

Saudi women EFL learners' expressing guilt and defiance discourses: Evolving their gendered identities

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English is now widely considered the most powerful and influential language in the world. Saudi Arabia believes that its transition from oil to a knowledge-based economy is dependent on its citizenry learning English as a foreign language (EFL). To play their role, Saudi women need access to EFL, access that is affected by their agency and responses to challenging gendered norms. This exploratory qualitative study sheds light on two discourses associated with Saudi women investing in learning EFL: guilt and defiance. Data were collected (2018-2019) via semi-structured interviews with nine Saudi women of various ages, social, educational, employment, and sectarian backgrounds. A thematic analysis revealed how Saudi women exhibited the discourses of guilt and defiance throughout their EFL learning journey. The major guilt subthemes were child rearing guilt, L1 (loss of first language) guilt, and regret for not starting to learn EFL sooner. Defiance subthemes included gendered identity, professional hegemony, and Eurocentrism defiance. Despite personal and other-attributed guilt and shame, study participants defied societal and cultural norms and chose to invest in learning EFL. This study demonstrated the benefit of hearing Saudi women's voices to address the paucity of research targeting their investment in learning EFL.

Introduction

English is now widely considered the most powerful and influential language in the world. Saudi Arabia believes that its transition from oil to a knowledge-based economy is dependent on its citizenry learning English as a foreign language (EFL). To play their role in this transition, Saudi women need access to EFL, which is affected by their agency and responses to challenging gendered norms. Saudi Arabia, per *Vision 2030*, its most recent national development plan, intends to diversify the Kingdom's income by making the nation a hub for industry and commerce (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA], 2016). These goals require adopting English, a universal language. As for Saudi women, the *Vision* aims to increase their participation in the economy to 30%, which makes acquiring English a must-have for aspiring Saudi women. This paper focuses on Saudi women choosing to invest in learning EFL.

This research is needed, because Saudi Arabia and Saudi women both represent a research *terra nova* that has long been shrouded by misconceptions about and self-serving accounts of women's potential agency, gendered identity, and empowerment. Mustafa and Troudi (2019) corroborated this assertion by arguing that "the literature abounds with many researches and articles that are written in a way that portray the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the poster child of hegemony, essentialism and women [sic] oppression" (p. 113). They further clarified that others have asserted the need to "to avoid the essentialist, orientalist

and Westernized understanding of Saudi Arabia and Saudi women” (p. 113). Until 1956, education was not available for Saudi women (Alghamdi Hamdan & Aldossari, 2021). The last 10 years have witnessed extensive Saudi government investment in education with women’s education no exception (Hamdan, 2017).

The gender image of Saudi women has long been a direct result of the intersecting politics of the three main structures of the Kingdom: traditions, religious authority, and postmodern Saudi society. Taking into consideration the influence of this trio, one could say that the main wave of Saudi women’s gender identity was in the modern era during the 1980s oil boom. This was the start of the official ‘educate women phase.’ Previously, Saudi women had endured many limitations in the social, religious and political spheres. The culmination of this past era was gendered segregation in almost all avenues of Saudi life. Also, two social classes emerged because of the government’s actions: (a) the misogynist female group that ensures male hegemonic policies are applied at home and (b) the male hegemonic group who enjoys women’s suppression, which, despite its irrelevance to Islamic teaching, was happening in the name of Islam.

During the first wave, women were limited to certain career fields (education was allowed) – a sentiment that held until 2009, which is the year Late King Abdullah inaugurated King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). This university welcomed Saudi women into the science and engineering fields like Mathematics, chemistry, physics, and biology, but to be teachers of these subjects not as careers. In the same year a woman, Nora Al-Faiz, was appointed as a deputy minister of women’s education (2009-2015). Many Saudi women are now in positions of power; three women were recently appointed as Saudi ambassadors to the USA, Princess Reema bint Bandar (2019 to date), and three women were sworn in in July 2020 as cultural attachés to the United Kingdom, Norway, and Morocco.

The second wave of Saudi women’s gender identity – that has witnessed tectonic shifts in the Saudi sociopolitical and cultural milieus – began in 2015 when King Salman reformed many aspects of Saudi life to create a modern Saudi Arabia. In 2018, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) was named the crown prince. He publicly announced that he would revert the ultraconservative society back to moderate Islam, precisely back to 1979 Saudi Arabia before the oil boom. *Vision 2030* identified Saudi women as being a pivotal asset for the Kingdom’s future. “Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy” (KSA, 2016, p. 37).

