



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

Classroom participation is an essential part of language learning, and students must engage in classroom activities in order to learn the foreign language effectively. According to communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching assumptions, students should be included in and engaged in teaching and learning activities to improve their language competence (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Classroom participation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes develops students' communication skills in

particular and is a crucial factor in fostering positive learning outcomes in general. Crone (1997) noted that if you engage students to participate in an active learning environment, they have the opportunity to become critical thinkers and, in turn, will be less passive. Classroom participation in EFL classes allows students to build on their knowledge, demonstrate what they have understood in the lesson, and develop confidence. It also lets students think critically and engage in dialogue with their colleagues (Garside, 1996). Classroom participation is critical for students' academic advancement as well as preparing them for future careers by building their

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confidence and ability to speak in front of others.

Mack, L. (2012) stated that "classroom participation evokes feelings of power and powerlessness." Students who don't participate tend to feel excluded and are ignored by their peers. EFL teachers' teaching strategy and students' motivation are key factors for ensuring equitable classroom participation. According to Fawzia A. (2002), pedagogical factors like EFL teachers' teaching strategies, the topic of the lesson, and teaching style could influence female students' classroom participation. Students who are motivated to participate in the classroom become more critical thinkers, and their classroom participation enhances their engagement in greater thinking abilities.

Active classroom participation contributes a lot to the success of education and students' personal development in the future. Tatar S. (2005) Classroom participation is a fundamental interactional and pedagogical task through which students display their involvement in EFL lessons. In line with this idea, Liu (2005) stated that students who actively participate tend to have better academic performance compared to students who do not participate. Furthermore, it is a common belief that participation in verbal interaction offers EFL learners the opportunity to follow up on new words and structures to which they have been exposed during language lessons and to practice them in context.

In this case, providing opportunities for female students to participate in classroom interaction or discussion is really needed to foster their English language competence and improve their communication comprehension. It is believed that students who are actively engaged in EFL classroom participation can develop their critical thinking and achieve high academic performance. Despite such importance, the majority of female students in secondary schools are less active participants in classroom discussion than their male counterparts (Yenenesh T., 2013).

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 Gedieo zone.

2 Statement of the Problem

The relationship between participation and language learning, which seems to be associated with each other in several aspects, has been investigated in various studies (Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler, 2004). However, using the target language in EFL class is a struggle for many students in general and female students in particular. From the researcher's teaching experience, most female students are not willing to volunteer to participate in EFL classroom discussion, are not asking for help using the target language, and are not willing to speak up in small-group activities. This problem impedes their English language performance.

According to Gan (2012), female students who learn English as a foreign or second language are usually passive and hesitant to participate in a classroom discussion, and Le Thi Mai (2011) claims that most female students are shy to speak in English because they are afraid of losing face in front of their classmates. In line with this, Aemiro Tenaw (2018) revealed in his study that most female students lack competence in the medium of instruction, which is English. In fact, this problem is true for all students, but most female students lack the confidence to use the language in classroom discussions due to different reasons. Their shyness influences their participation in language learning, and this situation can be considered a major problem faced by many female students in secondary schools. The present researchers observed this problem in detail when they were HDP candidates and assigned to secondary schools for teaching in the Geo Zone. To help such shy students, EFL teachers need to provide a supportive and encouraging climate that helps female students feel more comfortable, more confident, and less fearful of participating in the class discussion. Therefore, engaging female students in classroom participation is one of the strategies that can potentially change their participation, help them become more participative in the EFL classroom, and provide quality education.

According to Yenenesh T. (2013), more than half of the Ethiopian population is female. Therefore, giving equal opportunity for female and male students to participate in classroom discussion is very important. EFL teachers need to create a conducive

environment and gender-sensitive group formation since it builds female students' confidence and makes them responsible for their learning.

