

# Commands and Directives: Powerful Speech in the EFL Classroom

การใช้คำสั่งและการกล่าวชี้แนะ :

พลังของคำพูดในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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## Abstract

This research looks at whether male and female teachers conform to documented gender interaction patterns in same-sex and mixed-sex EFL classroom. According to Coates (1993), Fishman (1983) and others, men and women interact differently in same-sex and mixed-sex groups and dyads with men using more direct commands and directives than women. This study found that, unlike many other gender studies, female teachers used more direct commands and directives than male teachers. However, it was also found that all the subjects used similar verbal interaction patterns regardless of their gender or class type and for the same reason: to establish and maintain their position of power and dominance in the class.

## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้ศึกษาผู้สอนชายและผู้สอนหญิงเพื่อวิเคราะห์ว่ารูปแบบของการใช้วัจนาภาษาจะห่วงผู้สอนกับผู้เรียนในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ โดยพิจารณาจากตัวแปรด้านเพศของผู้สอนและของผู้เรียน จากงานวิจัยของ Coates (1993) Fishman (1983) และนักวิจัยท่านอื่นๆ พบว่าผู้ชายและผู้หญิงมีรูปแบบของการใช้วัจนาภาษาแตกต่างกันเมื่อยูในกลุ่มที่มีเพศเดียวกันหรือต่างเพศกันและเมื่อทำงานคู่กับเพศเดียวกันหรือต่างเพศกัน และพบว่าผู้ชายจะใช้คำสั่งและการกล่าวชี้แนะมากกว่าผู้หญิง ผลจากการวิจัยของผู้เขียนเองนั้นแตกต่างจากการวิจัยอื่นๆ ที่ศึกษาว่ารูปแบบการใช้วัจนาภาษาโดยพิจารณาจากตัวแปรด้านเพศ กล่าวคืองานวิจัยฉบับนี้พบว่าผู้สอนหญิงใช้คำสั่งและคำกล่าวชี้แนะมากกว่าผู้สอนชาย อย่างไรก็ตามรูปแบบของการใช้วัจนาภาษาของทั้งผู้สอนชายและผู้สอนหญิงมีความคล้ายคลึงกันไม่ว่าจะสอนวิชาใด ไม่ว่าผู้สอนจะเป็นเพศใดหรือไม่ว่าผู้เรียนจะเป็นเพศเดียวกันหรือต่างเพศกับผู้สอน ผู้สอนชายและผู้สอนหญิงเหล่านี้ต่างก็ใช้วัจนาภาษาทั้งกับผู้เรียนโดยมีจุดมุ่งหวังเดียวกันที่จะแสดงอำนาจเหนือผู้เรียน

## Introduction

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, teachers have dual roles. Their first, and most obvious, role is that of repository of the target language. The second role, although somewhat more obscure than the first, is just as important. In the EFL classroom the teacher is also the presenter of the target culture. It is at this juncture that language evolves into more than a linguistic system to be mastered. Some would even argue that it is here that language splits into two separate, and possibly antagonistic, "cultures" (Maltz & Borker, 1982), with one wielding immense power, both linguistic and social, over the other. Membership in either one of these two cultures is not self-determined, but based on the individual's sex at birth (Kramarae, 1990), and reinforced through everyday social interaction as well as other institutional societal forces (Simpson, 1993, pp.7, 175.). Although it has been argued that teachers are a "tribe", or "sub-culture" unto themselves (Woods, 1996, p.48), they are still susceptible to the same unwritten social influences which govern male and female interaction patterns within the society at large.

### Purpose of Study

This concept of gender as a determiner of interaction patterns leads to several questions regarding teachers, teaching, and language use. First of all, do male and female teachers interact differently in the classroom? Second, if teacher gender is not a factor in teacher-learner classroom interactions, why not? Finally, does the gender makeup of the class type taught have any effect on these patterns, if they exist, or are male and female teachers 'genderless' in that their interaction patterns in the

classroom are the same regardless of the gender of the learners?

This research analyses the variable of commands and directives to determine what, if any, similarities and differences exist in teacher verbal interaction according to gender and class type taught: namely, 'same-sex' groups, where the teacher's and the learner's gender are the same, and 'mixed-sex' groups, where the teacher's and the learner's gender are different. This variable has been chosen as it has been commonly cited as an indicator of gender-based differences in verbal interaction (see Coates, 1993; Fishman, 1983; West & Zimmerman, 1983). Although the reasons underlying gender-based verbal interaction patterns have never been fully explained, numerous theories have been devised in an attempt to do so.

