Gender identities and female students' learning experiences in studying English as Second Language at a Pakistani University

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Abstract: This paper attempts to examine how female students' roles as learners are influenced by their socially constructed gender identities and gender roles in studying English as Second Language (ESL) at a public sector university of Pakistan. The aim is to understand how female students' gender identities and gender roles affect their learning. With an interpretivist epistemological stance, qualitative approach has been used to collect and analysis data. Twenty-five female students of diverse education and family backgrounds were interviewed and observed several times. The findings suggest female students' gender identities can act to limit their actions and interactions with textbooks, peers and teachers. However, some female students seemed to challenge their socially structured identities. Against certain social norms, they were found to exercise their choice and agency, though such autonomy is limited and conditioned.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper shares the experiences of female students studying in an English as Second Language (ESL) programme in a public sector university of Pakistan. The focus is to understand how female students as women experience different aspects of the ESL, which include their interactions with teachers, peers, curriculum and examination. The paper attempts to explore female students' motivation and distress when they interact as women with the above-mentioned aspects of ESL. The paper also examines the clashes between female students' roles as daughter/sister with their roles as students, and how these clashes influence their ESL learning experiences. Although this study is built on the experiences of a few female students, it highlights those aspects of female students' learning experiences which are mostly ignored in the mainstream research. Thus, findings may be of great use for the teachers, course designers and policy-makers to maintain gender sensitivity in their actions and decisions.

1. Introduction

According to the latest education policy (i.e. Ministry of Education, 2009), the Pakistani Government aims to produce communicatively competent English speakers in order to meet the demands and challenges of the higher education, as well as the local and global job markets in a rapidly evolving world. This is reflected by the large budget allocated by the Higher Education Commission for the research, planning and implementation of English language teaching reforms in the country (Shamim, 2011). Among many other initiatives, revised English as Second Language (ESL) courses were introduced in 2006, which run simultaneously with other educational programmes and are taught as minor subjects for the first two years (four semesters) to all the undergraduate students at almost all the public sector universities of Pakistan. The courses of the programme are mainly based on two books: (1) "English for Undergraduates" by D.H. Howe, T.A. Kirkpatrick, & D.L. Kirkpatrick and (2) "Oxford Practice Grammar" by John Eastwood. The purpose of the programme is to improve students' English language skills in order to ensure that students can cope with the demands of higher education, with specific objectives focusing on strengthening students' writing, reading, speaking, listening and grammar skills. More general objectives include building students' confidence by providing them with opportunities to interact in the classrooms without any gender, racial or ethnic bias, and making their language-learning experiences enjoyable and productive (Curriculum for English, 2008). This paper attempts to evaluate from female students' perspective whether ESL programme provides equal opportunity to them without any gender bias.

2. Why female students?

Female students have been focused in this study mainly because women's perspective is usually ignored in the mainstream educational research on the basis of which government's policies are made in Pakistan. Such negligence of local researchers and policy-makers also concerned the NGOs and international organisations (Asian Development Bank, 2000; USAID, 2015). These organisations link such negligence with the poor state of women's education in Pakistan. According to the Federal Education Ministry of Pakistan, only 26% of women are literate. However, independent sources suggest this figure as only 12% (Latif, 2010). While the population of Pakistan is around 180 million with a gender ratio of 1.05 male(s) to 1.0 female (The World Bank, 2014), only 3.8% female under 10 go to primary schools, 3% between 10 and 14 go to lower secondary school, 1.6% attend higher secondary schools, 0.83% reach the higher secondary schools and only 0.27% make it to the universities. While some studies criticised the poor state of female education particularly in higher education, and advocated female participation in higher education (Malik & Hussain, 1994; Shah, 2007; Subbarao, Raney, Dundar, & Haworth, 1994), they did not examine female students' learning experiences in higher education, and how their socially constructed gender identities interact with the educational programmes. Although this paper is based on the experience of only 25 female students and does not claim that its findings can be generalised, yet it attempts to bridge the gap in the literature by focusing on female students' gender identities and gender roles in interaction with the some aspects of ESL programme.

