



Assessing Factors Hindering Females' Participation and the Practice of Teacher's Strategies in EFL Classrooms: The Case of Grade 11 Students in Gedeo Zone

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess factors hindering Grade 11 female students' participation and teachers' strategies in EFL classrooms. To achieve the objective, the researchers used a descriptive survey design and employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. There are around 46 grade 11 sections in the selected weredas, so the researchers selected 18 sections using a lottery system. Each section has an average of 42 students. Among these, 40% are females, and the researchers selected 176 female students using purposive sampling for this study. The researchers employed three data-gathering tools. These are semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires. The major findings indicated that female students did not freely participate like male students do in the EFL classroom unless they were called by their teacher; most female students were passive listeners. They didn't even ask questions for the briefing when the lesson wasn't clear to them. EFL teachers' teaching strategy did not invite female students to participate in the classroom discussion. According to the findings, EFL teachers should give male and female students equal opportunity in classroom discussions. They also need to create a conducive environment and gender-sensitive group formation since it builds female students' self-confidence.

1 Introduction

Active classroom participation is widely regarded as a central component of effective language learning. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners develop communicative competence not only through exposure to input but also through meaningful interaction and sustained engagement in classroom discourse. Learner-centered pedagogies, particularly communicative and task-based approaches, emphasize the importance of student involvement in dialogue, problem-solving, and collaborative tasks as mechanisms for language development (Diane Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Jack

C. Richards & Theodore S. Rodgers, 2001).

Within these frameworks, participation is viewed as an essential process through which learners practice linguistic forms, negotiate meaning, and build fluency.

Empirical studies have also highlighted the academic and psychological benefits of active engagement. For instance, Pamela A. Fassinger (1995) argues that classroom interaction is closely associated with students' confidence and sense of belonging, while Sharon Tatar (2005) emphasizes that verbal participation provides learners with oppor-

tunities to refine their communicative competence. Similarly, Jun Liu (2001) suggests that students who participate more frequently tend to demonstrate stronger academic performance in language courses.

These findings collectively indicate that classroom discourse functions not merely as a pedagogical technique but as a developmental tool for both linguistic and cognitive growth.

Despite the recognized importance of participation, classroom interaction is often unevenly distributed among students. Research across different educational contexts suggests that gender differences may shape patterns of verbal engagement, with female students sometimes participating less actively than their male peers (Mary A. Lundeberg, 1997; Christine Higgins, 2010). Factors such as fear of negative evaluation, limited self-confidence, sociocultural expectations, and teacher questioning practices have been identified as possible influences on female students' willingness to speak (Fassinger, 1995).

In the Ethiopian secondary school context, English serves both as a subject and as a medium of instruction in upper grades. Consequently, students' classroom participation in EFL lessons carries implications beyond language learning alone. Limited engagement may restrict opportunities for practice and weaken overall academic performance. Although prior studies in Ethiopia have examined challenges affecting female students' academic achievement (e.g., Yenenesh T., 2013; Gashahun W., 2019), less attention has been directed toward understanding participation patterns specifically within EFL classrooms.

Therefore, examining the factors that shape female students' participation, alongside teachers' instructional strategies, is critical for promoting inclusive and equitable language learning environments. Thus, the current research seeks to search out the factors that exert a crucial influence on female students' participation in EFL classrooms in four selected secondary schools in the Gedeo zone.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Interaction is widely acknowledged as a key mechanism in second and foreign language acquisition, as it allows learners to test hypotheses about language use, receive feedback, and develop communicative fluency (Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler, 2004). In EFL classrooms, where authentic exposure to English outside school is often limited, the classroom becomes the primary space for practicing the target language. However, the effectiveness of such practice depends largely on students' willingness to participate actively in instructional activities.

Research indicates that participation patterns are not always evenly distributed among learners. Female students have been reported to demonstrate lower levels of verbal engagement in some classroom contexts (Zhengdong Gan, 2012; Le Thi Mai, 2011). Communication apprehension, fear of making mistakes, and concern about peer evaluation may discourage active involvement in speaking tasks. According to Fassinger (1995), students' confidence levels and perceptions of classroom climate significantly influence their readiness to contribute. When the learning environment does not sufficiently support equitable participation, certain groups of students may remain silent despite having relevant ideas to share.

