

## FEMINISM IN ALGERIAN EFL CLASSROOM: FEMALE STUDENTS' ENTHUSIASM AND MALE STUDENTS' ANXIETY

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explores the attitudes of Algerian students towards feminism in EFL classrooms. The study which involved a group of 25 Master students studying English in Chlef University came as an aftermath of a raising anti-feminism attitude among male students in the Literature class. As a matter of fact, male students do not hesitate to express their disappointment to the importance and omnipresence of feminism across the post graduate syllabus contents. Participants completed a scale of attitudes towards feminism which covers aspects related to the students' religious and cultural learning background. Results revealed that female students have pro-feministic views and expressed their desire to attend Literature class that devotes an important space of talk to feminism issues. Most female students believed that feminism needs to be omnipresent in the course of Literature to correlate with the growing recognition of women's right in current Algeria. On the other perspective, male students who are under the effect of female-dominated classroom whether in number and discussions reacted negatively to the conspicuous share of talk devoted to feminism during the two years of their Master Degree preparation. Male students believed that feminism is a western concept that stepped into the Algerian EFL learning context at a time where the Algerian society witnesses a massive change of gender roles under the effect of globalism. Hence, they had the opinion that women's status in Algeria is much better than ever and it is time to look at the newly introduced 'female' EFL teaching and learning concepts with a watchful eye.

**Keywords:** feminism, male students, literature, attitudes

### Introduction

Feminism as a topic has been lavishly dealt with in the Literature class in the Master level studies in Algerian universities. The new interest toward feminism might be owed to varied reasons. In fact, after the bloody decade (1990-2000), women started to assume new roles in society after years of suppression and rejection. Hence, it was the role of decision makers including university curriculum designers to highlight themes like feminism to encounter issues of gender discrimination and reset equal rights for women. The Algerian students, the boys in particular, were to be reminded to respect women. It is high time to end up with all past wrong practices towards women such as bullying, sexual harassment and assault in school. However, the degree of importance which was given feminism in the curriculum (the allotted time and coefficient) raised a sort of anti-attitude from the part of male students. Male students often showed their disagreement to the fact that more and more importance is given to feminism talk in the Literature course. The present study aims at depicting the students' major attitude to the incorporation of feminism in their two years Master taught syllabus.

### The Importance of Teaching Feminism

As a matter of fact, feminism has become a popular topic among our students due to many reasons. Girls and women do not receive equal time and attention in the different school learning stages and are often sexually harassed by boys or men when they are not taught about gender issues or given tools to fight sexism (AAUW, 1992). The aim of new trend of teaching literature is put to encourage secondary school teachers (the future career target aim of the current study population sample) to be agents of social change and foster the learners' understanding and assimilation of social values such as gender structure, gender symbolism, and individual gender in education (Arend, 2007). With regard to the Algerian context, the teaching of feminism came a reaction to years of terror and exclusion that women suffered from during the 'Dark Decade' of terrorism (1990/2000). Eventually, it was a call for men in Algeria to accept gender equity and offer women more chances to be active members in the economical, political and social spheres. However, the rise of feminism as an inspiring trend confronts certain key challenges while stepping in the classroom. The following section will shed light on the main challenges that face the teaching feminism in the Algerian classroom context.

### The Challenges of Feminism Teaching

Despite the growing interest to study feminism, teachers of Literature still look for more appropriate methods to teach feminism in a more comfortable classroom situation. One of the challenges is related to the pedagogy employed by teachers while dealing with feminism itself. Indeed, teachers teach feminism as they themselves were taught. It is time for teachers to consider the pedagogies that they need to implement in the Literature dealing with feminism in particular; this may cover aspects such as the changing role of the teacher, the teacher's

authority and the teacher's awareness of the feminism teaching theories. The feminist pedagogy is one concept that needs to be emphasized by the teacher while dealing with feminism in the Literature class. Feminism, like any other form of critical pedagogy, aims at developing the learners' critical thinking and open-mindedness (Hoffman and stake, 1998). However, in a male dominated society, such as the Algerian society, the issue of feminism teaching seems a challenge for the teacher of Literature who needs to cope with the opposing attitudes stemming out from the male students (though a minority sometimes) towards the topic feminism each time raised in the Literature class. Naturally, the feminism education came to sustain and promote equal chance of learning and practices in class, school and beyond (Schoeman, 2015). Yet, the suspicious feeling towards the women newly adopted or granted status in society is enough to cause feeling of threat and fear among male students in class; a fact that makes them often hold anti-feminist attitudes in the Literature class.