In addition, research suggests gender roles are applied coercively to women in Pakistani society (Amna, 2009; Weiss, 1992). Social situations and political institutions are responsible for imposing identities to groups of women with the aim of maintaining their subordinate status in the society. Such power is exercised by various means, but in the context of higher education, it is mainly exercised in teaching–learning interactions (Candela, 1998). Since the knowledge of English language functions in maintaining and changing power relations in the contemporary Pakistani society (Rahman, 1999, 2001), it is interesting to analyse how female students' gender identities interact with the teaching and learning environments of the ESL programme at a public sector university.

3. Conceptualising identity

Several researchers have asserted that in almost all ESL teaching situations, teachers and researchers do not simply deal with language, or with learners and their cognitive and affective characteristics, but also take into account the relational aspects of ESL learning (Arnold, 1999; Jackson, 2008; Parkinson & Crouch, 2011). Arnold (1999, p. 18) argues that ESL learning and use is a transactional

process, which he defines as an act of reaching out beyond the self to others. As such, it is intimately connected with learner's emotional self. The way in which individuals consider "who they are" is significantly formed by their social identity, or "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or her] membership in a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfeld, 1978, p. 63).

A social perspective on ESL highlights the fact that learners are not anchored to a fixed state, but are conditioned by social forces which affect their sense of self (Arnold, 1999). This conceptualisation of the self begins with an assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society (Stryker, 1980). Stets and Burke (2003) elaborate this concept further saying that "the Self influences society through the actions of individuals thereby creating groups, organizations, networks, and institutions. And, reciprocally, society influences the self through its shared language and meanings that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect upon oneself as an object" (p. 128). Based on this understanding that the self emerges in and is reflective of society, Brewer (2001) argues that a social understanding of the self means that the society in which the self is acting must also be understood. Moreover, the idea that the self is always acting in a social context in which other selves exist must be taken into consideration.

A review of the literature suggests that the concept of self and identity has been adopted in numerous ways in the social sciences. According to the traditional symbolic interactionist perspective, known as the *situational approach* to self and society, society is viewed as constantly in the process of being created through the interpretations and definitions of actors in particular situations (Blumer, 1969). Individuals identify the factors which need to be considered for themselves, act on the basis of these identifications and attempt to fit their lines of action with others in particular situations to accomplish their goals. From this perspective, it is assumed that individuals can freely define situations, which means that society is always thought to be in a state of flux with no real organisation or structure (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 129).

By contrast, the *structural approach* does not see society as tentatively shaped (Stryker, 1980), but assumes that society is stable and durable, as reflected in the "patterned regularities that characterize most human action" (Stryker, 1980, p. 65). These contradictory approaches nevertheless share the notion that identity is embedded in social interactions; while the former perspective overemphasises individual agency, the latter questions individuals' capacity to make choices.

In the present study, the notion of identity is understood as individuals' perception of how they see themselves and others, and how others see them. This perception is established when individuals interact with one another in different situations. Their perception of self and others gives them a sense of belonging to particular group(s), and they assume certain roles accordingly. Individuals' perception of self and others is understood in terms of the extent to which it is shaped by structure, but also the extent to which agents can exercise choice and agency in constructing their perception of self and others. Identity is also used to refer to multiple, contradictory and contested understandings of self and others in relation to agencies.

4. Gender identities and English language learning

In their comprehensive review on gender and language, Pavlenka and Piller (2008) highlight various studies which have linked gender with different aspects of second language teaching and learning. They argue that the earlier research of Lakoff (1975), Thorne and Henley (1975) and Maltz and Borker (1982) conceptualised language and gender according to notions of *difference*, *dominance* and *deficit*. *Difference* views women-as-a-group and men-as-a-group as speakers of difference *genderlects*, developed through socialisation in same-gender peer groups, while *dominance* views women-as-a-group as linguistically oppressed and dominated by men-as-a-group. Meanwhile, *deficit* refers to the phenomenon by which women were seen as inferior language users and oftentimes as the muted group who speaks a powerless language.