During this second wave of women’s gendered identity, the Kingdom has taken strides toward achieving gender mainstreaming, which entails entrenching gender equality in all policy areas. As a result of this mainstreaming, the World Bank (2020) has recognised Saudi Arabia as the top country whose economy exhibited the most progress toward gender equality in women in business and law since 2017. An analysis of data presented in the June 2020 issue of *CEOWORLD World Magazine* (Papadopoulos, 2020) showed Saudi Arabia placed first as the best Arab country for women. On a related front, Saudi Arabia

believes that its transition from an oil to a knowledge-based economy is dependent on its citizenry learning EFL (KSA, 2016).

But the response to the proliferation of learning EFL in Saudi Arabia is uneven, especially for women. The status of English in Saudi Arabia created two responses among scholars and the populace. The first response is represented by those who view English (L2, the targeted language to be learned) as “loaded with political, religious, social, and economic overtones” (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014, p. 128). This position calls for caution and creates the fear that Saudi’s culture and identity will erode as will the country’s native language (called L1, Arabic).

Second, although several studies have looked at the history of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia, few have looked at the status of English in Saudi Arabia as the *structure* within which learners exercise their *agency* (Hamdan, 2017; Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020). An agent is someone engaging within a social structure. *Agency* is a sociological construct referring to a person’s ability to act independently in that structure using their free will to make choices about their life. With agency, people believe they are in control of their life and any attendant decisions or actions (Barker, 2005). Saudi women are gaining and exercising agency. This is evident along several fronts including the various legal and social changes in Saudi Arabia, number of Saudi women in leading roles within the government and the private sector, number of Saudi women in fields once monopolised by men (e.g., law, engineering, and petroleum), and the fact that women choose to invest in EFL in general and specific skills in particular (cf. Hamdan, 2017; Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020).

Relative to EFL learning, even a decade ago, “young women represent[ed] 60 percent of Saudis joining English language institutes across the Kingdom. Experts and investors in the field expect the number of such institutes to double over the next few years” (Staff Writer, 2012, para. 2). Speaking to that phenomenon in general, Conrad held that “learning a language increased the *power* of the learner, and it was this quest for empowerment that accounted for the enormous growth in demand for proficiency in English” (as cited in Spolsky, 2004, p. 85). The authors assert that this insight, in combination with the exponential number of Saudi women learning EFL, is indicative of their strong desire to exercise and gain agency, because “learning transforms who we are and what we can do [with learning EFL interpreted as] an experience of [gendered] identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215).

The seeds of this paper about Saudi women’s gendered identity and agency vis-à-vis investing in learning EFL emanated from both (a) Mustafa and Alghamdi’s (2020) study, which looked at the push and pull factors for Saudi women investing in learning EFL; and (b) Mustafa and Troudi’s (in press) study that investigated the agentive actions of Saudi women EFL learners. Both studies showed that Saudi women valued the acquisition of English language as an asset, a sentiment captured by showing that their investment in English was propelled by push factors such as self-development, economic prosperity, and knowledge seeking. Mustafa and Troudi (in press) similarly reported that 94.3 % of Saudi women respondents saw English as instrumental for economic prosperity, and nearly two thirds (61.4%) considered English as a source of social status and prestige.

The common factor between these two studies is that the women's explanations and motives for investing in learning EFL were shrouded with comments that intimated sentiments of guilt, defiance, or both. These elusive discourses reflect the aforementioned discussion of gender identity in transition. The study herein strived to dig deeper into this author-inferred phenomenon by (a) delving into ways the discourses of guilt and defiance manifest in Saudi women's EFL investment and (b) uncovering reasons for the existence of these discourses. For clarification, the term English as a second language (ESL) refers to people learning English in an English-speaking environment. EFL pertains to someone learning English in a non-English speaking environment (e.g., Arabs learning English in an Arabic-speaking environment) (Dunsmore, 2019).

Literature review

English is now widely considered the most powerful and influential language in the world. Over time, an evolving emphasis has been placed on learning English as a second language manifested in attendant education and programming (Alahmadi, 2014). Saudi Arabia is no exception, with English language acquisition an inherent part of the education system (primary, secondary, and tertiary). This phenomenon is examined in this literature review section, concluding with a discussion of defying gendered and cultural norms, and an overview of the constructs of guilt and shame.

