Moving from a Segregated to a Coeducational Context: Exploring Iranian Female Medical Students' Ownership and Investment in Language Learning

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Abstract

The present study examined Iranian female medical students' transition from a segregated school system to a coeducational university context to uncover how they invested in their learning in the new context. The participants of this qualitative study were 23 female medical students, taking a general English language course in a mixed class of 54 students. This was their first experience of being in a coeducational environment. During the term, the researchers/instructors observed the class and interviewed the students to examine their understanding and feelings about this experience and its influence on their learning. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Taking Norton's (2015) investment model as a point of departure, the findings showed that female students invested in language learning by focusing on the capital, identity, and ideology that they were dealing with in the coeducational class. The findings showed that despite the common belief in the Iranian society that female learners are shy in coeducational settings, the participants invested in learning and owned their identity as medical students. They considered the class as a miniature setting to learn how to cooperate effectively with the male students to be ready for the mixed environment of their future profession.

Pasar de un Contexto Segregado a uno Coeducativo: Exploración de Apropiación e Inversión de las Estudiantes de Medicina Iraníes en el Aprendizaje de Idiomas

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Resumen

El presente estudio examinó la transición de las estudiantes de medicina iraníes de un sistema escolar segregado a un contexto universitario coeducativo para descubrir cómo invertían en su aprendizaje en el nuevo contexto. Las participantes en este estudio cualitativo fueron 23 estudiantes de medicina, que tomaban un curso de inglés general en una clase mixta de 54 estudiantes. Era su primera experiencia en un entorno coeducativo. Durante el trimestre, los investigadores/instructores observaron la clase y entrevistaron a las estudiantes para examinar su comprensión y sus sentimientos sobre esta experiencia y su influencia en su aprendizaje. Los datos se analizaron a través del análisis temático. Tomando el modelo de inversión de Norton (2015) como punto de partida, los hallazgos mostraron que las estudiantes invirtieron en el aprendizaje de idiomas centrándose en el capital, la identidad y la ideología que estaban tratando en la clase coeducativa. Los resultados mostraron que, a pesar de la creencia común en la sociedad iraní de que las estudiantes son tímidas en los entornos coeducativos, las participantes invirtieron en el aprendizaje y se apropiaron de su identidad como estudiantes de medicina. Consideraban la clase como un escenario para aprender a cooperar eficazmente con los estudiantes masculinos y estar preparadas para el entorno mixto de su futura profesión.

Gender plays an important role in each educational system, and it can influence students' academic performance in different ways (Adigun et. al., 2015; Akabayashi, 2020; Ebrahimi & Yarahmadzehi, 2015). Apart from biological differences, sociocultural differences in various contexts have resulted in assigning different roles and sometimes stereotypes to girls and boys (Adigun et. al., 2015) that can directly or indirectly influence their perception of themselves regarding what society expects from them.

Based on different ideological and socio-political perspectives, educational systems in the world have different policies about educating boys and girls. While in the majority of countries, coeducation has been practiced for a long time, in some educational systems segregated education system is mandatory. Previous studies have shown contradictory results about the advantages and disadvantages of segregated and coeducational schools. While some studies showed the beneficial effect of segregated schools on students' achievement (Lee & Bryk, 1986), other researchers referred to the lack of academic or social benefits of segregated schools (LePore & Warren, 1996; Marsh et al., 1989; Willis & Kenway, 1986).

In Iran, the educational system has tried to promote gender equality in accessing higher education and has achieved considerable success in this regard (Rezaee, et. al., 2012), and today, the percentage of girls enrolled at the universities is higher than that of boys. However, after the Islamic Revolution, schools have become segregated for boys and girls from K1 to K12. In tertiary education, however, the coeducational system is dominant. This transition from a segregated to a coeducational environment and the effect that it can have on students' identity and performance in the classroom is a topic that has not been investigated in the previous studies. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the effect of this transition on female students participating in a general English language course, and the extent that they tried to invest in learning in the new environment.