However, these notions have been criticised by postmodernists such as Cameron (1992) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) for their essentialist assumptions about "men" and "women" as homogeneous categories, their lack of attention to the role of context and power relations and their insensitivity to the ethnic, racial, social and cultural diversities which mediate gendered behaviours, performances and outcomes in educational contexts (Pavlenka & Piller, 2008, p. 58). Cameron (1992, 2005) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) conceptualise identity as a socially constructed and vibrant system of power relations and varied practices, rather than as an inherent property of particular individuals, which, according to Pavlenka and Piller (2008), means that "women and men are no longer seen as uniform natural categories where all members have common behavioural traits. Rather, these labels function as discursive categories imposed by society on individuals through a variety of gendering practices and accompanying ideologies about normative ways of being men and women. It is these practices and ways in which individuals adopt or resist them" (p. 58). Following this approach, gender is further categorised according to age, race, class and sexuality in order to understand how particular groups of people are privileged or marginalised (Cameron, 2005).

A number of studies have adopted this approach in order to understand the connections between gender and different aspects of second language teaching and learning. Several studies have revealed how gender practices mediate individuals' access to educational and interactional opportunities (Goldstein, 1995; Kouritzin, 2000; Peirce, 2000; Peirce, Harper, & Burnaby, 1993; Warriner, 2004). *Gatekeeping practices* (including lack of day care for children, inconvenient locations, no driving skills/permission to drive, inconvenient timings of the classes and interaction with opposite sex) were the commonly cited factors, which hindered or prevented women's participation in second language classes. For example, Goldstein (1995) found that these gatekeeping practices prevent young women from being in the same classroom as men; Kouritzin (2000) argued that some communities require family care be given exclusively by female members; and Peirce et al. (1993) discovered that some women could not go to ESL classes because their husbands did not want their wives to become more educated than themselves.

Other studies have attempted to understand how gender ideologies and practices shape female learners' desires, investment and actions in terms of second language learning. For example, Sunderland's (2000) findings suggest that in some contexts, female learners were more inclined to study second language than male learners, and outperformed them, while Kobayashi's (2002) study suggested that marginalised young Japanese women are more interested than men in studying second languages in order to increase their limited choice of employment opportunities. These women see second language learning as means of empowerment, and as a means of taking/adopting a critical perspective on their lives and society.

Some studies focus on understanding how gender shapes interactions in the classroom, seeking to identify those participants who speak out in class, those who remain silent and explanatory factors behind these differing behaviours (Miller, 2003).

Several studies have explored how gender has been represented in second language programmes (Poulou, 1997; Rifkin, 1998; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004; Siegal & Okamoto, 1996). Language textbook stereotypes that place men in the public domain and women in the home continued well into 1980s; the situation improved in most Western countries in the 1990s, with the development of non-sexist guidelines for educational materials. However, recent reviews of ESL and EFL texts published around world reveal that many foreign and second language textbooks continue to reproduce gender biases (Mustapha, 2013; Pavlenka & Piller, 2008; Sara Mill & Mustapha, 2015).

To summarise, gender identities can be viewed as socially constructed, as society imposes specific gendered practices relating to "being a man" or "being a woman". All over the world, these gendered practices discriminate against certain groups, and limit their access to (among other things) education and employment. Within the context of ESL teaching and learning, gender discrimination may be evident in gender representation in textbooks, and/or in women's limited ability to participate in

activities within and beyond the classroom. As discussed above, gender ideologies drive women's desire to learn ESL in order to increase their employment opportunities and to empower them. These factors indicate the importance of gender-related issues in the ESL teaching and learning processes and serve as a framework for the current study.