There have been various studies conducted on the academic achievement of female students at the university level, and some of them were at the secondary school level. For example, Yenenesh T. (2013) conducted research in Harar Senior Secondary School and discovered that psychological factors (including student motivation and level of aspiration, as well as personal factors) affect female students' academic achievement. Gashahun Wami (2019) conducted research in Woliso Secondary School on problems affecting female students' academic performance and discovered low-income parents, a lack of adequate female role models, and a lack of adequate female role models. However, the study conducted by these researchers focused on the academic performance and achievement of female students. Unlike the above studies, the present study focuses on female students' participation and teachers' strategies in EFL classrooms. As far as the knowledge of the researchers is concerned, no study was conducted on female students' participation and teachers' strategies in EFL classrooms in Gedeo Zone secondary schools. Hence, this study will contribute to filling the existing research gap.

3 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 Gedieo zone. Specifically:

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

4 Materials and Methods

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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. Besides the semi-structured interview and the observation, the researchers selected 8 EFL teachers using a simple random sampling technique.

4.4 Data Gathering Tools

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

4.5 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.

5 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 readership. For classroom observation and conducting interviews, prior permissions were obtained from school directors, head teachers, and the classroom teachers.

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 Questionnaire Result on female students' participation

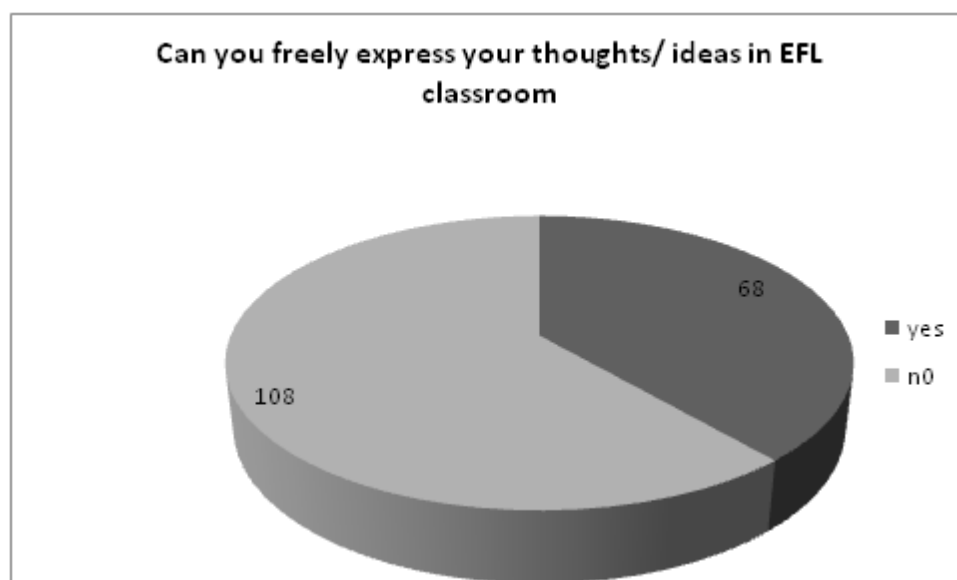


Figure 1: Students' response whether they freely express their thoughts/ ideas in EFL classes

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

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 bias is often present in classrooms, but sometimes teachers may not even detect it (Lundeberg, 1997). Most teachers call on male students more frequently than female students. This decreases the participation of female students in classroom discussions (Higgins, 2010).

