of corrective feedback is chiefly attributable to the negative evidence it involves. Based on Gass (1997), language learners have contact with two sorts of input: negative evidence and positive evidence. Negative evidence offers the learner the information about erroneousness of an L2 statement or form and is often understood by the delivery of corrective feedback to answer the learner's non target like L2 production. Positive evidence in contrast notifies the learner of what is adequate in the target language and covers "the set of well-formed utterances to which learners are encountered" (p. 36). The difference between the two sorts of input foster the question if both sorts of evidence are essential or whether encountering with positive evidence is the only essential situation for L2 learning.

A list of researchers (Krashen, 1981; Schwartz, 1993; Truscott, 2007) claimed that, SLA is only related to positive evidence and negative evidence is not essential and may even be hurtful as well as first language (L1) acquisition. So, any effort to attract the learner's attention to linguistic form should be refused. Maximizing the learner's exposure to positive evidence is the merely task confronting L2 educators.

### **Gender and language learning**

The two competing theories are mainly supposed with regard to the identification of female and male behavior and abilities within educational contexts (Swann 1992). Whereas some researchers see the origins of boys' and girls' unlike language learning behavior and abilities as exclusively biologically determined (and therefore innate), others totally neglect this "natural" explanation and instead ascribe their existence as having emerged from society and culture. Though, not all researchers and scientists behave the matter based on these white and black classifications, but a view that guarantees both socio-cultural and biological factors is considered by their relationship. The models of all three theories have been presented in the following discussion.

Representatives of the first theory attribute the separation between boys' and girls' learning capacities and behaviors to specific embedded biological varieties (Swann, 1992, p. 5). Following biological features that are regularly in terms of varieties concerned with both ensured features of language behavior and boys' and girls' distinct cognitive capacities, it has been proposed that whereas girls are said to have more 'spoken ability', boys are supposed to own more 'spatial ability'. These changes are concerned with definite cognitive capacities which usually clarified through stating the "natural" foundation of women and men, though these clarifications tend to be rather unpredictable.

Assuming such a natural deterministic view, changes between girls' and boys' language and learning capacities and behavior are recognized as purely innate. This obligation to

change may be encountered with certain problems within educational situations, particularly when teachers attempt to bring more gender equality and balance into their classrooms. In this regard, teachers who tend to present equal occasions might be confronted with declarations about boys and girls that propose a biological clarification of change, like the opinion that changes are 'only natural'. It is possible to attribute boys' "under-attainment" to several issues, like an anti-academic "male culture", but also to certain structures of the English curriculum. One of such structures can be that English is understood as a girls' issue. Another might be that English is inactive while boys prefer further dynamic contribution and boys have restricted patience of vagueness, they want further well-defined tasks.

Based on Swann (2005, p. 235), literature on the topic of under attainment sounds to have completely removed its concentration from females to males. Researchers seem to agree upon the fact that more examinations are required for the sake of providing further profound analyses of "female and male attainment rates, including factors like classroom interaction patterns, social class, school environments and language competences, and different kinds of evaluations" (Lynch, 2000).

### **Studies on the role of gender on teacher's feedback**

Female and male students were dissimilar from each other concerning their forms of connections with their teachers. For instance, Meece (1987) has specified that boys contribute more to classroom interaction than girls in most of the studies. Male students answer and ignite conversation with their teachers more than female students so it has been really claimed that teachers may interact more with male students (Meece, 1987). On the other hand, teachers are the reason of making interaction more with male students rather than female students and this is because male students interact more in the classroom (Duffy et al., 2002). The boys were more probable to interact with their teachers in Iranian context as Rashidi and Rafiee Rad (2010) perceived. Male students, however, tended to be volunteered to answer the questions, even if they do not know the right answer.

A research by Hall (1982) on the gender-directed behavior of university teachers stated that although university teachers generally wish to treat male and female students equitably, some may treat their male students differently. College teachers have been found to ask male students, instead of female students, higher-order questions demanding critical thought (Sadker & Sadker, 1992). It was also reported that these teachers made eye contacts less regularly with females than with males (Thorne, 1979) and that they permit their classrooms to be male-centered through calling on males more regularly (Thorne, 1979). Moreover, it was claimed that teachers permit males to cut females (Hall, 1982), and respond to females diffidently (Hall, 1982). Teachers of both sexes also regularly give female students less interaction time than male students (Sadker & Sadker, 1992), and ignite less interaction with female students than with male students. Hall (1982) also stated that the university classroom environment could regularly be unwelcoming to women, lead to the daily discriminations carried into these classrooms. In the same vein, she illustrated that female and male postsecondary

students obtain dissimilar levels of informal feedback, admiration and encouragement for their attempts. In a complete review, Howe (1997) studied the role of gender in classroom interaction in four dissimilar classifications: desk-based group work, whole-class discussions, discussion for oral assessment and group work around computers. The total class interaction is the only section of this framework which sounds relevant to the emphasis on the present study. The only alteration sets in the attendance of laboratory equipment that is the average of interaction in language laboratories.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The present study attempts to answer the following question:

- What types of feedback dominate the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL classroom discourse when the teacher and students belong to the same/different gender?