5. Methodology

With an epistemological interpretivist stance, and using a qualitative case research approach, this study examines the experiences of female students studying in a public sector university of Pakistan. These female students belong to lower mid-class families, aged between 19 and 22 years, and studied in the fourth semester of the four-year Bachelor programme at the time of the study. These students were interviewed and observed several times for an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Each student was interviewed twice, before and after observation. Two students were interviewed three times as per the need of emerging themes. The interviews lasted on average for 50 minutes. All interviews were conducted in regional language, tape-recorded, translated and transcribed. As interpretivist, I believe that in order to understand an individual's behaviour, one should attempt to view the world from that individual's viewpoint. The job of researchers is to obtain access to the individual's context in order to interpret their reality from their point of view. Within an interpretive framework, the researchers try to make sense of what they are researching. Bryman (2008) calls this process as *double hermeneutic* in that conducting social research, both the subject (the researchers) and the object (other participants in the study) bear the same characteristic of being interpreters or sense-seekers. This means that researchers have to understand how participants view their reality, but at the same time understand what they make out of participants' reality and how they define their findings in the light of existing literature. With this approach, I developed my arguments on the responses of research participants reinforced by the existing literature. Since participants responded in regional language, great care was taken to translate their responses in a way that maintains the natural quality of their contributions. The data from interview (and observations) were compiled into themes using NVIVO 9.

There were many problems in finding the volunteer students for this study. Almost 100 female students were requested for the study and only 25 volunteered. All of the female students were initially not comfortable with the idea of having their conversation recorded. As a qualitative researcher, I was interested not only in what respondents have to say, but also in how they say it, i.e. their use of high tone or long pauses in their sentences, or their facial expressions that add certain meaning to their statements. If these aspects were to be fully woven into analysis, then it was necessary to have a complete account of the series of exchanges in an interview. Although such minute details could have been better captured with video recording, it was very difficult to convince female students even for voice recording. So, I had to convince students by assuring them that whatever is voice recorded will only be used for research purpose without any clue of their identities. Secondly, it is assumed that interviews with female participants may be disrupted due to the cultural context of Pakistani institutions, where it is culturally unacceptable for unrelated men and women to be alone in private settings. This problem was tackled by two ways. Firstly, collective interviews of female participants were conducted. Secondly, when interview with any single female participant was conducted, it was conducted in public sphere. Though it made the female participants quite comfortable, it disturbed the interview process due to other activities going on simultaneously around.

While I subscribe to the view that it is important to talk to students in order to understand their realities, I also acknowledge that students may not be able to express their views about many aspects and issues within an interview context for numerous reasons. This meant that it was particularly important to observe students and their worlds; however, these observations were evidently subjective. This adds a further issue for consideration, namely the ability to witness first-hand the behaviours and activities described by participants in interviews. This was achieved through active and non-participant participation with students and teachers in the research context. Active participation involved conducting classes and taking part in the class activities, while examples of non-participant participation include sitting in classrooms, observing student groups and being present during

teachers' informal meetings. Through these different forms of participation, I aimed to observe and experience the research context as a participant, while still acting as an observer focused on understanding, analysing and explaining The observations were mainly used for three purposes: firstly, to understand the institutional context in general and the ESL context in particular; secondly, to understand and explore the sensitive issues that participants were uncomfortable to discuss in interviews; and thirdly, to verify interviewees' certain responses and claims.

It is important to mention that I have got access to students, teachers, classrooms and even teachers' common rooms by the virtue of my positionality in relation to this study. In conducting this study, I see myself as, what Jahanbakhsh (1996) called, an *ex-insider*, who had been involved in teaching ESL programme at that institution. Thus, on the one hand, it gives me an opportunity to easily involve with teachers, who once were colleagues. On the other hand, it raises the issue of power relations in conducting interviews with students who might see me as *insider*. In such situations, maintain Bryman (2008), respondents usually say what the researcher (as the insider) wants to listen, rather expressing their honest opinion. This situation was avoided by creating a friendly atmosphere to make respondents feel comfortable and assuring them that their identities and responses will be kept anonymous.