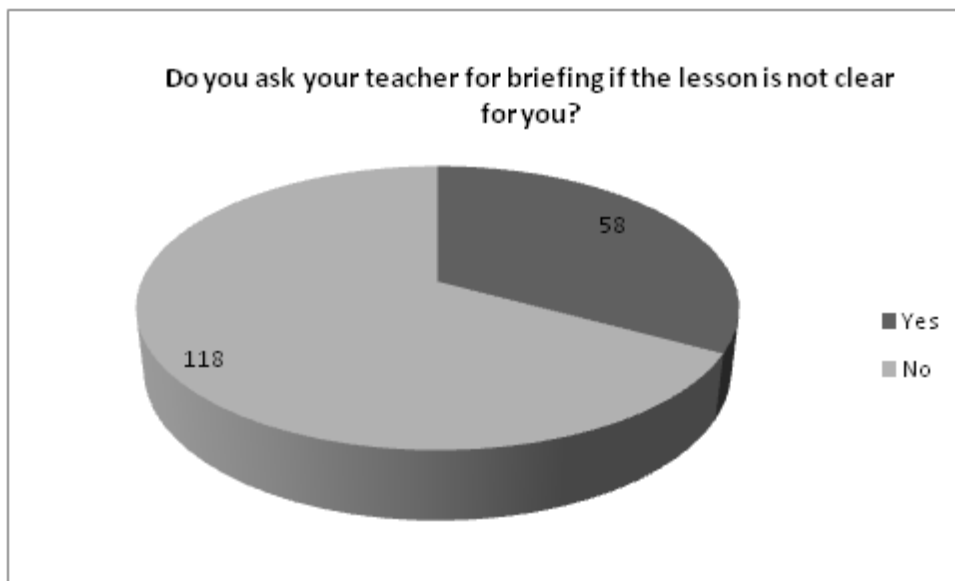


Figure 2: Students’ response on whether they ask for briefing when the lesson is not clear for them

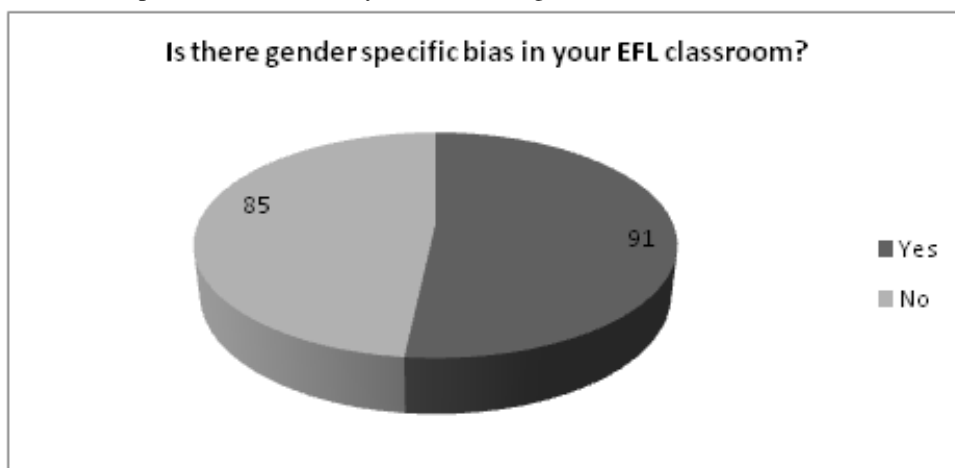


Figure 3: Whether there is gender specific bias in EFL classroom

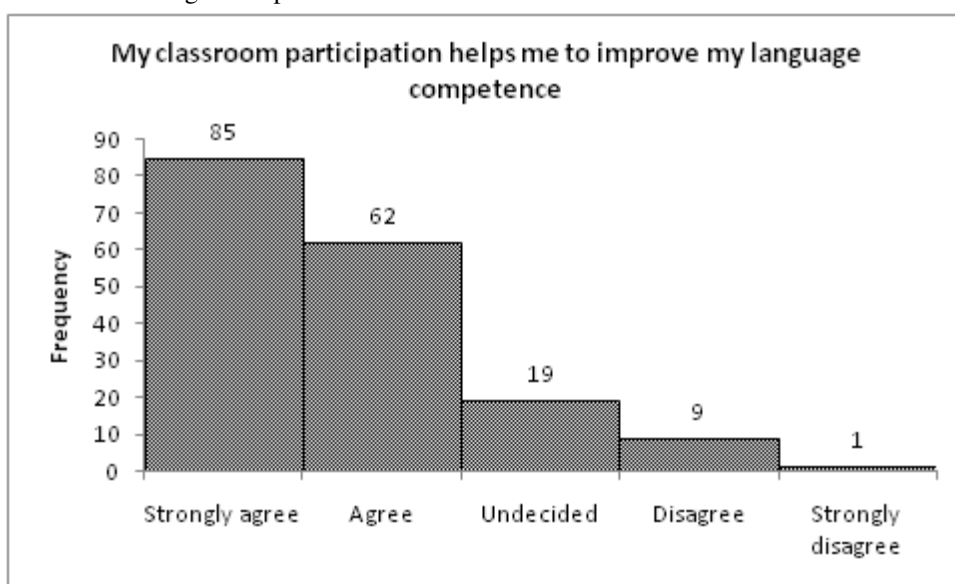


Figure 4: The advantage of Classroom participation in EFL class

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.