Identity and the Investment Model for Learning

The quest for knowing the self, the ego, the "me" inside, or the "I", is an old subject in the mind of the researchers for examining the issue of identity in

different contexts (Giddens, 1991; Woodward, 2004). It is a vast topic in all of the fields concerned with society and psychology. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the past two decades faced a rush of research on identity and language learning (Hansen & Liu, 1997; Jenkins, 2009; Joseph, 2004; Llamas & Watt, 2009; Nematzadeh & Haddad Narafshan, 2020; Norton & De Costa 2018; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Sang, 2016), and the work of Norton on identity and investment founded a groundwork for an in-depth look into the issue of language learning and identity (Darvin & Norton, 2015). In Norton's definition, "identity is how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p.45).

Weedon (1987) notes that language is an important phenomenon that constructs the main part of our characteristics such as ego and identity, and it is a fact that identity is not a simple one layered entity and it is changing over time in different situations.

In 1995, Norton proposed the investment model maintaining that a learner should invest in learning rather than just being motivated. In her idea, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories did not fully investigate the role of social identity in language learning and how power influences interaction. She mentioned that other people's power can hinder learning as in one of her studies a girl named Eva did not invest in learning as she believed she was degraded in the context by the powerful individuals. Investment is defined by Darvin and Norton (2018) as:

> the commitment to the goals, practices, and identities that constitute the learning process and that are continually negotiated in different social relationships and structures of power. In this view, learners can be highly motivated to learn a language, but may not necessarily be invested in the language practices of a given classroom if its practices are, for example, racist or sexist (p. 2).

Investment is a very important issue in language learners' identity and learning. It is mentioned that investment tries to bring a new look into the old dichotomies that put learners into frameworks and define their identities as they are motivated or not or if they are anxious or calm (Darvin & Norton,

2015). Investment defines a language learner's identity as constantly changing in different situations and is remade in social interaction. Kramsch (2013) believed that the notion of investment "accentuates the role of human agency and identity in engaging with the task at hand, in accumulating economic and symbolic capital, in having stakes in the endeavor and in persevering in that endeavor" (p. 195).

Darvin and Norton (2015) examined three concepts of capital, ideology, and identity in relation to investment. The ideology in this model is related to language ideology which highlights how social practices are outlined by language. Many issues are raised in this part of the model like ethno-linguistic identities, policies of language, and values related to language. The notion of 'ideology' here means some norms, principles, and ideas. Bourdieu (1987) believes that these ideas are the result of the power that governs the world that constructs reality. These ideas position the learners in different situations when they want to communicate. The dominant ideological power in different contexts prohibits or fosters an event to happen i.e. communication for language learners (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Learners enter a learning situation with linguistic repertoire, personal resources, and social agendas so they are not empty containers that should be filled in the learning environment. In other words, they have their capital and as they come into a new space they should invest their capital into something which is accepted in the context. Based on this model, learners possess different ideologies and imagined identities for themselves in each learning situation they participate in.

As students seek more to find their identities, they position themselves in different patterns of control regarding how much access they have to the learning resources such as books and technological devices (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Actually, the capital that the students have, acts as their affordances of learning. It is whatever the students possess in even their mother tongue that can facilitate learning another language (Norton, 2015).

Based on the model, systematic patterns of control will also define and influence a learner's identity. Pennycook (2007) notes that while students are sunk into learning English and consider it as beneficial, they do not think of the hegemony of language and the control it may have on their identity. In this regard, teachers should be aware of these patterns of control and attract

students' attention to navigate what they are doing and what the language does to them (Norton, 2015)

Apart from systematic patterns of control and affordances of learning, all learners try to locate themselves in different situations aligned with other people. However, because of the different patterns of control that ideologies have on people, learners position their own identity based on their race, gender, social class, and ethnicity. Also, others can place people in different situations and conditions (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2015). In a study by Mustafa and Alghamdi (2020) different factors influencing English language investment in English language learning of Saudi women were investigated. They mentioned that there are many issues eschewing women in Saudi Arabia to learn the English language while at the same time there are some other factors helping them to partake in learning. Learning English helped these Saudi women to self-leverage and develop their capabilities in carrying out their career and education as well as helping them with their children's education (Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020).