Teacher-related factors also play a substantial role in shaping classroom interaction. Instructional strategies, questioning techniques, feedback patterns, and group formation practices can either encourage or inhibit students' engagement. Oluwakemi E. Aina and Patricia A. Cameron (2011) argue that subtle forms of gender bias may influence how teachers allocate attention and opportunities during lessons. Similarly, Higgins (2010) notes that classroom discourse practices may unintentionally privilege more assertive students, thereby limiting equitable participation.

Within the Ethiopian context, English functions as a medium of instruction at the secondary school level, making active participation in EFL classrooms essential for academic success.

Previous Ethiopian studies have primarily focused on factors affecting female students' academic achievement at a broader level (Yenenesh T., 2013; Gashahun W., 2019). However, relatively limited empirical evidence exists regarding how instructional practices and learner-related factors specifically influence female students' participation in EFL classrooms, particularly in the Gedeo Zone.

Professional observations suggest that many Grade 11 female students tend to participate only when directly called upon, rarely volunteering in open discussions or group activities. Nevertheless, these observations have not been systematically investigated through structured research. Without empirical examination, it remains unclear whether limited participation is primarily driven by learner characteristics, teacher strategies, classroom climate, or a combination of these factors.

Accordingly, there is a need for focused research that examines both the factors hindering female students' participation and the instructional strategies employed by EFL teachers. Such investigation is essential for informing gender-responsive pedagogical interventions and promoting equitable language learning opportunities.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This research is designed to assess factors hindering females' participation and teachers' strategies in EFL classrooms, in the case of grade 11 students in the Gedeo Zone. Specifically to:

- identify the causes that hinder female students' participation in EFL classes
- assess whether EFL teachers' strategies affect female students' classroom participation
- suggest possible solutions to alleviate the problems identified

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

The objective of this study was to assess factors that affect female students' participation and strategies used by teachers in EFL classrooms in secondary

schools. The researchers used a descriptive survey design and employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative research method primarily addressed data gathered through interviews and observations. Whereas the quantitative research method treated the data obtained through the questionnaires administered to female students.

2.2 The Research Setting

The study was conducted in four government secondary schools in urban areas of Ethiopia's Gedeo Zone, SNNPRS. The subjects of this research were grade 11 English teachers and grade 11 female students from the four secondary schools. Two English classes in each school were selected randomly in each high school for classroom lesson-observation purposes.

2.3 The Population and Sample of the Study

The target population for this study was secondary school English teachers and grade 11 students. The researchers attempted to survey four weredas in Gedeo zone, including Bule, Yirgachefe, Wonago, and Dilla secondary schools. The researchers selected one secondary school from each area using simple random sampling. There were around 46 grade 11 sections in the selected weredas, so the researchers selected 18 sections using a lottery system. Each section had an average of 42 students. Among these, 40% were females, and the researchers selected 176 female students using purposive sampling for this study. In addition to the classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, eight EFL teachers were randomly selected through a simple random sampling method.

2.4 Data Gathering Tools

The researchers employed three data gathering tools. These were semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data from the interviews was transcribed, and the observation data was coded and analyzed using the qualitative method. The data gathered from the questionnaire, on the other hand, was analyzed using frequency and percentage.

2.6 Considerations for Ethical Issues

The process of conducting the study must be ethically sound, as it is based on the participants’ free will and motivation. Every effort was made to keep the status of all participants and institutions and the participants’ beliefs, opinions, and values unharmed. During data collection, the autonomy and equity of the participants were well ensured. To that end, the researchers first stated the purpose of the study. The researchers attempted to pay the utmost attention to maintaining the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of the responses. Being aware

of cultural sensitivity, the research team tried to confirm the intended leadership. For classroom observation and conducting interviews, prior permissions were obtained from school directors, head teachers, and the classroom teachers.

3 Results and Discussions

3.1 Questionnaire Result on female students’ participation

The result of the data indicates that majority of female students did not express their idea freely in the English language classroom.