Saudi Arabia's education system and EFL

The KSA's school system comprises three mandatory levels: primary (kindergarten through grade six), intermediate (grades seven through nine) and secondary (grades 10 through 12) with English language lessons normally beginning late in the primary level at grade four (Alahmadi, 2014). The push for English language in Saudi Arabia allegedly arose from 1930s oil business practices, coming into the educational setting as a mandatory component in the 1950s (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Its presence in the Saudi education system for nearly 75 years has many people arguing that EFL programming needs to be more culturally sensitive, accessible, and effective.

To illustrate, English as an international language (EIL) education is very much rooted in Western ways of knowing (Alshammari, 2015). This Eurocentric approach to EFL education often excludes, discourages, and produces anxiety amongst Saudi Arabian teachers and learners. This model lacks a cultural competency that is required in inclusive and efficient educational programs. This absence poses an issue because some Saudi learners perceive Western knowledge as absolute truth. They struggle to critique it, thus affecting their reading, writing, speaking and overall English-language understanding proficiencies (Shukri, 2014). Some Saudi learners also struggle with learning English because they believe it opposes their religious beliefs (Karmani, 2005). Many learning and resource materials that are used in English-language teaching and learning are produced in America (Alghamdi, 2018); consequently, they lack the cultural crossover to a Saudi Arabian context where 99% are Muslim and practice the Islamic faith (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

There are also logistical issues with EFL program implementation. Teachers and learners alike describe a lack of necessary resources, especially non-Westernised teaching resources (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Elyas & Agrigi, 2014). This dearth in resources is problematic, because there is a disconnect in the way in which Eastern and Western learners are instructed to write. The latter are knowledge transformers, and the former are knowledge tellers (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Cumming, 1989). This disconnect creates an issue when learning and understanding the English language. The solution lies in (a) de-Westernised (or Saudised) curricula so that it is culturally relevant to all EFL learners (regardless of education level) and (b) heightened teacher training in a culturally sensitive pedagogy (Alghamdi, 2018). Westernised (Eurocentric) approaches to teaching EFL can lead to a cultural disconnect (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015) compromising learning and affecting self-identity.

Defying gendered and cultural norms

The term *gender* “distinguishes those aspects of male and female roles, behaviours and preferences that were socially constructed rather than a function of biology. ... Gender norms are the social rules and expectations that keep the [socially constructed] gender system intact” (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 410). They explained that people learn gender norms in their childhood through the socialisation process. Once learned, norms are strengthened or challenged in families and the broader social context. Usually, gendered norms disadvantage women, because they perpetuate unequal power relations, which are deeply embedded in social institutions (e.g., politics, economic, labour, education). Social interactions also reinforce and reproduce gendered norms, including what counts as maleness and femaleness in a society or culture (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020).

It is not uncommon for some members of society to push back and defy gendered norms. Defiance means insubordination, open resistance, rebelliousness, or bold disobedience (Anderson, 2014).

While defying the norm means greater risk of violence and harm, their transgression will eventually help change the norm achieving greater gender equality. As the number of people who transgress the norm increases, more space for others to follow will open-up [sic], eventually reaching a tipping point and bringing about sustainable change in the status quo (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 415).

Having and exerting the power to defy social and gendered norms depends on two factors: (a) a person’s attitudes and beliefs; and (b) their agency, which is the ability to make their own decisions and act on them. In turn, a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and agency reflect their (a) personality – their drive to conform or rebel; (b) personal history – values and ideas she or he has come across during their life (e.g., from family, peers, religion, media); (c) socio-economic circumstances; and (d) status in family, community, and peer group, which affects their ability to negotiate or challenge norms or accepted practices (Marcus, Harper, Brodbeck & Page, 2015).

Many Saudi women who learn EFL often experience feelings of guilt and shame, because they are in defiance of cultural norms (El Alaoui et al., 2018). These feelings can negatively contribute to the overall effectiveness of obtaining an English language education. Although these emotions are often considered to be closely related to each other, bilingual women speakers have emphasised that shame was more prominent than guilt. They have also reported that feelings of shame made them focus on their perceived flawed self rather than their flawed behaviour (El Alaoui et al., 2018). Shame pertains to dishonour, disgrace, indignity, and humiliation. Guilt alludes to being at fault or in the wrong, at blame, and culpable (Anderson, 2014). The dominance of shame (El Alaoui et al., 2018) may speak to the more insidious influence of Saudi's culture replete with themes of powerlessness, punishment, and daily exposure of one's faults and weakness to others (Omar, 2014). These negative feelings may become barriers to Saudi women efficiently investing in and accessing an effective EFL education.