Identity, Learning, and Educational Setting

Linked up with identity, learning is believed to be partly the product of cultural and social processes (Ernest, 1999; Gredler, 1997; Kaino, 2008; Pravat & Floden, 1994). Language learning is the way that people place themselves in a bond with other people, a way that they make societies and shape power to define themselves with it and sometimes manipulate people in different places (Lippi-Green, 1997). Therefore, the learning context/environment has a pivotal role in students' learning and success (Rudman & Glick, 2008). The issue of 'habitus' in identity is what Bourdieu (2000) calls feeling "at home" while learning a language in an environment (p.150). Therefore, regarding identity and learning environment, the 'habitus' can play a major role in defining the self.

Built on the educational policies of different contexts, students may experience different types of schooling based on a special system of beliefs. For example, while in many parts of the world, a coeducational system has been practiced, in the Iranian educational system all students should go to segregated schools for all K-12 years of formal education (from the first grade

of elementary school to the last year of high school). Having passed this period, they enter into the university level studies if being qualified in which the coeducational system has been practiced for a long time.

The previous studies examining the positive and negative effects of coeducation vs. segregated education on boys' and girls' performance and educational success have concluded with mixed results (Ebrahimi & Yarahmadzehi, 2015; Gwarjiko, 2015; Pahlke, et. al, 2014). Some researchers believe that coeducation has positive effects on both boys' and girls' learning. For example, Bosire et. al. (2008) found that students taught in coeducational settings outperformed those in segregated schools. It is also believed that coeducation settings motivate students to work more which can result in higher academic achievements (LePore & Warren, 1997). Even some researchers believe that segregated education is harmful to the physical, social, psychological, and emotional development of students (Younger & Warrington, 2006). Another line of research indicated that coeducation is more beneficial for boys because teachers tend to interact more with the boys and they encourage boys more than girls (Brenner, 1998; Mirembe & Davies, 2001).

According to Norton's ideas (2000), gender is very important in talking about identity in different situations. In fact, individuals construct their identity via language and make borders among themselves and others since language is defined through culture, social context, and discourse (Woodward, 2004). Therefore, as the boys participate more in the classroom activities and benefit from the power of language, teachers think that girls who tend to be silent do not understand or know the answers (Francis, 2004).

Some researchers believe that there are more distractors in coeducational settings for girls than those for boys resulting in a lower level of concentration and ultimately lower academic achievement by girls (Mael, 1998). Besides, it is believed that boys' attitudes toward girls may reduce girls' attentiveness towards the lessons (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker, et. al., 2009). The reason behind this claim is that in segregated schools, girls are more self-confident and this can empower them to act better in the learning environment while in mixed settings they try to invest differently to keep themselves safe of the wrong judgments, thus they change their identity in different contexts (Norton, 2000).

Some studies found that students in segregated schools have more achievements in standardized tests (Riordan, 1994). They can have more concentration on the subjects being taught and interact with each other more easily which can positively affect their learning. It was shown that girls studying in segregated schools have a more positive self-concept and self-confidence, higher self-esteem, better academic performance, and more leadership skills compared with those attending coeducational schools (Smyth, 2010; Thompson, 2003). Furthermore, boys were also shown to have better academic performance in segregated schools (Mburu, 2013). In higher levels of co-educational classes, adolescent female students often find themselves unsettled and uncomfortable, and this can negatively influence their performance as they try to be silent and do not participate in class discussions (Younger & Warrington, 2006).

Furthermore, it is believed that segregated education is beneficial for students in some of the subject areas such as Mathematics, Science, and English (Crosswell & Hunter, 2012). It is also noted by some researchers that based on the biological needs and differences of learners, it is important to separate education so the students can receive specific instruction which suits their gender characteristics (Gurian, et. al., 2001; Sax, 2005).