### Theoretical Background

The Interactionist Model postulates that there is an interplay between the biological sex of the individual and societal norms which construct an "internal system of gender rules" (Swann, 1992, p. 8), including interaction rules. One's gender is a social construct, not a predetermined given, shaped by the experiences we have during our lifetime, experiences which emphasise the hierarchical nature of gender relations, and the dominance of men (Coates, 1993). This model was a shift away from a purely biological argument regarding gender. Along with this shift, there was a parallel movement towards viewing men's language as powerful and dominant, and women's as powerless and, subsequently, subordinate to men's (Coates, 1993). Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1987) also comes into play here. This theory argues that speakers will modify their

language in order to create a better linguistic fit between the participants in an interaction (Kramarae, 1990). As each participant in the interaction accommodates to the other, the chances of miscommunication occurring are lessened, or heightened in the case of speech divergence. In male-female interaction, however, it is usually the female who accommodates towards the male (Bilous & Krauss, 1988; Bradac, 1990) which further indicates a socio-cultural subordination of female speech to male's.

The Two Cultures Approach, based on Maltz and Borker's (1982) paper, delved into the communication problems faced by ethnic minorities in socio-linguistic subcultures when they interacted with members of the dominant linguistic culture. Here miscommunication was not due to an insufficient grasp of the dominant linguistic culture, but rather the result of one linguistic culture analysing and interpreting the speech of the other in terms of their own linguistic and cultural code (Maltz & Borker, 1982). When male and female interactions are viewed through this 'two cultures' approach, the concepts of power and dominance, and powerlessness and subordination, become secondary although, according to Maltz and Borker (1982), power and dominance may continue to play a part in the overall interactions.

### **Gendered Speech Patterns**

If any of these theories is universally true, it would have implications for education in general, and EFL classrooms in particular. If gender is biologically, socially or culturally defined, with built in female linguistic powerlessness, and implied female accommodation to male speech patterns, the employment of female teachers in a mixed-sex EFL classroom could, logically, necessitate accommodation of the female

teacher's speech to match male learners, rather than the desired opposite. Employing male teachers to teach females, on the other hand, would have the effect of socialising female learners into the verbal interaction patterns of the male gender role of the target language which could adversely effect the female learners' grasp of the target language as defined by gender, and, therefore, affect their communicative competence in the target language.

### **Commands and Directives**

Commands and directives are arguably one of the most powerful linguistic forms available to speakers of any gender. Through their use the speaker does not simply request the hearer's compliance, but rather demands it (Gleason & Greif, 1983). Although their linguistic force can be mitigated somewhat through the use of polite formulaic expressions such as 'please', 'if you don't mind', and even terms of endearment such as 'sweetheart', they do not suggest that the hearer can refuse the command or directive without directly challenging the speaker's authority. Since hearer compliance ultimately supports and reinforces the speaker's authority, and, therefore, the speaker's power and dominance, be it achieved or ascribed, commands and directives have been used to delve into the interactional power-dominance relationship in various same-sex and mixed-sex interactional situations, including the classroom.

In non-teaching interactions, early research found that, on the whole, men use more commands and directives than women. Strodebeck and Mann (1956) stated that men use more "statements of orientation", while Soskin and John (1963) noted that men use more "statements of focus and direction", and women more mitigated ones. Engle's

(1980) study found that fathers were more likely to give directives to their children, whereas mothers were more likely to consult them. Goodwin (1980, 1988, 1990) also found that boys used explicit commands while girls used more mitigated ones. This tendency is not confined to purely social or intimate situations. In a study of doctor-patient interactions, West (1990) found that male doctors used aggressive forms, such as direct imperatives, whereas female doctors preferred more mitigated forms, phrasing their directives as joint action. This tendency by the female doctors had the added effect of making them appear to be less effective as doctors in comparison to the male doctors.

The greater use of commands and directives by males is also evident in the classroom. Gleason and Greif's (1983) study of day-care teachers found that male teachers used more imperatives than female teachers, 11% and 2% respectively. Other studies have also shown that commands and directives are a common classroom teacher interactional control technique (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992), although often no correlation by gender is given. From the few studies which do provide gender breakdown, however, males teachers appear to use more commands and directives than female teachers. From this, one would expect a similar gender breakdown in the EFL classroom, unless the use of commands and directives are not only gender based but also specific to the situation. The overall implication of this previous gender research, however, is that men are interactionally more competitive, while women are more co-operative (Coates, 1993) in a variety of social interactional situations.