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants of this study were Iranian EFL learners who were learning English in language institutes in Isfahan and 12 teachers (6 male and 6 female). Their age ranged from 15 to 32 at upper-intermediate level, 60 male and 60 female. In order to have a more homogeneous sample, participants were chosen from a group of 340 students after taking OPT (Oxford Placement Test). Table 1 shows the number of the participants based on gender and level of the students.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Participants

Group	Number	Gender
1. (Male Teacher)/ (Male Students)	(4)/(40)	(4 Male Teacher)/(40 Male Students)
2.(Female Teacher)/ (Female Students)	(4)/(40)	(4 Female Teacher)/(40 Female Students)
3.(Male Teacher)/(Mixed Gender)	(2)/(20)	(2 Male Teacher)/(10 Female Students and 10 Male Students)
4.(Female Teacher)/(Mixed Gender)	(2)/(20)	(2 Female Teacher)/(10 Female Students and 10 Male Students)

## Instruments

### *Oxford quick placement test*

One of the instruments in this study was a 60-item Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) used to measure proficiency level of the participants to have a homogeneous sample. OPQT is among the most common and standardized proficiency tests worldwide and the researcher does not doubt its reliability and validity. At the beginning of the study, 340 learners participated on OPQT and the scores were announced in percentage. After

calculating the mean scores, 120 students were selected as the sample of the study (60 female and 60 male).

### ***Sonmez's categorization***

Regarding the question types and responses made by the teachers in the present study, the categorization made by Sonmez (2002) was used. Here the referential and display questions have been accounted.

### **Procedure**

This study was conducted among Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners learning English at Isfahan English language institutes. At first, in order to select and place the participants in the right course, the oxford quick placement test was administered. This way, the participants of the study were selected. The process of data collection included the observation of classes and video-recording the classroom conversations in which the researcher was present as a non-participant observer during data collection process. Then the collected data were transcribed and coded to address the research question, the data underwent another coding procedure to clarify the types of the feedback employed by the teacher.

## **RESULTS**

### **Patterns of teachers' questions and responses**

Regarding the question types and responses made by the teachers in the present study, the categorization made by Sonmez (2002) was used. Here the referential and display questions have been accounted. Table 2 shows the frequency of these questions in both single gender and mixed classes.

**Table 2.** Frequencies of display and referential questions

	F teachers In S class	M teachers in S class	F teacher in Mixed class	M teacher in Mixed classes	Total
Display questions	123 (13%)	137 (14%)	264 (28%)	426 (45%)	950 (100%)
Referential questions	42 (15.5%)	52 (19%)	93 (34%)	83 (31.5%)	270 (100%)

As it is evident in Table 2, in general, teachers used more display questions than referential questions in all the observations. Regarding display questions what is noteworthy is higher frequency of display questions (73%) in mixed classes than those in single-gender classes (27%). Moreover, it should be noted that distribution of referential questions did not seem to be significant in all the classes.

As responses lied within the categories of 'positive responses', 'negative responses' and 'temporization' the distribution of them are illustrated in the Table 3.



**Table 3.** Distribution of responses in mixed classes

	<b>F teacher in Mixed class</b>		<b>M teacher in Mixed classes</b>
Positive responses	Addressing males	242 (73.3%)	125 (30%)
	Addressing females	88 (26.6%)	295 (70%)
Total		330 (100%)	420 (100%)
Negative responses	Addressing males	58 (53%)	62 (63%)
	Addressing females	52 (47%)	36 (37%)
Total		110 (100%)	98 (100%)
Temporization	Addressing males	35 (58.3%)	26 (40%)
	Addressing males	25 (41.7%)	40 (60%)
Total		60 (100%)	66 (100%)

With regard to distribution of responses in mixed classes, it can be seen that only regarding positive responses, significant difference can be seen. In this sense, it is evident that female teachers employed a higher frequency of positive responses for male students (73.3%) and male teachers employed more frequent positive responses for female students (70%). In other categories of responses, the frequencies were almost similar.