Being accustomed to the segregated system of education during the school years, and then suddenly entering into a coeducational system of universities is not an easy transition for many students and can therefore negatively influence their learning (Ebrahimi & Yarahmadzehi, 2015). This negative influence may be even more evident in EFL classes where students need more interaction and cooperation in the classroom. However, despite its significance and potential pedagogical implications, the transition from a segregated to a co-educational system in the Iranian context has not received enough attention in the related literature. Therefore, this study tries to examine if the transition from a segregated learning environment of a school to a co-educational setting can affect the female students' performance in language learning classrooms and whether this change can hinder them to invest in their learning to protect their identity while participating in classroom activities.

Following the footsteps of investment and identity notions grounded in Norton's Model (2015) in the EFL context and based on the purpose of the study to explore how female students find themselves in a mixed learning

environment, the following question was raised:

To what extent do EFL learners invest in language learning in a new mixed context of the classroom?

Methods

This qualitative study is nested on an interpretive phenomenology design which tries to reveal the meaning which is hidden in a phenomenon (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). It is based on the interviews and narratives to bring about meaning, and it is the researchers who uncover the embedded meaning from the words of the participants (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). According to Pathak (2017), a "phenomenological research design is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions and understanding of a particular phenomenon. Lived experience of a group around a specific phenomenon is the central research question in a phenomenological study" (p. 1719). Furthermore, Moran (2000) mentioned that in phenomenology the aim is to conquer the biases that hinder consciousness and through this method explain the ways that people can achieve awareness of a situation. As such, the present study strived to untie the meaning concealed in the words of female students who struggled to find their voices in an EFL classroom and to show their identities as influential members of their society in the university context.

Participants

The participants of the study were 23 female medical students, aged 18 to 20, among the total number of 54 learners (male and female) who took part in a general English course at the Birjand University of Medical Sciences. They were selected for the research through convenient sampling by selecting all the female students from the class. The general English course having three units was an obligatory course that students had to pass to enter the next levels of professional English for medical purposes. The class was held twice a week for one and half hours for 24 sessions in one semester. Throughout the course, learners had to work on English by participating in class discussions and doing their assignments. The class was composed of both male and female students taking part in a co-educational environment of the university for the first time

because the main purpose of this study was to examine the Iranian students' transition from segregated schools (from K1 to K12) to the coeducational environment of universities. As they had group works and discussions as parts of their class routines, they had to work and collaborate in the classroom.

Instrumentation

Interviews and class observations were the main sources of data in this study. The interviews shed light on the darkness to uncover meaning in students' words. The semi-structured interviews were in the students' mother language (Farsi). As this study is based on Norton's (2015) investment model, the following questions in the interview were raised to elicit students' answers to three elements of the model which are capital, identity, and ideology:

1. Has entering a coeducational system had any influence on your willingness to communicate in the class?
2. To what extent has your English language proficiency affected your classroom participation in the coeducational environment of the class?
3. To what extent have your characteristics influenced your class performance?
4. To what extent has your belief system (personal or social) influenced your investment in the coeducational class?
5. In general, do you believe that a coeducational environment can improve or impede language learning?

Results

The students' answers to the interview questions were recorded and then transcribed and the related themes were extracted through coding. Coding is labeling and analyzing units of meaning from the information that are compiled to come to an understanding of a phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Here, as the study is grounded in the idea of investment and the elements of this theory (capital, identity, and ideology) were the issue of concern, the researchers tried to go through the data and decipher codes and locate them in the investment theory. Accordingly, axial coding was used to

categorize the concepts found through the data, based on the investment model. Axial coding relates categories to the subcategories that are linked together; it is drawing together data in a way that focuses on the relationship among the categories (Mills, et. al., 2010).

Data analysis indicated that in general, despite the odds of shyness of female students in mixed classes at the beginning, they gradually tried to show themselves and make their voices be heard by all the students who were present in the class.