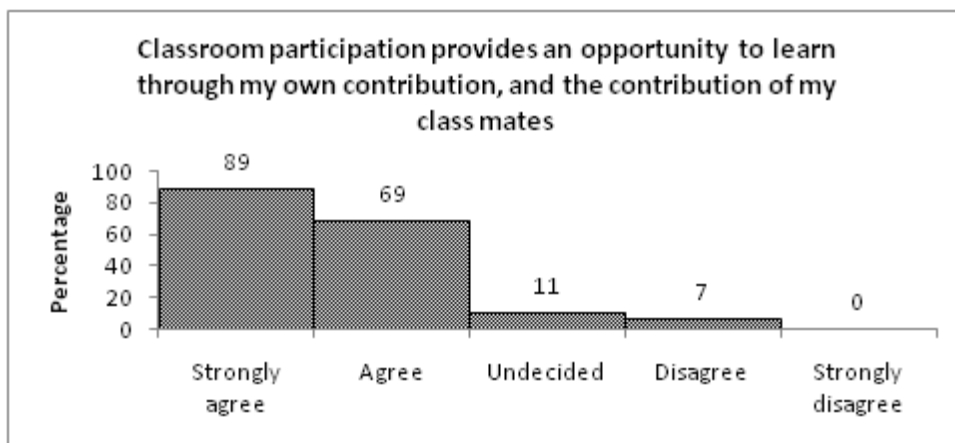


Figure 5: Students response on how they learn from their own classmate participation

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.