Guilt and shame

For clarification, “both English and Arabic contain distinct terms for *shame* (al-‘ar; العار) and *guilt* (al-dhanb; الذنب)” (Alaoui et al., 2018, p. 18). The authors herein concur that, in the Saudi context, *guilt* is generally understood to be a flawed action that people are criticized for, and that the guilty person wants others to *forgive*. *Shame* is about a flawed self. People experiencing shame want others to *forget* what they have done (informed by Alaoui et al., 2018). Indeed, guilt and shame differ on the source that creates the emotion (Wong & Tsai, 2007).

In more detail, guilt is about *actions* taken, and shame is about *self*. People feel shame when others guilt them. They feel guilty when they guilt themselves (Lewis, 1971; Wong & Tsai, 2007). Guilt is a painful feeling of responsibility and regret for one's own *actions*. People experiencing guilt feel they have violated their own personal morals (Fossum, 1989; Wong & Tsai, 2007). Shame arises from violating external cultural norms and societal values. While guilt arises from a person's thoughts about a particular *action they* have taken, shame arises from others' real or imagined negative perceptions of oneself (Wong & Tsai, 2007). “Shame is a painful feeling about oneself as a person” (Fossum, 1989, p. 5) and arises when a person takes into consideration others' cultural and social beliefs (Herman, 2018).

The Saudi exception to shame (i.e., self-evaluation mirroring others' reactions) would be when someone's misbehaviour shames their “family and entire tribe, thereby tainting the *sharaf* (honour) of all parties involved. If shame is viewed as a key aspect of punishment, guilt is a redeeming quality [in this instance]” (Alaoui et al., 2018, p. 22). This understanding may well reflect a guilt spectrum that ranges from harmful guilt to a more constructive conceptualisation. As a caveat, the study herein initially focused on guilt rather than shame *per se*, because guilt is often associated with defiance. Indeed, Rice, Dirks and Exline (2009) suggested that “defiance is a ‘proud, shameless reaction’ to the administration of sanctions” (p. 300), which can pertain to defying gendered norms.

Research questions

The last 30 years of research in the field of second language acquisition have emphasised the need to integrate the language learner and the language learning context to analyse relations of power and understand how these relations affect the language learners, their identities, and the language learning process. This focus accentuates the fact that language learning is situated in a socio-political-cultural context, which can either lend endless possibilities of support or impose several obstacles for the language learner (Block, 2007a, 2007b; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2000, 2013).

Within that corpus of research, a problematic concept in the relationship between language learning and identity is the relationship between language learning and women. Several studies have indicated that, in several parts of the world, learning English for women is considered to be learning a language of empowerment that offers them agency, entry to previously restricted places, and access to otherwise unattainable symbolic and material powers. Moreover, learning the English language can be a means to liberate women from the confines of gendered patriarchy (e.g., Corson, 2001; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; Kouritzin, 2000; Norton, 2000). Other studies have shown that women may be constrained by gatekeepers who restrict their access to English classes (e.g., Kouritzin, 2000).

Although all of this research is relevant to Saudi women's investment in EFL, this study investigated feelings of guilt and defiance when investing in learning English. This study is important because of the massive surge of Saudi women choosing to learn English as a foreign language. The repercussions of their real and perceived defiance of cultural norms bear close scrutiny.

1. How are the discourses of guilt and defiance manifested in Saudi women's EFL investment?
2. What are the implications of these discourses on Saudi women's EFL investment?

Method

This qualitative study employed an exploratory interpretive framework that is most advantageous when "little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist, and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 193). Exploratory research designs use smaller samples and unstructured interviews. Researchers strive to provide broad, initial understandings of a phenomenon and lay the groundwork for future, more conclusive studies (Dudovskiy, 2018; McGregor, 2018). The latter tend to be descriptive (i.e., yielding a fuller picture) or explanatory (causal inferences) in nature (de Vaus, 2001). Interpretive research designs help researchers bring clarity to the topic at hand and provide the most information possible at the time as expressed by study participants (Shank & Brown, 2007).

The second author's university granted ethics approval for the study.

Sample frame

As noted earlier, while analysing interview data from a previous study about Saudi women investing in learning the English language (sampling frame details at Mustafa and Alghamdi, 2020), the authors discerned a subtle but pervasive sense of guilt and defiance. They decided to pursue this discovery with all (N=9) participants in that exploratory study agreeing to be re-interviewed for this study, which posed different research questions and used a different interview guide. Exploratory studies often use smaller sample frames anticipating more conclusive future research by likeminded scholars (Dudovskiy, 2018). Pseudonyms ensured confidentiality.