Among the 23 female participants of the study, some students mentioned that they were shy and were afraid of the wrong judgments of others in the class. At the beginning of the semester, they thought that if they articulate something wrong they may be labeled as incompetent in English, so they tried to remain silent or only answer when addressed by the teacher. What follow are some excerpts of the students' answers to the interview questions (the names are pseudonyms): "I feel anxious while speaking in front of other students in the class. I believe that the mixed class has increased the level of my classroom anxiety, although I am satisfied with the class activities" (Interview: Hamide).

> Because of my shyness in mixed classes, I prefer that our English class be held separately, so I can speak English in the class and improve my language. Now it is harder, especially talking in front of others in the first semester. (Interview: Zahra).

"Participating in the mix classes in the university can have a negative effect on my learning of the language. We may be ashamed of the male students who are around us. This feeling is bad". (Interview: Maryam) "Yes, in university classes, because they are mixed, it is difficult to talk about our opinions". (Interview: Raha)

However, even at the beginning of the semester, some other students thought it was very good that they were in the mixed classrooms and it could help them to show themselves and even learn from others as indicated in the following excerpts: "No, I do not think that it can influence my learning negatively, and I think the same for others. I think it is the student's motivation and also the teacher's performance that can influence learning so much".

(Interview: Reyhan). "We can learn in each situation and the mixed classes shouldn't influence our learning negatively. Speaking is very important for learning a new language and students should not be afraid of it". (Interview: Rosha). "I think the atmosphere of the class has a positive influence on students' learning because it makes students try more and this helps them to improve their English language". (Interview: Sana). "Yes it has a positive effect on my performance because the class is more competitive." (Interview: Leila)

> After graduation from the medical school, we need to work together in the hospitals to cure patients. So, I think the coeducational environment can help us to know each other and have more effective collaboration at work in the future (Interview: Zahra).

Gradually, more and more female students believed that these kinds of classes (coeducational) had a positive effect because they were more competitive, and they tried to show their abilities more. They believed that the students themselves and the teacher had more important effects on their learning and achievement. They thought that in this class they could work better and learn from each other. Furthermore, considering the mixed working content of hospitals, they believed that the coeducational environment can prepare them more effectively for their future profession.

Nested on Norton's investment theory, the three components of the model (capital, identity, and ideology) were investigated in the words of the female students to find out how they invest in learning a language in this mixed classroom.

Investing in language: Capital, Identity, Ideology

Capital

English language in many countries in the world turned into a capital, something that helps people to show themselves and express their needs. In an EFL context, students have to know how to use this capital to define themselves which makes it a difficult task. They should bring into the context

both linguistic and paralinguistic language so they become able to communicate effectively (Vasilopoulos, 2015). Accordingly, the data showed that although the atmosphere of the mixed class influenced students' willingness to communicate especially at the beginning of the semester, their English language proficiency had also an important role in their inclination for participating in the classroom dialogue and discussion. Some of them wrote that their low language proficiency was the reason they did not want to talk in the class: "Because my English language proficiency is low, I preferred to speak less especially as our class was held mostly in English I was afraid of saying a wrong answer". (Interview: Maryam)

> At first, it was difficult for me to talk, but I tried to say some words because it was the only place that I could speak English. Although I knew that my English language proficiency was not very high, I tried to participate in classroom dialogues and conversations. I wrote some sentences on a piece of paper first and then tried to read them aloud in the class. In this way, I felt more secure about what I wanted to say. (Interview: Rosha)

"Although the classes were good, the students did not have a good command of English which decreased their ability to participate in the class". (Interview: Shina). "I knew many words and sentences in English but I couldn't put them together at first. I am not afraid of boys or other students in the class. Just I am not sure if I can speak English accurately". (Interview: Zahra)

Darvin and Norton (2015) also mentioned that students bring their capitals to a learning environment and the teacher's job is to be aware of those values related to capitals such as prior knowledge, their mother tongue, and their literacy capacities. All these help students to invest or refrain from investing in the class.