This paper presents the analysis of the verbal interaction patterns of male and females teachers in same-sex and mixed-sex classes using the variable of commands and directives to determine if such dichotomous male-female speech patterns exist in EFL classrooms, or if there is another factor at work which is modifying them. In EFL classroom using a communicative approach, teacher-learner interaction should, ideally, be one in which "interactive processes of communication" receives priority (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Therefore, any differences, or similarities, between male and female teacher verbal interaction patterns should be more apparent than in classrooms using a more rigidly structured approach.

### **Research Procedure**

The data for this research was obtained by each of the subjects 'self-recording' one 45-minute lesson using audiocassette. The learners were all Arab adults. Self-recording was used since this research was interested in the effect, if any, of teacher gender on teacher verbal interaction patterns in same-sex and mixed-sex classes and direct observation would have changed the female teacher same-sex classes to mixed-sex-classes if the researcher, a male, had observed them directly. This could also have inadvertently changed the interactional dynamics of the class, and, therefore, affected any findings which would have resulted.

### **The Subjects**

The subjects involved in this research were 10 British teachers recruited from among the native English speakers teaching English in Kuwait. Five were male and five female. One male and one female teacher agreed to

repeat the recording with another class, making for a total of 12 recorded 45-minute lessons in all. All the teachers, except one, were employed at the same teaching institute. The female teachers ranged in age from 27 to 39, the male teachers from 27 to 46. All the subjects had a minimum of two years of EFL teaching experience in their current position. The mean teaching experience was 8.8 years, with females having 7.0 years and males 10.6 years. All the teachers possessed at least a Bachelor's degree and at least a certificate in EFL. Once the tapings had been completed, they were transcribed, the transcriptions analysed and the number of commands and directives noted.

### The Analysis

Descriptive statistics and chi square were used to determine whether or not there were any statistically significant differences between the use of commands and directives between the four gendered groups based on class type taught. Commands and directives were defined as either being direct, using the imperative form, or mitigated, where the command or directive is softened by using polite formulaic expressions such as 'let's',

'please', and 'could you'. Due to the small number of subjects chi square ( $X^2$ ), calculated using an  $\alpha < .01$  ( $X_{crit.} = 6.64$ ) with 1df (degree of freedom), and using Yates' correction for continuity, was used to determine if the results obtained were statistically significant, and, if so, which group, or groups, contributed most to the overall result. Once the statistical analysis had been completed, the teachers were interviewed. Of the ten original subjects, eight agreed: one had left the country, and one was unable to participate for personal reasons.

### Findings

This study found that the female teachers used commands and directives more frequently than the male teachers in both class types taught (*Figure 1*). This is in opposition to findings in previous gender studies such as Stodbeck and Mann (1956), Soskin and John (1963), and Gleason and Grief (1983), which predicted that males would use more commands and directives than females. However, these findings were not significant at  $p. < .01$  level, with  $X_{obs.} = 0.99$  thereby upholding the null hypothesis.