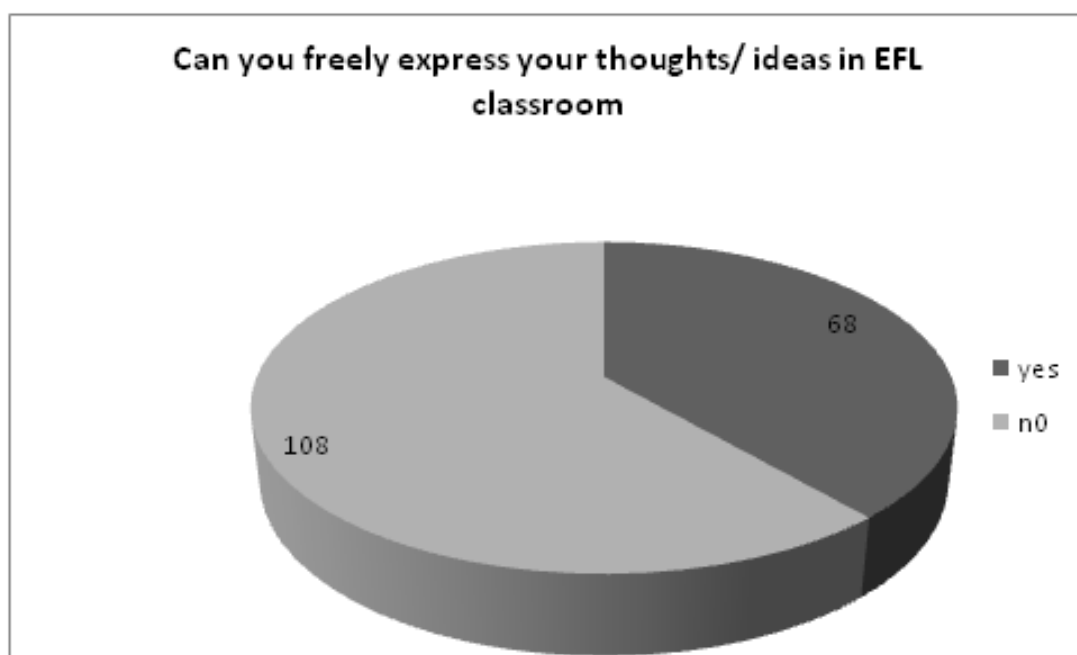


Figure 1: Students’ response whether they freely express their thoughts/ ideas in EFL classes

The data in figure 2 has shown that most female students feel afraid to ask for clarification when the lesson is not clear to them. Fassinger (1995) and Gomez *et al.* (1995) asserted that female students’ fear of failing to demonstrate their intelligence in the classroom, low levels of self-confidence and feelings of confusion will cause them to become passive, and thus less engaged in classroom discussions.

The data in figure 3 shows that there is gender-specific bias in different ways in the EFL classroom. gender-related bias can subtly operate within classroom settings, and educators may not always be consciously aware of its presence (Lundeberg, 1997). Most teachers focus on boys students more frequently than girls’ students. This decreases the participation of female students in classroom discussions (Higgins, 2010).

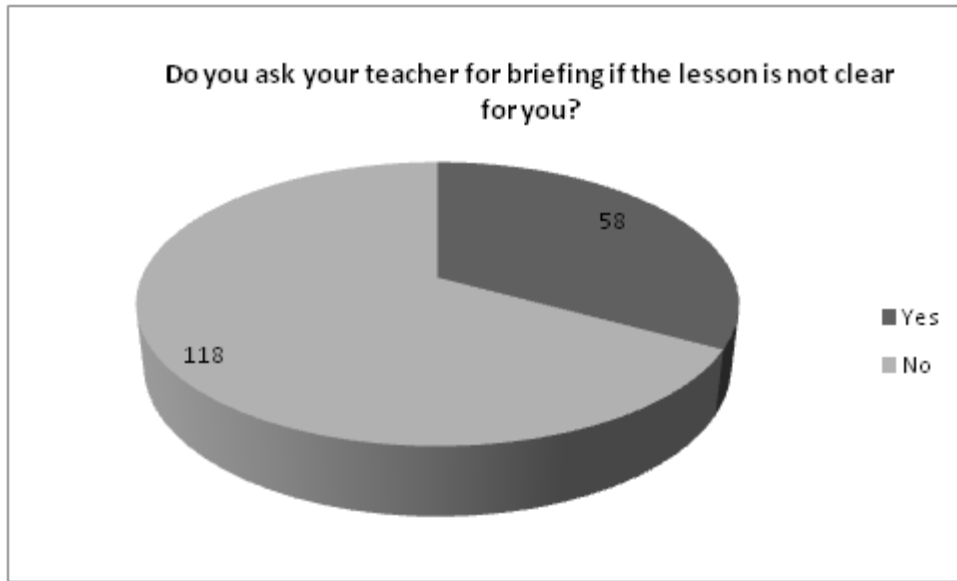


Figure 2: Students’ response on whether they ask for briefing when the lesson is not clear for them