6. Findings and discussion

This section examines the way in which students' gender identities interact with ESL textbooks, with their roles as learners and the impact of these interactions on their learning experiences in the ESL programme. Female students participating in this study perceive higher education as an opportunity to contest the identities imposed upon them by society. Therefore, they always try to participate in all the educational activities in the university. These students also revealed that studying English is an important part of their university life, with the ESL programme appearing to offer them an opportunity to build their confidence through the *power* of English. Moreover, female students use English to interact with the rest of the class and to prove that they are not simply defined by expected roles. One of the student said, "Men think that we are only there to work in houses. But we can do more than that. We can study more effectively and be an important part in building our society [...] Studying at a university requires motivation, confidence to face people, and [English language] skills to understand the course contents. We [female students] are very much motivated to study because we know that it will change our lives. But to get confidence and skills we have to study English. This very idea motivates me to put more efforts in studying English".

The ESL textbooks used at the university are designed "to build the confidence of the students" by giving them the "opportunity to learn language and practise it in the class" (Howe, Kirkpatrick, & Kirkpatrick, 2006, p. iv). To generate discussions among students, the textbooks suggest a number of activities based on pictures and images, with the aim of "engag[ing] the students in meaningful communicative use of language" and "mak[ing] [their] experience of English language teaching and learning more interesting" (Howe et al., 2006, p. iv). However, it was observed that several exercises included on images which distressed female students, and made their English learning experiences unpleasant. For example, one picture depicted men studying, watching the business news on TV and operating computers; women are seen cleaning, ironing and cooking. These images reflect the typically male-dominated society, depicting women as subordinate to men, and the pervasive sociocultural norms in Pakistan (Delavande & Zafar, 2011; Rouse, 2002; Zahra, 2005).

The exercise accompanying this picture ostensibly aims to generate discussion among the students and "to improve their speaking skills" (Howe et al., 2006, p. iv), and the teacher therefore instructed students to examine the picture and then talk about it. Before long, the male students in the class began defending the representation of male roles in the picture as fair and realistic in the context of Pakistani society, with a few female students vocally contesting the representation of women as discriminatory and talked about the need to challenge social norms that confine women to the home. However, male students dominated the discussion; the few vocal female students stopped participating in the discussion when male students cited religious sources to legitimate

their claims, while the female students who had remained silent appeared uncomfortable during the exchanges. One of the female students discussed this incident angrily, expressing her discomfort with such pictures which generate discussions in which male students are able to display their power. She said "I was unable to say anything, though I wanted to say a lot. But they [male students] were so confident and aggressive in their arguments that I lost my confidence to say anything. In fact, I felt fear and remained silent all the time. There were only two girls who were facing them all, but they [girls] also stopped arguing when they gave religious references".

As a result of these dynamics, female students in the ESL class start losing interest in the topic as learners, and feel degraded as women. While they may have joined the class with the aim of "improving [their] English speaking skills", female students are eventually only concerned with passing time until the class is over. These findings are consistent with those of Amna (2009); in her study of identity and curriculum at primary education in Pakistan, she argued that "the system that the government provides over education is another fact which contributes to women's illiteracy. The government of Pakistan provided policies on the textbooks that show the preference [for] men over women, the emphasis was, and still remains, on the male figure, the skills he needs to be successful in the society [...] The textbooks picture a boy or man as a powerful, strong, and one who dominates every field of life, whereas the books depict a girl or a woman submissive, timid and one who is confined to the house and children" (p. 426).

One of the intended outcomes of the activity discussed above was to "bridge the gap" between male and female students by encouraging them to interact with each other through discussion (Howe et al., 2006, p. iv). Interactive activities like this may help to increase interactions between students from different backgrounds and integrate the class as a whole (González-Lloret, 2003); however, this was not the case in the ESL class observed. Male students' dominance over female students in the discussion clearly exacerbated the communication gap between them. Moreover, the (male) teacher reacted in a notably passive way to the situation; appearing not to recognise the female students' distress, he failed to intervene in the discussion.