Identity

Examining the students' comments shed light on the importance of students' characteristics and the extent that their willingness to communicate in this context was important for them. Female students showed that they wanted to

have a voice, especially in this environment and it was not important that they were in front of other classmates from another gender. They tried to prove to others that they are capable enough to participate in classroom activities. They tried to be themselves and not be afraid of communicating in the class as indicated in the following excerpts: In this context, I could cope with my stress and talk in front of others. I think the university is a better place than high school". (Interview: Raha). "I am a quiet person in general but here I tried to be more active. It was difficult at the beginning but when I sat in the front rows everything changed to be better". (Interview: Fahimeh). "We should show ourselves in these situations. It is not good to be always silent. In this way, other students may think we know nothing". (Interview: Mahsa).

> It depends on the feelings and characteristics of each person. We should want to do something. I wanted to learn. Our performance should be correct. This class is for me, and I should care more about myself and my learning than other students' judgment. (Interview: Zohre)

Here the students mentioned issues such as coping with fear, being active participants, showing themselves, being eager to learn, and being self-confident, as important factors in mixed classes. These features and activities are related to the notion of identity as multiple and fluid which changes over time and space (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Female learners tried to overcome their fears and be themselves to show who they were. Being an active participant in the class helped them to find themselves and reach their stance in the class. They found their relationship to the world of the class by being vigorous, confident, and eager to achieve their learning goals despite the new coeducational environment.

Ideology

According to Darvin and Norton (2015) ideologies are defined as "dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 72). Therefore, when a person decides to act in an environment, s/he should be aware of these ideological issues to be able to operate in that system of communication

(Darvin & Norton, 2016). The results of the interviews with the students on the issue of belief systems showed that female students did not think that separate classes were always better. On the other hand, they believed that they should be able to act in contexts that are not fixed and static ideologically. Despite all of its difficulties, speaking English as a foreign language in the class helped the students to be more confident in their abilities as indicated in the following excerpts: "Segregated schooling is outdated. We should be ourselves and try to be the best". (Interview: Roya)

> We have come to a bigger environment and our audience are so much different from the school. This decreases our fear and prepares us to speak in English in every situation. Finally, we should live in the society together, so we have to talk and communicate with people of the opposite gender. We should learn to be polite while communicating with each other. (Interview: Sana)

> If we learn how to communicate in the class we can act better. For sure, it is not easy to be in mixed classes at the beginning since we had experienced segregated classes for a long time during our K12. But it is not important. It depends on us to respect each other. (Interview: Dina).

Even though they had studied in segregated environments and now entered a mixed atmosphere, the learners did not think that it was a significant change that could influence their learning. They tried to be themselves and respect each other in the class. They found it as a good opportunity to be ready for a bigger community of people from different walks of life. In fact, they believed that as they should live in the society together, this class provided a good context for them to be more familiar with the other gender. Respect, politeness, and the sense of being oneself were important ideological aspects that the students tried to promote in their performance during the course and they did not allow the new atmosphere to influence their behavior negatively. Moreover, they took it as an opportunity to invest in learning.

Generally, most of the female students preferred the coeducational system and did not believe it could be a hindrance to their learning or performance in another language. They tried to prove themselves and showed that they were good enough to be a part of the class society. They became

more confident whenever they spoke and tried to be more active as indicated in the following excepts: "I think it is good to be in a mixed class. We are a small society and we need to be ourselves here". (Interview: Maha)

> Impede learning?!! Not at all. Why should being in a mixed class keep us away from talking or expressing our ideas? It is very good for us. We all learn to prove that we are good and you can see we (girls) are always volunteered to answer questions in your class. (Interview: Diana)

> At first I was frightened. But when I started speaking in the class it became normal for me. I like it more in this way, not like the high school where we were all girls in the class. When I sat in the first row of the class and answered the questions like others, it gave me a good feeling to talk more. Now I am more confident to talk in other classes too. (Interview: Sana)

> It makes no difference for me. There is no difference between girls and boys. Some of the boys were also shy in front of us. I think this mixed class was good for both genders because you asked all of us and we all had the opportunity to talk about our ideas in front of each other (Interview: Nasrin).