### **The Feminist Pedagogy**

Although various definitions were given to feminism (Arnold, 2000; Weiler, 1995), Shrewsbury's (1993, p.8) definition to feminist pedagogy entails genuine criteria for a theory about the teaching and learning process that would help to guide our classroom practices as teachers and learners and evaluate our desired goals and outcomes. The theory has been applied by instructors with different age levels at different learning spheres from elementary school classroom (e.g., Christie, 1997) to high school classroom (e.g., Bradley, 1994), the computer lab (Parry, 1996) and the professional conference (Bell, 1993). As far as the current research is concerned, it looks relevant to review the main principles of the feminist pedagogy. Webb et al. (2002) list six main principles under the feminist pedagogy:

*1-Reforming the relationship between the professor and student*: Both professor and student are to assume new roles. Although this reformation can be subject to constraints such as attitudes and norms of language, both students and teachers share power opportunities and assume responsibility for teaching and learning respectively. Indeed, the feminist pedagogy aims at increasing the students' interaction in the classroom through dialogue and stimulate their curiosity (Scerif, 1997).

*2-Empowerment*: Along with the principle of democracy and shared power, the feminist pedagogy encourages learners to develop their critical thinking and deal creatively through the 'practice of freedom' to learn how to participate in transforming their world (Middlecamp & Subramine, 1999). The principle of empowerment is not based on domination but rather on the concept of power and energy as a source of motivation. Hence, the teacher is no longer the unique source of knowledge and the classroom leader, yet he or she assumes the role of 'activation of multiple perspective' (Scerif, 1997, p.66).

*3-Building community*: building community and cooperation within classroom on one side and with the broader environment on the other side is one concern of feminist pedagogy. In the process of collaborative learning, the learner is expected to construct meaning through relationships and dialogue (Gawelek, Mulqueen, & Tarule, 1994, p.182). Collaboration aims at helping the learner to integrate his or her skills of critical thinking in the feminist classroom and improving his or her ability with others (Shrewsbury, 1993, p.9). Eventually, both female and male learners are brought together in a feminist classroom and act toward a more equitable society (Novek, 1999).

*4-Privileging the individual voice as a way of knowing*: According to Middlecamp & Subramaniam, (1999, p.521), different voices and dynamics are to emerge under the effect of fostering multiple authorities; when students are actively engaged in a feminist classroom, their feedback is sought and incorporated and, hence, they feel less intimidated and more approachable. Indeed, the student's voice should be highly heard in all academic spheres; in lectures, writing, discussions and in faculty meetings. Indeed, methodology and course content assimilation is fostered as long as the unique voice of each student is not reserved for oral performance courses.

*5- Respect for diversity of personal experience*: Personal lived experiences act the basis for analysis for feminist theory (Foss & Foss, 1994). Moreover, factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexual preference shape our social position and, thus, affect our way of understanding in feminist pedagogy (Parry, 1996, p.46). Students are likely to respect each other and their anxiety disappears the time they start sharing their personal experiences. According to Weiler (1988, p.58), lived experience should be the core element of feminist research. Hence, truth which stems out of valued diversity and understanding to that its knowledge is the main concern of feminist theory.

*6-The Challenge to Traditional Views*: school has a significant role in the construction of values through knowledge and relevant teaching methods. By the implementation of the feminist teaching methods, gender is

reinforced through the dichotomisation of nurturance and autonomy , public and private , and masculine and feminine ( Scering , 1997).For feminist teachers, the notion of challenge extends to dare the traditional forms of ideas and their origins and way they are taught in a given class ( Wood and Lenze , 1991).Research in the field of feminist theory has envisaged to help students understand themselves as a requirement and raise their awareness to the fact that values are open to inquiry and change.

After Webb et al.( 2002) had identified the above six principles of feminist pedagogy , they invited researchers to a more exploration of the feminist pedagogy by participating in the four strategies to allow more widespread adoption of the feminist theory : a) similar essays might be work as a insightful basis for instructors in the field of feminism aiming for more egalitarian classrooms.b) since practice makes perfect ,teachers are asked to do more practice with feminist pedagogy to become more widely accepted.c) feminist pedagogy will continue in its spread as long as it receives the appropriate assessment by supervisors based on the students' evaluation to the instructors' course.d)sharing ideas about feminist pedagogy with colleagues can be also fruitful since both men and women enjoy egalitarianism.