Some chapters in the ESL textbook (i.e. Howe et al., 2006) are based on experiences and activities which are exclusively associated with men in Pakistan, such as driving. Although women are not legally banned from driving (as in Saudi Arabia), and women in wealthy areas of Karachi are seen driving cars, driving is culturally viewed as a male activity. It is particularly rare for women to drive in cities in Sindh such as Hyderabad, Sukkur or Larkana, and it is extremely unlikely that even women from wealthy backgrounds would drive in rural areas of Sindh. Accordingly, female students in this study had been discouraged from driving, and therefore had no knowledge of traffic signals, road signs and so on. Female students viewed driving as an act which would give them the freedom of mobility and facilitate their future professional and domestic life, and the kind of independence they had never enjoyed due to their dependence on male family members for mobility. Some female students noted that their brothers completely opposed the idea of women driving, arguing that the family's honour would be negatively affected if their sisters were seen driving around. Meanwhile, other female students' families asserted that it would be unsafe for them to drive on the basis that women are exposed to exploitation when they travel in this way.

In the light of this lack of exposure to driving and road awareness, female students' interest in one of the ESL units, "A traffic nightmare" (Howe et al., 2006, p. 3) was particularly notable. The unit included conversations, exercises and drills related to driving skills, traffic signals and road signs. Some female students noted that this unit provided a unique opportunity for them to learn about the meaning of particular road signs, and found the chapter a useful means of acquiring basic information about driving as well as improving their English language skills. This interest also encouraged them to use other resources to further support their knowledge, understanding and English language skills. One of the female students said "I always wondered why he [her brother] changes speed suddenly on the highway and what those particular road signs mean. If I asked him, you know how they [men] react. But this chapter was very informative. I know a lot more about it now, and I did search about other road signs

and rules from the net as well. Now it will be easy for me to drive if I ever get opportunity". Similarly, another female student reflected on her enjoyment of this particular unit, "I did every exercise of this chapter. I really enjoyed it a lot and found the information very helpful".

In this case, female students' gender identities clearly interacted positively with their identities as learners; their desire to learn about a topic previously restricted to them encouraged them to put more effort into their language learning. Unlike the previous activity based around discussion of gender roles, this unit therefore successfully made female students' English language learning experience more pleasant and interactive, and supported their ability to gain new knowledge and understanding.

However, female students' enjoyment of this particular chapter seems fleeting in comparison to their wider experiences of balancing their gender identities and their identities as students. In particular, female students' gender identities in relation to their families and their expected household duties can conflict with their roles as university students. In Pakistan, women are expected to carry out all domestic tasks, including cooking, washing and cleaning; it is unlikely that male members of the family will carry out these tasks if there is a woman in the family. It is even more unlikely that a woman will receive support or help with household responsibilities when she is required to devote most of her time to her university course.

One of the female students discussed her struggle to fulfil her roles as a daughter of a disabled father, and as the only sister of seven brothers. Along with her mother, she was expected to carry out all the domestic work in the house, including making tea and preparing dinner for eight every night, washing the family's clothes at the weekend, cleaning the house twice a week and numerous other tasks. Describing her daily routine, she revealed that she leaves home for university at 7:30 am, returns at 4 pm, and after a short nap, makes and serves tea for her family. Around 7 pm, she prepares dinner, and after everyone has eaten and she has cleared away the dishes, she finally has time to study.

It is important to note that this female student was highly motivated to join university, which she believes would enable her to "stand on [her] own feet", rather than depending on her future husband, as her mother has had to. She is the first female member in her family, and third member overall, to be admitted to university. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she faced resistance from her brothers when she expressed an interest in joining university, as they argued that she was needed at home to take care of their father and to help their mother. She was only able to join the university once she had convinced her brothers that her domestic responsibilities would not suffer; however, this commitment to household work means that she is left with minimal time to study and demonstrate her progress at university. As she has over six hours of class time (made up of five 50-minute classes) every day for six days a week, she also has a limited amount of time that she can use for extra study on campus.