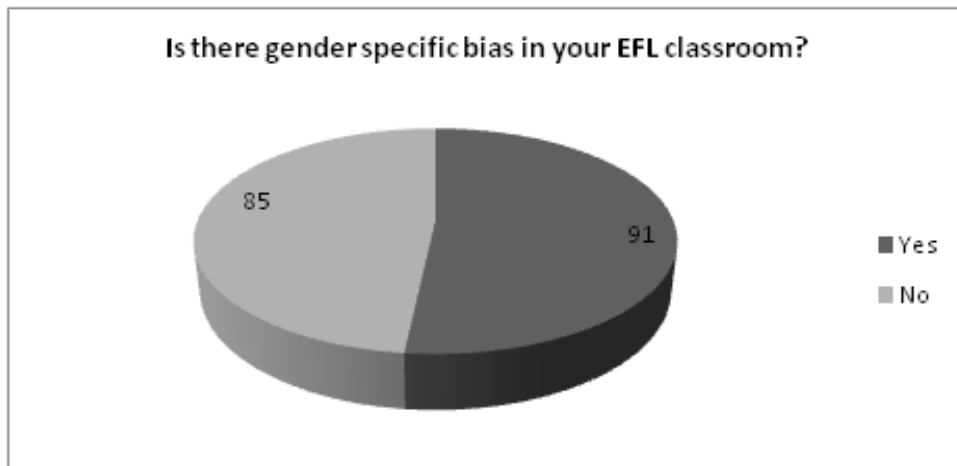


Figure 3: Whether there is gender specific bias in EFL classroom

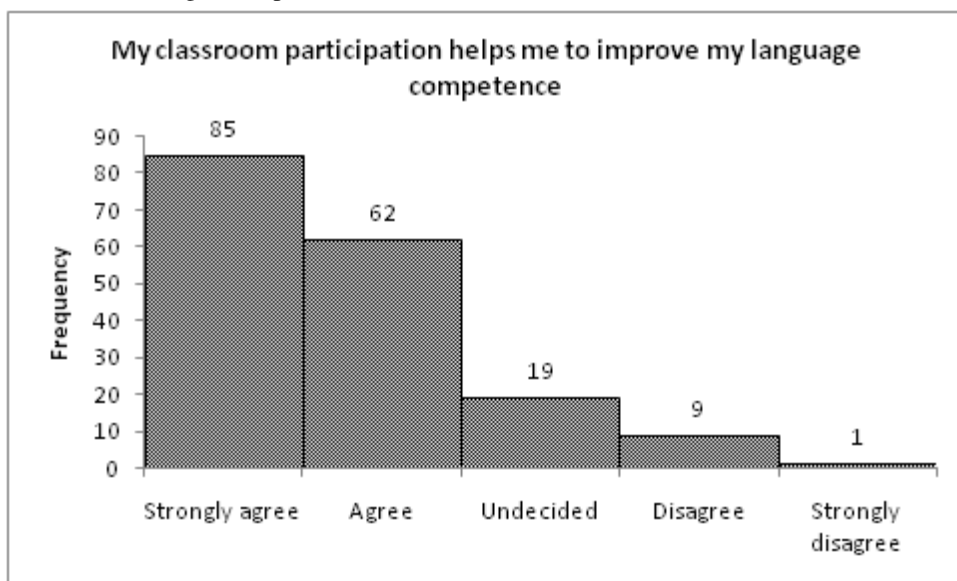


Figure 4: The advantage of Classroom participation in EFL class

Figure 4 indicates that a great number of the respondents believe that their classroom participation will help them to improve their language competence. Concerning this, Ewens (2000) suggested that classroom participation promotes a higher level

of reflective thinking and problem solving, including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and that information learned through discussion is generally retained better than information learned through lecture.