Participants

Table 1 profiles the characteristics of the Saudi women interviewed for this study (N=9). They averaged 30 years of age ranging from 21-50 years old. Virtually all were married. Most (67%) had an undergraduate degree, and about half were educators. Two were in the private sector, and two were housewives.

Table 1: Demographic and social characteristics of study participants (N=9)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Education	Occupation	Place of origin
Faiza	40	Married	BA Islamic Studies	Islamic Studies teacher	Mecca
Muntaha	36	Married	MBA	Bank employee	Dhahran
Noura	38	Married	High school	Housewife	Riyadh
Abrar	34	Married	High school	Housewife	Madinah
Nouf	50	Married	BA Social Studies	Retired teacher	Riyadh
Salwa	21	Single	Psychology student	-	Jeddah
Afaf	40	Married	College	Entrepreneur	Dhahran
Faten	42	Married	Medicine	University lecturer, writer and novelist	Jeddah
Eiman	25	Engaged	BA Mathematics	Maths teacher	Khobar

Data collection

The second author (bilingual English and Arabic) collected the data in late 2018 to early 2019. Semi-structured interviews proved to be effective for learning about the participants' experiences and accessing their emic (internal, meaningful) perspectives related to the research questions dealing with guilt and defiance while learning EFL. All interviews were conducted in-person (in either Arabic or English) using a fairly open interview framework that allowed for focused, two-way communication to enable the researcher and female participants to collaborate in the process of delving into the latter's personal histories, experiences, and practices pursuant to investing in studying EFL in Saudi Arabia.

The interview protocol consisted of 10 questions divided across three categories (available on request). The main questions were used to open the interview, establish rapport, and guide the discussion while encouraging participants to freely express themselves. Follow-up questions uncovered implications of their main responses. Probing questions promoted clarity, helped obtain more detail, and gave the participants cues about the expected level of response (McGregor, 2018). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated to English if conducted in Arabic.

Data analysis

Both authors (one a Saudi woman) thematically analysed the interview transcripts, reading each one repeatedly to ensure that any identified themes were representative of study participants' comments (McGregor, 2018). Select quotations from the data were used to develop the themes, appreciating that there should be enough quotes to provide evidence that the claim of a theme is sound; no quotes were used twice (McGregor, 2018). Both authors contributed to data interpretation and the development of discussion and concluding points around major findings. Finally, to verify the accuracy of the work and data interpretation, previous steps were scrutinised by performing several iterations for the codes and themes. Also, member checks were undertaken, wherein participants approved the accuracy of their data by checking its content (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Findings

The thematic analysis affirmed the anticipated themes of guilt and defiance for Saudi women's investment in EFL with data revealing nuanced insights (subthemes) into this phenomenon. Three dimensions of guilt (subthemes) were discovered: child rearing, first language (L1) loss, and the regret of not having studied English sooner or harder. Three dimensions of defiance (subthemes) were discerned: gendered identity, professional hegemony, and Eurocentrism defiance. Given the unique nature of the EFL context (Saudi Arabia), and the fact that Saudi women EFL learners are understudied, these findings offer new contributions to the EFL literature. Findings are presented using the two main themes: guilt discourse and defiance discourse.

Theme 1: Guilt discourse

Guilt was evident with the thematic analysis identifying three distinct guilt discourses (subthemes): child rearing, L1 loss, and "not before now."

Child-rearing guilt

While discussing the status and importance of the English language as it pertains to Saudi women, some participants disclosed feelings of guilt arising from learning English or promoting English learning and how it impacted their parenting role. Six of the seven mothers who were interviewed (Faiza, Muntaha, Noura, Abrar, Rawabi, and Nouf) did not express guilt feelings about learning English, but they expressed guilty feelings about

how their own EFL studies were being received by their children and their decision to make sure their children had the chance to learn English.

In addition to studying English herself, Abrar had enrolled her son in an English-speaking school. As a parent, Abrar's biggest fear was that her son would "consider Arabic a religious, ceremonial language and adopt English as his language of daily communication."

Faiza, a religious studies teacher, approached this issue from a religious prism of hypocrisy. She said that her guilt stemmed from the following Quranic verses: "Do you command people to virtuous conduct, and forget yourselves" (Sura 2, v.44) and "O you who believe! Why do you say what you do not do? It is most hateful to God that you say what you do not do" (Sura 66, v. 2-3). She explained that

... our job as parents is to advise and guide our children. I keep telling them that Arabic is the language of Quran, and they should uphold it high. However, I see them looking at me thinking 'you hypocrite! So why you are focusing on learning English right now?' I can't shake the feeling of guilt.