### **Data Gathering Procedures and Findings**

The present study main purpose was to identify the students' attitude to the subject of feminism in the Literature class.The study came as a result of depicted ' complaint' from the part of a given number of male students in particular to the importance given to the teaching of feminism in Master studies .According to these students, feminism as a subject has received excessive talk and , thus, an important amount of time compared to other aspect of Literature.

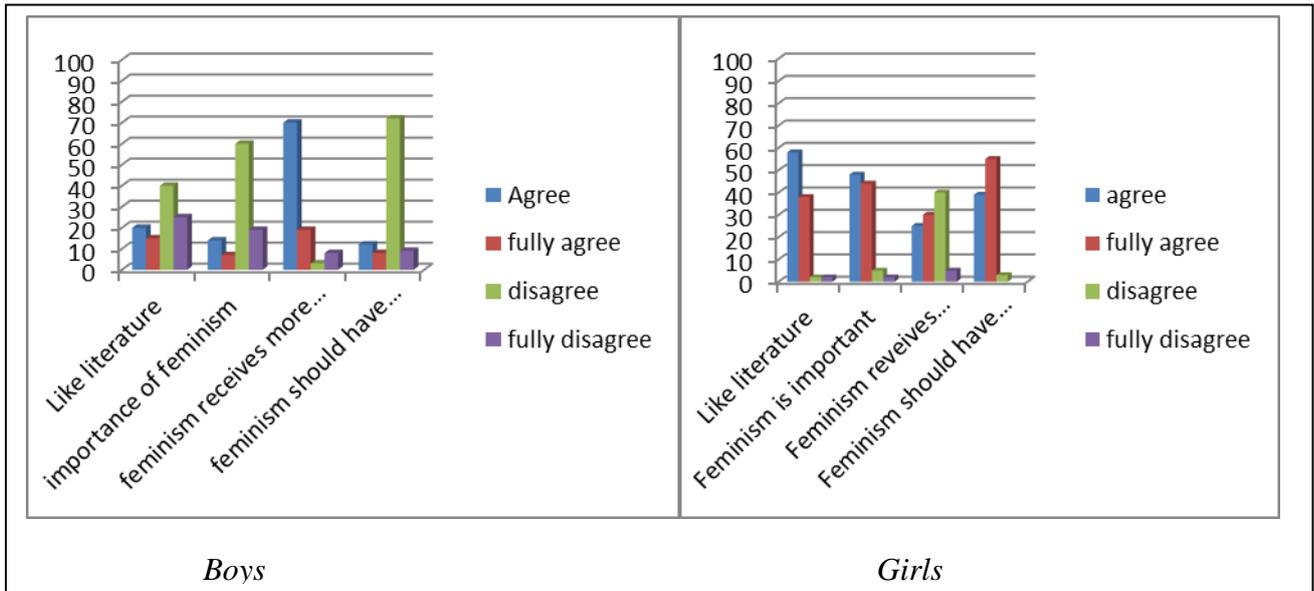
The study relied on a questionnaire of 12 questions classified under three different categories :

Students' general information ( age and gender), the students' attitude to the incorporation of feminism in the Literature class( the attitude towards feminism,male , female- dominated or a egalitarian class)and finally a detailed students' cultural and social background information ( their social class, religious state , their type of community , their relation with their parents and their parents' level of education).With regard the questions concerning the students' attitude to literature , they were set up in a table of likert scale form of four columns graded from fully agree to fully disagree.Information concerning the students' cultural background were gathered in a table of columns also graded in *Yes* , *No* and *Uncertain* .In both cases , the students were invited to tick the response that best identify their true ttitude to feminism and determines their exact cultural background respectively.