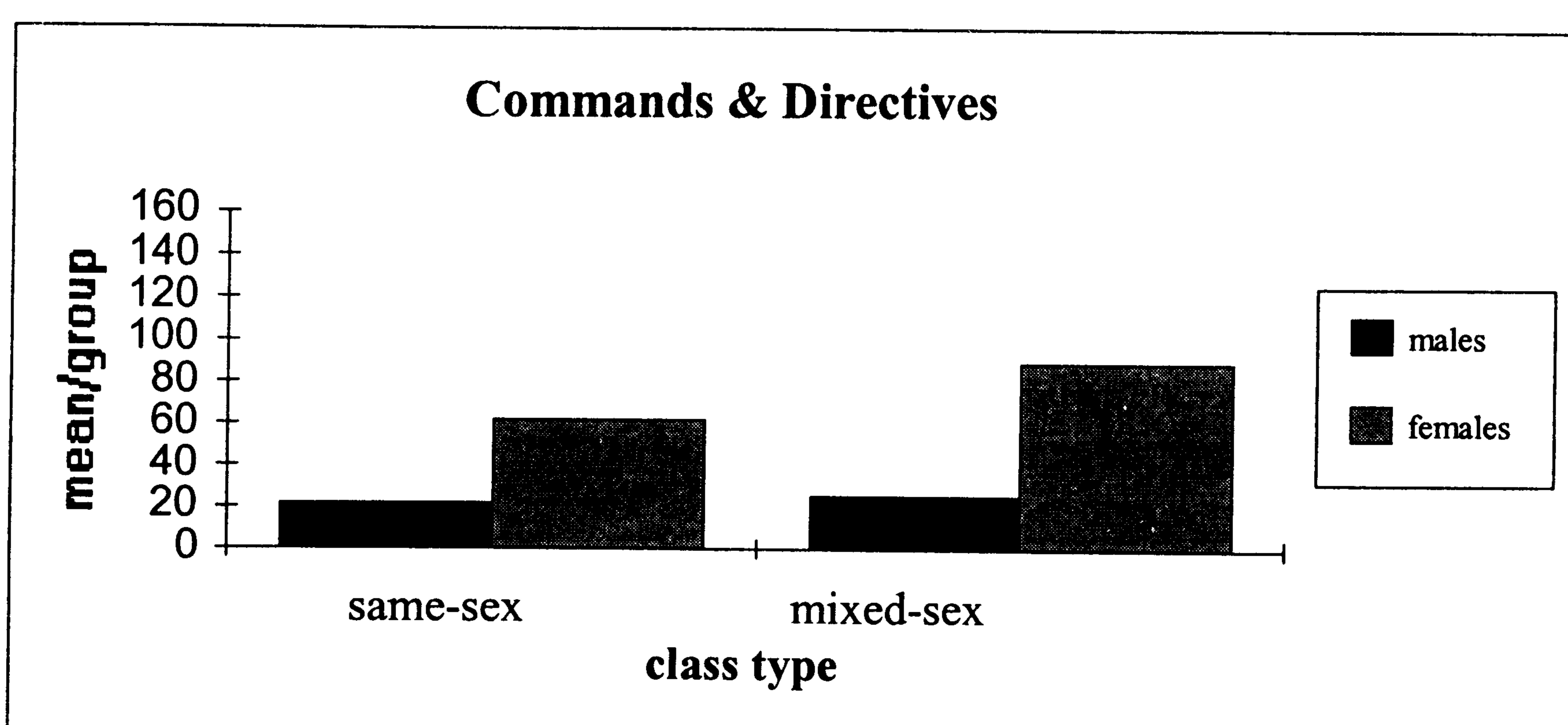


Figure 1: mean number of commands and directives/2700 seconds by gendered teacher group

When the commands and directives were broken down into direct and mitigated responses, however, the results for direct command and directives were significant at  $p < .01$  level, with  $X_{obs.} = 9.53$ ,

suggesting that gender may have been a factor in their use (*Table 1*). The results for mitigated commands and directives were still not significant at  $p < .01$ , with  $X_{obs.} = 4.50$ .

	direct	Mitigated	mean total number
male teachers-same-sex classes	16.66 (75.76%)	5.33 (24.24%)	22.00
female teachers-same-sex classes	41.66 (67.20%)	20.33 (32.80%)	62.00
male teachers-mixed-classes	11.00 (42.87%)	14.66 (57.13%)	25.66
female teachers-mixed classes	63.33 (70.89%)	26.00 (29.11)	89.33

*Table I: mean number, and percentage of direct and mitigated commands and directives/2700 seconds by gendered teacher group*

Part of the rationale for these finding can be attributed to gender differences, but it is also necessary to consider how Arab culture may have affected the teachers' linguistic speech patterns, especially among the female teachers. In Arab culture females are expected to obey males, not be obeyed (Maududi, 1992). Because of this cultural norm, the female teachers may have had to work harder to establish and maintain their power and dominance in the class, unlike the male teachers. One effective method of doing this was through the use of commands and directives: the higher the frequency of (direct) commands and directives, the more 'in control' of the class, and the more 'competent', the teacher would appear, similar to the previously noted study of doctors by West (1990).

The male teachers who taught same-sex classes, as the statistical analysis discovered, and the interviews confirmed, usually employed direct, rather than mitigated, commands and directives which complies with previous research. The most recurrent reason given for this was that being direct was considered an appropriate manner to demonstrate to the male learners the male teacher's position of power and

dominance in the class. Even though such commands and directives were not necessarily considered as polite as more mitigated ones, they were considered the norm when teaching same-sex classes. The female teachers who taught same-sex classes also stated that they used more direct commands and directives. This concurred with the statistical findings which are presented in *Table 1*. However, the use of direct commands and directives were, generally, used at the beginning of classes because, according to the teachers, they were more effective for curtailing 'chit chat' between the learners, and establishing the teacher's position of power and dominance in the classroom. Once established more mitigated ones were used.