### Teachers' feedback

After coding all the feedbacks, the feedbacks were categorized into 'implicit' and 'explicit' feedbacks. Also, the frequency of written feedback was so low that it was easily concluded that all the feedbacks were oral ones. Following table (Table 4) shows frequency of teachers' feedback for all four types of classes.

**Table 4.** Distribution of teachers' feedback

	<b>F teachers In S class</b>	<b>M teachers in S class</b>	<b>F teacher in Mixed class</b>	<b>M teacher in Mixed classes</b>	<b>Total</b>
Implicit feedback	22 (14.7%)	17 (11.4%)	49 (32.8%)	61 (40.9%)	149
Explicit feedback	56 (21.5)	37 (14.2%)	98 (37.6%)	69 (26.5%)	260

As the table shows, feedback used by the participant teachers were only oral ones. Also, it was noted that implicit and explicit feedbacks dominated the classroom, with explicit feedback covering a wider range of feedback than implicit ones. Moreover, it was noted that in mixed classes, more feedbacks (both implicit and explicit) were employed.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Regarding teachers' questions, teachers used more display questions than referential questions in all the observations. Regarding display questions what is noteworthy is higher frequency of display questions in mixed classes than those in single-gender classes. Moreover, it should be noted that distribution of referential questions did not seem to be significant in all the classes.

Findings of Farahian and Rezaee (2010) agree with the findings of the present study. Observing great number of display questions used by the teacher, they claim that inexperienced teachers tend to ask more closed/display questions. Moreover, they see it likely that, since the teacher in the study does not have a satisfactory of second language, they prefer to ask close questions since they either cannot produce suitable questions or are not able to provide full answers to the questions if learners redirected the questions to them.

In the same line, seeking to find ways to overcome students' reticence and lack of production of lower level language learners, Ozcan (2010) recommends more use of questions that require students' opinions and comments (referential question) rather than solely answering questions to display their comprehension (display question). In line with these findings, Al-farsi (2006) also concluded that teachers, both individually and overall, asked questions mainly to check learners' knowledge. While, he states that regarding functions of questioning, evaluating learning is the most important one. But, what is seen in the present study and Al-farsi's proposed that teachers have not paid fair amounts of attention to all types of question and learners' knowledge has been emphasized the most.

Unlike all these varieties among male and female teachers' manners in the classroom, Doray (2005), Rafiee Rad and Rashidi (2010), in their studies of classroom interaction in Iran and Australia, showed that female and male teachers had several conditions in common in terms of their designs of classroom discourse, maintaining the idea that the opportunity of discourse condition was dependent initially on the context and the role of mutual interaction.

Participants of the study did not use a wide range of corrective feedback in their classrooms. This study classified feedbacks into 'implicit' and 'explicit' feedbacks. There was very little written feedback and so all the feedbacks were oral feedback in the present study. Also, it was revealed that in mixed classes more feedbacks were employed by the teachers. In the literature, a popular classification of corrective feedback is in terms of being implicit or explicit, too. In the case of implicit feedback, there is no overt indication that an error has been committed, whereas in explicit feedback types there is (Yang, 2008, as cited in Shomoossi, 2008). The analysis of data in the present study demonstrated that 63.5% of the corrective feedback used by teachers was explicit while only 36.5% was implicit. Implicit corrective feedback is covertly corrective (they do not directly reveal to learner that correction of error has

taken) whereas explicit feedback makes learners aware that the erroneous utterance is corrected by teacher (Ellis, 2008).

Ellis (2008) views implicit/explicit distinction as reflecting a continuum rather than a dichotomy since corrective feedback is partly implicit or explicit. Researchers have argued that the implicitness/explicitness of feedback can impact learners' perception as to whether it functions as a correction, thus influencing its effectiveness. For example, the corrective intentions of recasts are reported to be easily unnoticed by learners due to their implicitness (Lyster, 1998, as cited in Ding, 2011), in contrast, the corrective intention of explicit feedback types are often made more salient by overtly rejecting the erroneous utterance of learners.

Very similar results were obtained by Esmaeili and Behnam (2014) which reported higher frequency of explicit feedback than implicit ones. They concluded that explicit feedback was more effective than implicit feedback in promoting learner uptake. So, since the present study revealed that in mixed classes more explicit feedbacks were used. Again, it can be concluded that teachers' gender influenced the type of feedback and more productive classroom patterns. What is noteworthy is that teachers in Iranian EFL contexts provide students with an unequal amounts of some features in the classrooms. In the present study, these features included question types (they used not enough referential questions), unfair corrective feedbacks (they employed less implicit feedbacks) and responses (they gave far more positive responses than the other two types of response).

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