With such a tight schedule at home and at university, she devotes the maximum time to the subjects she views as most important. In particular, she prioritises major subjects over minors; since major subjects carry more marks and credit points, good marks in major subjects means good grades overall. The ESL courses are taught as a minor in the university. This means that, even though she considers ESL very important in order to "improve [her] language skills … [and] … gain confidence", her heavy workload does not allow her to prioritise her ESL work. She therefore only studies ESL topics which might be examined, or which might be discussed in the class; consequently, she has only focused on Howe et al. (2006), which is used in the class by teachers, and has never used Eastwood (2006) since it is never used in the class. During some semesters, she has completely neglected her ESL work due to extra responsibilities at home and at university.

In the light of the pressures faced by female students at home in addition to the pressures of university work, their engagement in the ESL programme can be reduced to the bare minimum in order to

pass examinations. The above female student's experiences suggest that the designation of the ESL courses as minor, when combined with conflicts between students' gender identities and their identities as students, can further compound the de-prioritisation of the subject by (female) students.

Although only female gender identities and their gender-related roles remained the focus of this study, this does not imply that these gender identities are self-contained. Indeed, as social agents, students have multiple identities which intersect and overlap during their interactions with different aspects of ESL programme. When responding to various situations, female students shift from one identity to another. For example, one of the female students foregrounds her gender identity as a girl in interacting with male students during ESL activities. These activities required group work and a lot of communication with boys. Due to cultural norms, she felt uncomfortable, avoided boys and kept her communications limited to female colleagues. However, she foregrounds her ethnic identity (i.e. being a Sindhi speaker) in deciding which female colleagues she would communicate and group with. In her words "I keep some [communication] distance from Urdu-speaking girls [female students] […] I have observed that they [Urdu-Speaking female students] show attitude when any of us [Sindhi female students] try to talk to them. They usually group with only Urdu-speaking girls. And when we try to talk to them they ignore us. I don't like their attitude and try to keep distance".

In this case, female students' ethnic identities take precedence over their gender identities. Although she attempted to negotiate her ethnic identity in order to interact with female students of other ethnic groups, however, the inconsistencies in her attempts meant that these were unsuccessful. Consequently, she continued to reinforce boundaries established by her ethnic identity, and sustained the communication gap. The resistance of these female students to negotiate their gender and ethnic identities therefore restricted their interactions to students who shared their gender and ethnic identities, which therefore limited their participation in the community of the ESL classroom overall.

7. Conclusion

This paper used the sociological lens of gender identities to analyse female students' learning experiences in an ESL programme. This approach has provided rare views into female students' learning experiences and highlighted those aspects which are ignored otherwise in the mainstream research. With its many limitations, the paper attempted to demonstrate different ways in which female students' learning experiences in the ESL programme are shaped by their gender identities and gender roles. The choices they made and the way they acted were analysed from gender identities perspective. It was found that their gender identities can act to limit their actions and interactions with textbooks, peers and teachers. However, some female students seemed to challenge their socially structured identities. Against certain social norms, they were found to exercise their choice and agency, though such autonomy is limited and conditioned.

Overall, this paper highlights the importance of students' identities and different roles associated with these identities in shaping their learning experiences in the ESL. Although only a selected section of findings are reported, this paper argues that students should not be treated on the basis of a unitary identity as learners while making important decisions like course designing, teachers' trainings and policy-making. Students are the product of society with multiple identities. When they come into the class, they bring these identities with them. Teachers, course designers and policy-makers should be aware of the students and their multiple identities. They should know what aspects of an educational programme may conflict or complement with students' different identities. This awareness helps in reducing students' distress and helps in increasing their interest in the programme. The knowledge of students' social identities also helps in introducing attractive material such as texts about driving that are empowering to women, teaching approaches that concord students of different backgrounds to participate in the class and policies that facilitate and encourage students' learning.

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