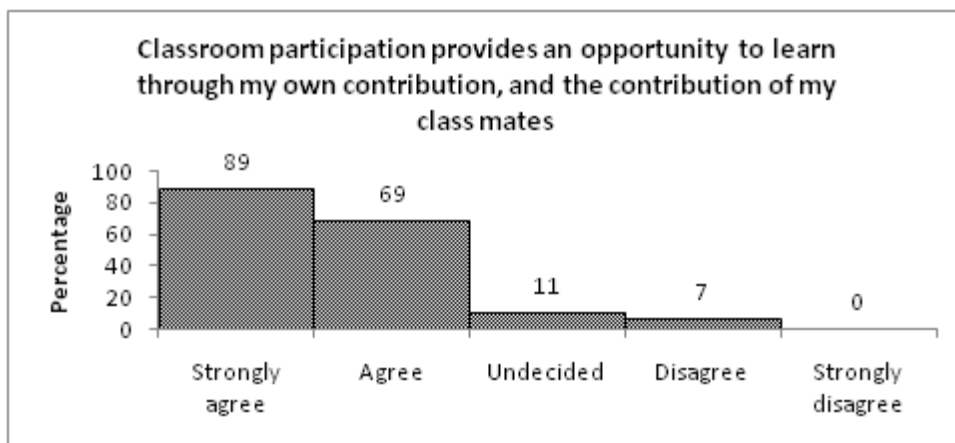


Figure 5: Students response on how they learn from their own classmate participation

Figure 5 indicates that most female students strongly believe that their classroom participation will help them to learn from their own contributions and the contributions of their classmates. Mustafa *et al.*

(2010) claim that students who actively participate in the classroom are expected to get better results. Thus, poor participation may affect female students’ academic achievement.

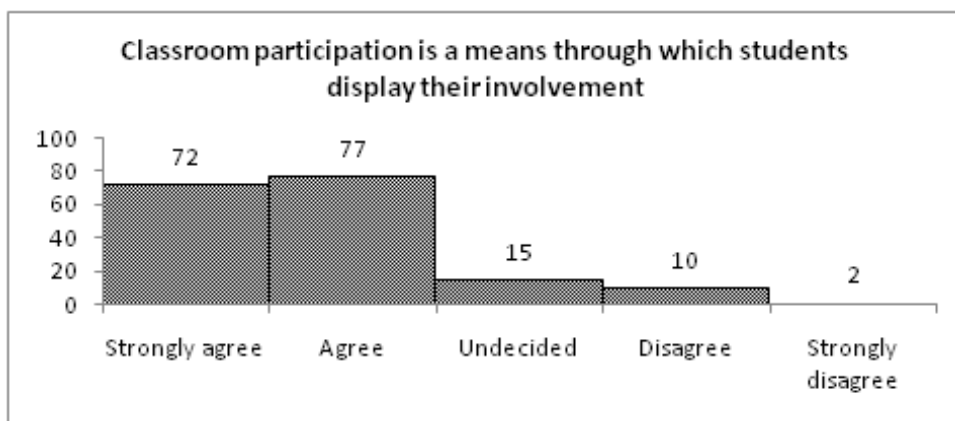


Figure 6: Female students’ involvement in Classroom participation

The majority of female students, as shown in figure 6, concurred that participating in class activities demonstrates their interest in EFL lessons.

in class. Today’s kids face significant gender discrimination in the classroom, and numerous studies have demonstrated that professors treat male and female pupils differently (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Garrahy, 2001; Higgins, 2010; Tindall & Hamil, 2004).

Figure 7 shows that many female students felt that their experiences with various forms of gender bias at school have an impact on how they participate