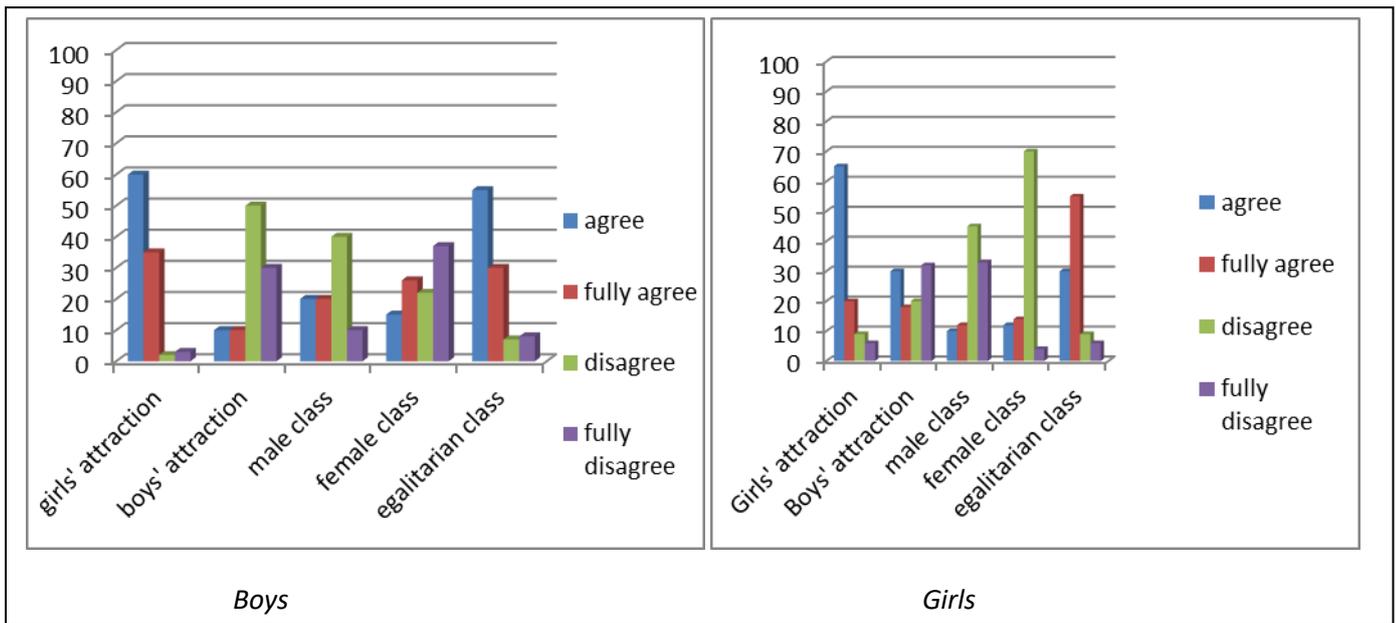
With regard to the population of the study , the data was gathetred from 25 Master students randomly selected who are supposed to be living in chlef city center( a town to the middle west of Algeria) or coming its suburbs , whose age ranges between 22 and 24 years old, and who normally have dealt with feminism as a topic in their two years of the Literature course.

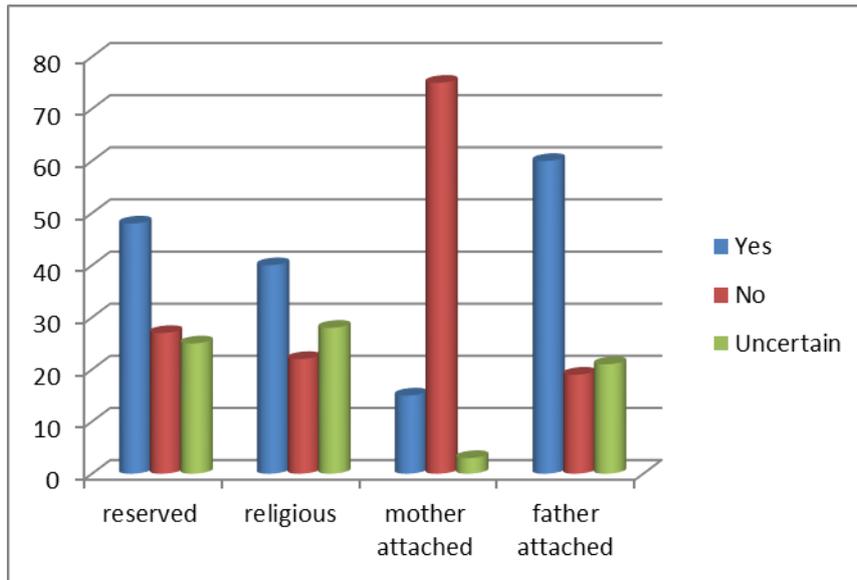
The procedure of analysis simply involves drawing a summary of the findings of the students' responses of the three different questions' categories then matching between them to check and weigh the amount of their correlation .The purpose is to findout to what extent the students' attitude to feminism teaching is affected by their cultural background.