Owning and Investing in Language Learning

As indicated in Table 1, despite the difficulties that some of the female students faced at the beginning of the semester, gradually they learned how to own their identity, ideology, and their language as the capital.

Table1

Investment model and the notion of ownership in the data

Investment		Ownership
Capital	• Using the English language with different proficiency levels • Benefiting from whatever they knew about the English language to communicate	• Owning the language as a capital in the class • Feeling more secure in using the language
Ideology	• Feeling of respect and politeness for being in the new society of a mixed class • Removing the barriers of presence and talking in a mixed environment • Cooperating in learning	• Owning and defining new ideological principles toward learning in a coeducational context • Emphasizing the idea that knowing a language is a kind of empowerment in every situation
Identity	• Coping with stress • Being more active • Caring about the self-image in a learning environment • Coping with shyness • Gaining confidence	• Owning the identity as a female student in a mixed class • Finding a voice and overcoming negative traits such as stress, shyness, and annoyance

Owing who they are and what they want as female university students were the result of investing in the English language class regardless of the co-educational system. Female learners learned that although it may seem rather difficult to invest in a new environment and express their ideas through the English language, it could be flourishing and thriving at the same time to show who they are and what they are going to achieve.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the literature about the notion of investment and the three elements of identity, ideology, and capital in the Norton's (2015) theory of investment, the female students' answers to the interview questions were analyzed to see how much they invested in learning in the coeducational environment. As these students had not experienced mixed classrooms in the formal educational system before entering the university, it was supposed that they may participate less in the class to save their face and identity in front of the male students.

Categorizing the data based on the investment model showed that through investment, the students owned their language (as the capital), their identity, and their ideology as female learners. The idea of ownership showed that no matter what the situation was, the students could invest in different learning situations. Darvin and Norton (2015) believed that when learners become sure that they have control of their identities, they invest in taking control of their power relations, capital, and their way of thinking.

Having analyzed the data, the researchers found that female students were strong and tried to show their strengths to themselves and others. They participated actively in the class discussions, volunteered to give presentations, did their assignments completely, and even when they felt shy, they tried to be themselves and cope with their fears. Gee (2004) mentioned that when speakers of a language tend to join a group or show their abilities, they hunt for a more positive identity. It is also believed that when learners participate in a language environment, it gives them a feeling of "self-enhancement" (Kramsch, 2009, p. 63). Thus, when in the present study the female students participated in the classroom activities more and felt success in the mixed environment, they reached self-enhancement and participated more.

Despite their long experience of being taught in a segregated environment during their school years, female students did not think that in a coeducational context they may be less successful. They believed that they should be ready for entering a bigger society, and participating in the class could help them overcome their fears.

Norton (2015) noted that if students invest in learning, they get so many

positive aspects like friendship and knowledge which can enhance their power and grow their self-confidence and identity. Here in this study, the female students tried to be themselves and did not allow the mixed atmosphere of the class and the ideological belief system to influence their performance. They showed that as females they had a strong identity that should not be hidden and should grow stronger.

Generally speaking, in the present study the female students did not think that the mixed atmosphere may act as a hindrance, and they believed that it could improve cooperation, and encourage them to prove their abilities to others. Similarly, Norton (2015) also believed that learners who want to have more powerful identities try to reshape their relationships with others so that they can gain or prove the identity that they have despite the unequal power relations. This study showed that despite the beliefs in some contexts that consider girls as the "weaker sex" (Adigun et. al. 2015, p.1), female students in this EFL context strived to do their best, and did not allow the situation to affect their success and improvement.

The present study aimed at examining the female university students' transition from segregated to co-educational contexts. The findings indicated that female students favored the co-educational system because they believed that it is a better reflection of the society in which they should work and live with males. However, considering the problems that some of the female students may encounter at the beginning of the process, it is incumbent upon the policymakers and the responsible officials to smooth the transition of students from segregated to educational contexts. Considering the significant role of gender and identity on students' learning and the paucity of research in this regard, it is hoped that future studies try to explore further aspects of the investment model in learning a language, especially in situations that females should experience a new teaching environment.

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