When teaching mixed-sex classes, however, most male teachers stated that they tended to use more mitigated commands and directives since they wished to be more polite, and therefore be perceived more positively by the female learners. This is also in agreement with the statistical findings presented in *Table 1*. This tendency towards politeness, however, was not given unconditionally. One male teacher stated that if a mitigated command and directive

did not achieve the desired outcome on the first attempt, he would switch to a more direct form. Some male teachers also reported using a “softer tone of voice” when issuing commands and directives in mixed-sex classes. The teachers also noted, however, that the frequency and use of each type of command and directive depended more on the level of the class being taught, with lower level classes receiving more direct, and fewer mitigated commands and directives than higher level classes, regardless of learner gender.

The female teachers who taught mixed-sex classes also stated that they used more direct commands and directives with male learners, which also agrees with the statistical findings presented in *Table 1*, and for more or less the same reason: to demonstrate their position of power and dominance in the class. Unlike the male teachers, however, the female teachers reported only using such direct commands and directives during periods of learner intransigence, when the class was exceptionally noisy, for example, rather than as a matter of course. If the class was behaving appropriately, according to the teacher’s own set of behavioral rules, then the teacher would intersperse more mitigated commands and directives among the more direct ones in an attempt to increase learner interactional participation.

As both the qualitative and quantitative data illustrate, teacher gender did not have an effect on the use of commands and directives, although learner gender and class level did. Regardless of teacher gender, all teacher groups used more direct command and directives with male learners, and more mitigated ones with female learners. Furthermore, according to the qualitative findings, both gendered teacher groups used

direct commands and directives for the same purpose; to establish and maintain their position of power and dominance in the class. If the teacher’s position was not threatened, both gendered teacher groups would utilise more mitigated commands and directives to foster a more positive classroom atmosphere, regardless of class type.

According to previous research, the male teachers would be expected to use more commands and directives overall, and more direct ones in particular. The female teachers, on the other hand, would be expected to use less, though more mitigated ones overall. However, this study found that the female teachers used more commands and directives overall, though they did use more mitigated ones; however, neither of these results were statistically significant. The gendered use of direct commands and directives was significant in that the female teachers used more of them than the male teachers, which is contrary to many previous gender studies. The size of the class, class type and level were all factors that were especially relevant. In order for the female teachers to appear in control of the class, a higher frequency of commands and directives may have been required. The female teachers believed that, in some classes, the male learners were uninterested in studying English, and were there by force rather than choice. In addition, as Patai (1983) points out, Arab males tend to express their feelings of frustration and anger openly, and when viewed in conjunction with the male Arab view of women as subordinate to men, the reason for the greater number of commands and directives used by the female teachers in mixed-sex classes becomes apparent. Such a social environment could have created a difficult situation for both the teachers and

the learners to operate in. The male teachers in the group, although subject to pressures of class control, did not have to use such a high frequency of commands and directives as the female teachers, as Arab learners have different cultural views of men and women, and the male teachers were apparently able to use this Arab view to their advantage.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, although some gender differences were found in this study, the similarities between the gendered teacher groups far outweighed the differences as regards verbal interaction patterns. All gendered teacher groups used commands and directives, to varying degrees, to establish and maintain their positions of power and dominance in the class. In other words, the teachers appeared to be more genderless than gendered, being teachers first and gendered individuals second. Furthermore, all teachers in all class types modified their commands and directives according to the class type being taught. Both gendered teacher groups also tended to use more stereotypical male verbal interaction patterns when teaching male learners, and more stereotypical female verbal interaction patterns when teaching female learners. This would imply that the teachers, regardless of their gender, tended to modify their interaction patterns to establish and maintain their positions of

power and dominance in relation to class type. It was further found that many of the gender differences that did exist may have been imposed on the teachers by external Arab cultural gender norms over which the teachers themselves had little control.

This study would further seem to suggest that the teacher's position of power and dominance, not their gender per say, was the over-riding factor, at least as far as teachers in this study are concerned, in determining verbal interaction patterns in same-sex and mixed-sex EFL classrooms. Gender did seem to be a factor to some degree, however, but only in relation to the gender of the class type taught, not the gender of the teacher teaching the class. In all gendered groups, the teacher expected the learners to accommodate to them rather than the other way around regardless of the gender of the learners. This would seem to suggest that, as Coates (1993, p. 203) observed, both 'power and dominance' and the 'two cultures' approaches are needed to explain gendered interactions, and this would appear especially so in the EFL classroom. However, in the case of EFL teachers, the issue of power and dominance is related to teacher-learner interaction, not male – female interaction, and the two cultures that are meeting are not male and female language, but rather the culture of the teacher and the culture of the learners.

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