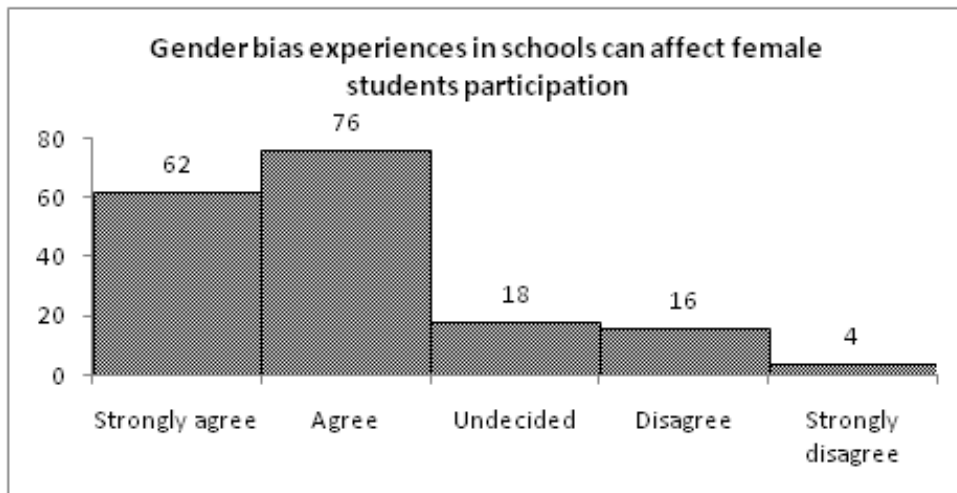


Figure 7: Gender bias experiences in the school

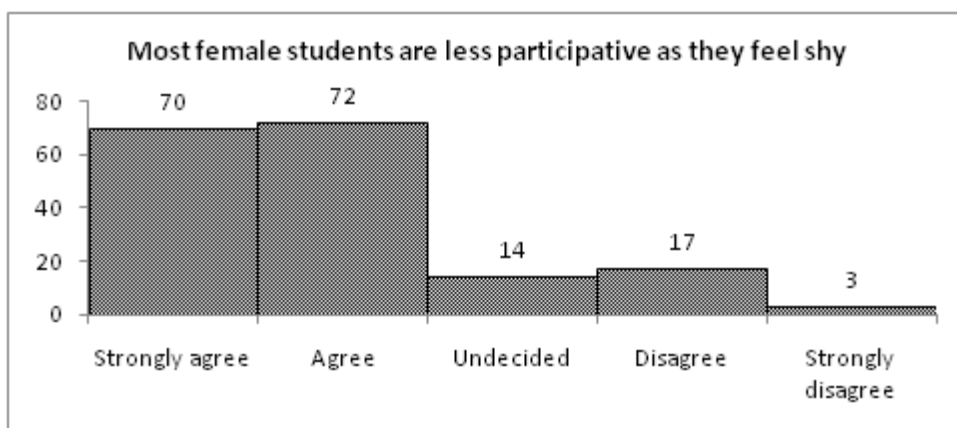


Figure 8: Shyness makes students less participative in EFL classes

Figure 8 indicates that shyness is one of the factors that make female students less participative in the EFL classroom. According to Fassinger (1995) and Howard *et al.* (2002), most female students are less

participative simply because they are afraid of other students, their teacher, or they are embarrassed to stand in front of their colleagues.

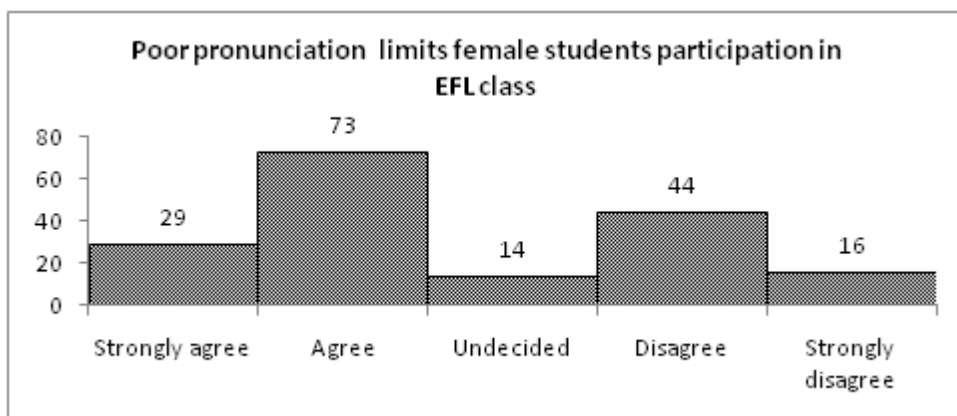


Figure 9: Poor pronunciation of words limits female students' classroom Participation

Figure 9 has shown that inaccurate or poor pronunciation of words is one of the factors that limits female students' classroom participation in EFL class. Performance anxiety and mispronunciation of words make female students feel embarrassed and make them less active participants in EFL classes.