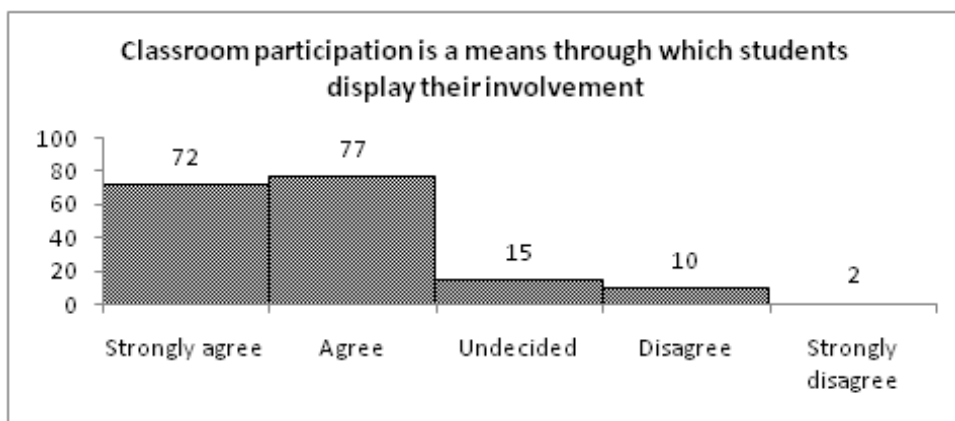


Figure 6: Female students’ involvement in Classroom participation

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

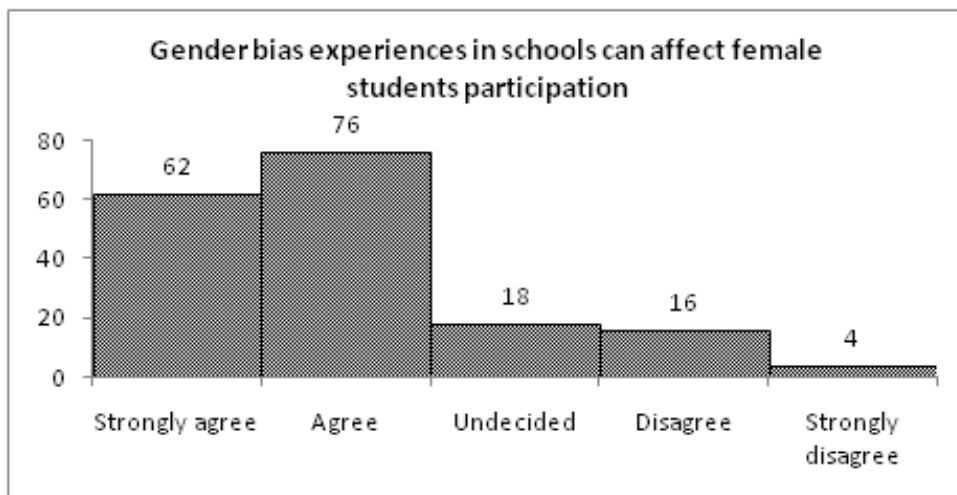


Figure 7: Gender bias experiences in the school

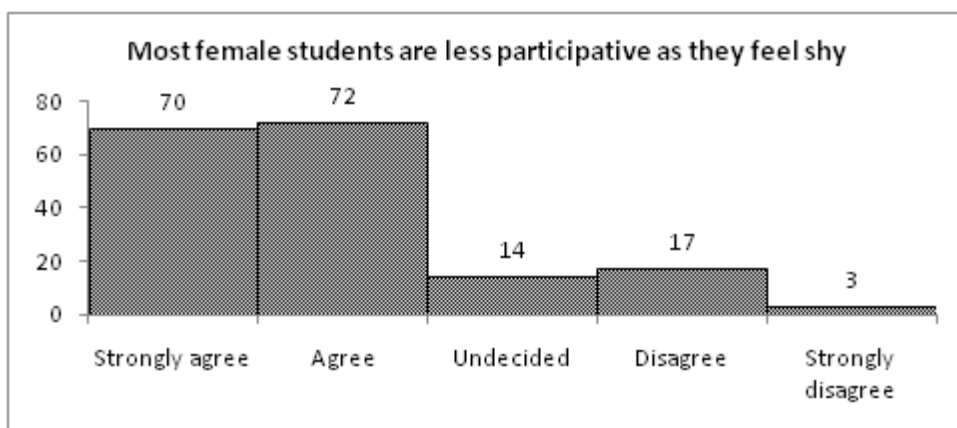


Figure 8: Shyness makes students less participative in EFL classes

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.

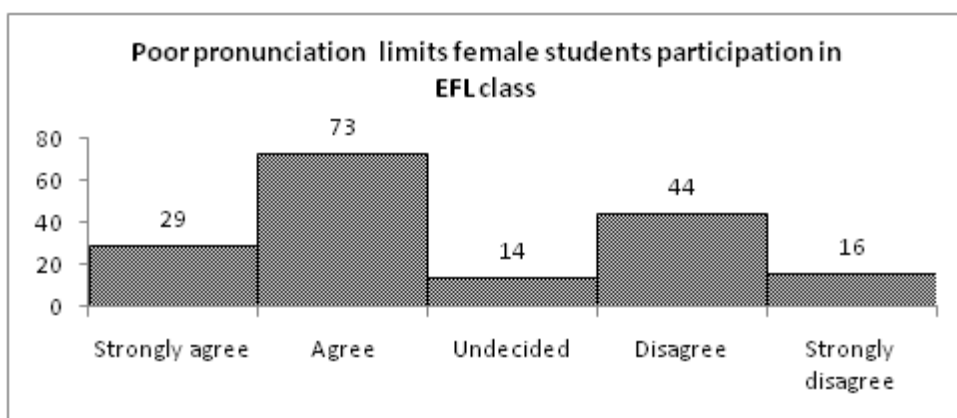


Figure 9: Poor pronunciation of words limits female students' classroom Participation

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.

6.2 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 un-

less 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 teacher only choose volunteers to answer questions; they did not give females the opportunity to participate. Whereas 12 (7%) of the respondents strongly disagree and 23 (13%) of them disagreed that their EFL teacher only choose volunteers to answer questions; they did not give females the opportunity to participate. 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 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.

6.3 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.

6.4 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.

7 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.

8 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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