Data analysis :



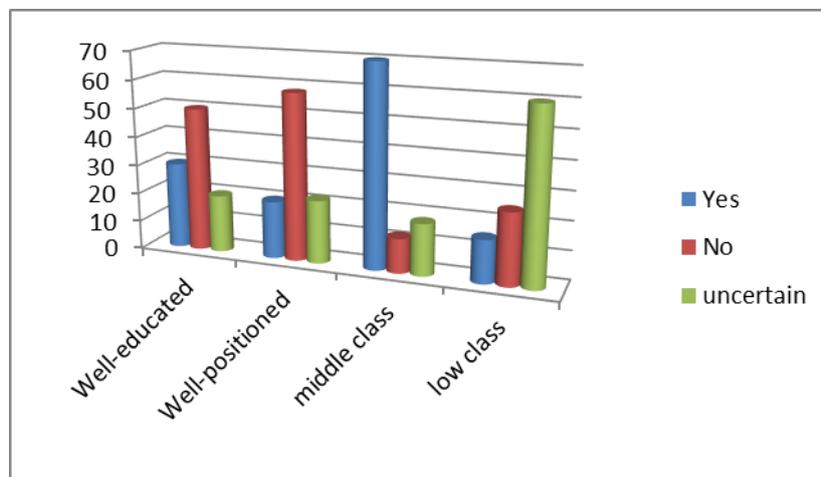
Literature rather than feminism. The fact that their number is small is another factor that makes male students feel being dominated by the female students and show their negative attitude to feminism each time dealt with in the Literature class.





**Figure 3: Male students' Social Background**

Part of the male students' negative attitude to feminism seems to stem out from their social and cultural background as shown in Figure3. Indeed , an important number of boys admitted their ' reference bag' which introduce them as individuals coming from rather reserved and religious regions in the suburbs of Chlef area.Raising the aspect of religion does not mean necessarily that the Islamic religion has encouraged people in general and those students in particular to hold anti-Feminist views , yet as any divine source of knowledge , it is the people's understanding to it which turns to become attitudes to such a concept of feminism, for instance.Eventually, the attitude of feminism in class is the accumulation of social attitudes which resist change and hold a 'fear' of 'external concept' such as feminism.One other aspect that that seem to play a part in the males' negative attitude to feminism is that male-dominated society where boys are much attached to their fathers and , thus, reflect similar exclusive behaviour to feminine notions in general.



**Figure 4: Male students' Social Status and Education**

The aim of this part of the questionnaire was to check the relation that might exist between the students' attitude to feminism and their parents' education.The findings revealed that most male student belong to the middle class . The aspects that seem to affect the students' attitude to the study of feminism is the parents' education and their position in society.Educated parents in general have already studied in schools of mixed gender type and , thus , show certain flexibility and understanding to gender issues such as feminism . The same view point for students coming from well-positioned families in society who generally believe that respect to women and valuing their reight as equal individuals to men in society is feature of civilized prestigious life.

Varied factors intervene in shaping the students' attitude to feminism in the Algerian EFL classroom teaching context.These can entail cultural factors related to the students' religious beliefs , the type of community they were born and brought up in and their family status.

## Conclusion

The results of the survey revealed the apparent dissatisfaction of the male students to the omnipresent of the feminism in the Literature course along the two years of their Master studies. The students expressed it clearly that although they prefer to study in egalitarian class, they consider the amount of time and talk devoted to in the Literature course as 'unreasonable'. The male students admit that feminism is not just encountered in the Literature course but discussion about feminism can take an important share of the Civilization lecture. The study aimed at depicting the actual reasons that would make the students hold such a negative attitude to study feminism. One of the reasons is related to the students' cultural background and religious traditional belief which expects women to be dependent on men in every life aspect. The fact of being born in a close community is another factor behind the male students' anxiety to the study of feminism. With regard to openness, some male students coming from well-educated families confirm that they consider feminism as any other topic that deserved to be explored more in the Literature class to enrich their knowledge about it.

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