3.2 Result of the questionnaire on EFL teacher's strategies

Table 1: Teachers teaching strategies in EFL classroom

Key: (SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, U= Undecided, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree, N = number, F= frequency)

No.	Items	Frequency and Percentage						
		F/N	SA	A	U	D	SD	TOTAL
1	Teacher's poor teaching strategies affect female students' classroom participation.	N	49	54	22	39	12	176
		%	28	31	13	22	7	100%
2	Girls are more likely to sit quietly unless they are called on by their teacher to respond questions.	N	63	86	9	11	7	176
		%	36	49	5	6	4	100%
3	EFL teachers only choose volunteers to answer questions; they did not give females the opportunity to participate.	N	70	60	11	23	12	176
		%	40	34	6	13	7	100%
4	Our English teacher creates conducive environment to help female students to participate freely in the classroom.	N	26	40	9	80	21	176
		%	15	23	5	45	12	100%
5	Our English teacher encourages me to participate in classroom discussion.	N	38	45	6	73	14	176
		%	22	26	3	41	8	100%
6	Our English teacher makes the lesson fun and interesting to enhance our classroom participation.	N	11	23	7	97	38	176
		%	6	13	4	55	22	100%
7	Our English teacher gives credit for our participation, so I motivated to participate.	N	13	19	1	91	52	176
		%	7	11	1	52	30	100%

The data in the above table indicates how EFL teachers' teaching strategies affect female students' classroom participation.

In item one, 54 (31% of the respondents) agreed that EFL teachers' poor teaching strategies affect their classroom participation. Similarly, 49 (28%) of the respondents strongly agreed that EFL teachers' poor teaching strategies affect their classroom participation. From this data, we can see how teachers' strategies affect female students' classroom participation.

Concerning item two, 63 (36% of the respondents) strongly agreed and 86 (49% of the respondents) agreed that girls are more likely to sit quietly unless they are called on by their teacher to respond to questions. On the other hand, 7 (4% of the respondents) strongly disagree, and 11 (6%) of them disagree that girls are more likely to sit quietly unless they are called on by their teacher to respond to

questions in an EFL classroom. From this data, we can see that a great number of female students sit quietly unless they are pushed by their EFL teacher to participate in the classroom.

According to item three, 70 (40%) of the respondents strongly agree and 60 (34%) of them agreed that their EFL Teachers tend to rely exclusively on volunteers when posing questions, which limits female students' chances to engage. Whereas 12 (7%) of the respondents strongly disagree and 23 (13%) of them disagreed that their EFL Teachers often depend solely on volunteers when asking questions, which limits female students' opportunities to contribute. From this data we can say that EFL teachers did not give equal opportunity for female students to express their ideas on the lessons.

In item four, 26 (15%) of the respondents strongly agree, and 40 (23%) of them agree that their En-

English teacher creates a conducive environment to help female students participate freely in the classroom. Contrastingly, 21 (12%) of the respondents strongly disagreed, and 80 (45%) of the respondents disagreed that their English teacher creates a conducive environment to help female students participate freely in the classroom. However, nine (5%) of those polled selected the option "undecided". From the data, we can see that a great number of respondents said that their EFL teacher did not create conducive environments that helped their female students participate freely in the EFL classroom.

Item five shows that 38 (22% of the respondents) strongly agreed and 45 (26% of them) agreed. 73 (41% of them) disagreed, and 14 (8%) strongly disagreed, that their English teacher encourages them to participate in classroom discussions. On the other hand, 6 (or 3% of them) said they were undecided. From this data, we can see that almost half of the respondents disclosed that their EFL teacher didn't encourage them in the classroom discussion.

When we come to item six, 11 (6%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 23 (13%) agreed. On the contrary, 97 (55%) of the respondents disagreed, and 38 (22%) of them strongly disagreed that their English teacher makes the lesson fun and interesting to enhance their classroom participation. Whereas seven (4%) of the respondents responded that their English teacher makes the lesson fun and interesting to enhance their classroom participation. From this data, we can say that EFL teachers didn't make the lesson fun and interesting enough to increase the students' classroom participation.

According to item 7, 13 (7%) of the respondents strongly agreed, and 19 (11%) of them agreed. In contrast, 91 (52%) of respondents disagreed, and 52 (30%) strongly disagreed that their English teacher rewards their participation, so they were motivated to participate. From this data, we can say that English teachers at this grade level didn't give credit for their students' participation, so their students were not motivated to participate in the classroom discussion.

3.3 Interview Data Analysis

The researchers selected eight EFL teachers to be participants in the semi-structured interview. After analyzing the data gathered from the interview, the researchers divided according to the following themes:

- **Female students participate as well as male students in the classroom discussion**

Almost all eight EFL teachers that were selected for the interview confirmed that female students didn't participate as well as male students in the classroom discussion.

- **Female students' interest in participating in classroom discussion**

The majority of the respondents said that female students are not interested in participating in the classroom discussion in an EFL classroom. Three respondents stated that few female students are interested in classroom discussions and participate in them.

- **Classroom participation and academic achievement of female students in an EFL class**

Almost all of the respondents confirmed that the majority of their female students have less academic achievement in the English language compared with their male classmates. The respondents added that students who actively participated in EFL classrooms had good academic achievement. They believe that female students' poor academic performance is due to their lack of participation in EFL classes.

- **Teaching strategies affect the extent of female students' participation**

The majority of the respondents asserted that EFL teachers' teaching strategies directly affect female students' classroom participation.

- **Factors that affect female students' participation in EFL classes**

All eight respondents assured me in one word that fear is one of the major factors that affect female students' classroom participation. The respondents further explained that, in

addition to fear, there are some other factors that affect female students' classroom participation. These are lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem among female students, shyness, cultural influence, and family background. Fassinger (1995) stated that advanced classroom preparation as well as a student's level of confidence would determine their willingness to participate within the classroom.

- **Possible solutions to alleviate these influences**

The majority of the respondents responded that encouraging female students to participate in the classroom, giving them advice, and telling them the advantages of classroom participation in language learning can be a solution to increasing female students' participation.

3.4 Analysis of the Observation

The data from the observed classes showed that EFL teachers obviously do not provide equal opportunities for male and female students to participate in the classroom discussion. They didn't give just a little chance for female students to participate in classroom discussion. The classrooms observed are totally teacher-dominated, and in most classrooms, there were gender-biased situations. As stated by Aina and Cameron (2011), gender bias experiences that students encounter in schools can affect their participation in classroom activities.

Besides, the teachers didn't use various teaching methods or strategies to motivate and encourage female students to practice the target language. They gave oral and written activities to the students and then asked only two or three volunteer students who raised their hands to respond. The rest of the class, especially the female students, sat idly and became passive listeners.

The classroom led by a female EFL teacher, on the other hand, indicated that the teacher's role in engaging female students in classroom discussion is relatively better. In this classroom, female students' classroom participation is relatively better than that of classes led by male EFL teachers. However, it was observed that some female students did not

volunteer to participate even if they were called by their EFL teacher. They are concerned about communication. According to Fassinger (1995; Howard *et al.*, 2002), communication apprehension makes most female students less participative.

4 Conclusion

- The following conclusions were reached based on the main revelations from the questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation.
- Unless their teacher called them, female students did not participate as freely as male students do in the EFL classroom. There weren't many female students who voluntarily attended EFL classes.
- Most female students lack the motivation and reluctance to participate in class discussions in EFL.
- Most female students feel intimidated to participate in class discussions. They simply sit still and pay attention to their teacher. When the lesson is not clear to them, they don't even ask questions for the briefing. There is gender specific bias in most EFL classes through calling only male students for classroom participation and by giving less attention for female students participation.
- The EFL teacher's teaching method excluded female pupils from the conversation in class. The majority of the classes were taught by the teacher. Since most female students have lower levels of academic success and English language proficiency than male students, they didn't give them the opportunity to participate in the teaching and learning process.

5 Recommendations

EFL teachers are expected to help or motivate female students to become active participants and high achievers in their education because the female population in our country (Ethiopia) is greater than or equal to half of the total population. They can increase female student participation by employing

various strategies, such as making the lesson fun and interesting. Therefore, EFL teachers should design the lesson according to the interests of their female students. EFL teachers should also use positive nonverbal behaviors such as smiling and nodding to acknowledge female students' answers. This can encourage shy and fearful students to participate and share what they feel in the classroom discussion.

Instead of calling only students who raised their hands, EFL teachers should give equal time to male and female students in class discussions. They also need to create a conducive environment and gender-sensitive group formation since it builds female students' confidence and makes them responsible for their learning.

To increase female students' classroom participation, EFL teachers should avoid teacher-dominated classroom situations and instead use a communicative teaching and learning approach. Teachers need to give their students more time to use the language in different ways. Students can easily develop their language competence when they get the chance to use it. Besides, giving credit for students' classroom participation can also increase the number of female participants in the classroom discussion.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article confirmed that they have thoroughly read and approved the manuscript to be published in this journal.

Ethical Approval

Consent was sought from the research participants. Confidentiality was maintained in reporting information.

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