As a parent, Nouf offered a sociocultural guilt perspective associated with the idea that learning a foreign language could lead to acquiring that language's ideology and social norms at the risk of subverting Islamic ideology. Nouf expressed guilt for

... sending them to the US to learn English. I guess they have learnt *more* than English! Saad [one of her sons] came back with fluent English and somehow also with polluted ideas and ideologies. Mosaed [the other son] explicitly declared that he is moving out of Saudi Arabia to remain in the US.

When asked about her source of guilt in this regard as a parent, Nouf explained that "their dad was against them learning English overseas, but I insisted."

When asked about polluted ideas and ideologies, Nouf based her explanation on the Islamic values and ideologies that she used to raise her children. She said,

Mosaed, for example, now sees it as OK to hug females, and he believes now in freedom of sexual orientation. These ideas were never part of his upbringing, nor were they OK before he went to the US.

Salwa, who is not a mother, commented on this issue while discussing her upbringing.

My parents at times showed regret that they had immersed me in English-medium education at school. I remember my mother trying to counter these actions by forcing me to learn more Quran and use Arabic at home.

Salwa continued, "while I was happy about the uniqueness English gave me growing up, I decided that, if I have children of my own, I will not emphasise English as much."

First language (L1) loss guilt

Some participants referenced guilt associated with the Arabic language; the L1 loss was a major source of concern. Faten confessed that “I hate to admit the importance and status of the English language, and I feel that Arabic is falling a victim of this status.”

Muntaha, who was also studying English, said “I feel guilty that I pushed [my children] into international schools to learn English... I’m concerned that they will not speak Arabic fluently, and my biggest concern is that they might lose connection with the reality that they are Saudis and start acting like Americans.” To Muntaha, being a Saudi meant that her children should exhibit pride in their first language (Arabic), which is the “language of the Holy Quran.” They should also uphold Saudi ideals and traditions and not allow a new language to morph them into something else. She commented that “You can be Saudi and speak English; I don’t see why you should stop being Saudi if you learn English.”

Salwa, with a critical argument that falls under the umbrella of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) used by university instructors when teaching, explained that she spent a whole ‘Preparatory Year’ in college studying courses in reading and critical thinking, academic writing, and listening and speaking. What shocked Salwa “to the core” was that, when she received her four-year study plan, Arabic was in the plan, but it was called, “Arabic as a second language.” Saudi-born students “had to learn about Islam, modern social problems, and Arabic Heritage *in English!*” Salwa elaborated her point:

I appreciate that my school is partnering with a Western school, thus giving us the chance to receive quality education. But two things I do not appreciate. First of all, for Arabic and Islam to be taught to me, a Muslim native speaker, as a second language, gives Arabic an inferior status. Second, being taught in English [here Salwa reads from her school’s brochure] ‘means that after you graduate, you will stand out in the employment market’... This is funny, because my employment market is Saudi Arabia where many of our clientele do *not* speak English! I believe it should have been the other way around.

Connecting English language competency to social inclusion, Afaf said that “I feel sorry for our lost identity that dictates using a foreign language and abandoning our own.” She shared that

... the fear of being labelled as a socially incompetent interlocutor by groups of people who have adopted ‘Arabeeze’ [using English words in Arabic form and vice versa] was motivation enough for me to learn English.

Eiman, who shared this sentiment, feared exclusion due to lack of English-language proficiency.

My fiancé was educated in the US, both for his bachelor and masters degree and so were his sisters. When we first got engaged, I noticed that all their banter and inside jokes were told in English. The first few months I was worried they would put me on the spot, and I would choke due to my limited English.

Eiman further disclosed that

I feared rejection from my sisters-in-law if they knew I couldn't keep up with their level of English, because they are very influential in matters of love and marriage. But thank Allah, they helped me improve my English. Now I can chip into their conversations and jokes more actively.

"Not before now" guilt

Another type of guilt that surfaced exemplified a schizophrenic effect – that being the regret of not studying English harder or sooner. Faten, who had previously believed that people were exaggerating the importance of English in Saudi Arabia, disclosed that, if she had just started learning English earlier, she might have improved her chances of securing PhD scholarships.

For a similar reason (i.e., perceived overemphasis on importance of Saudis learning EFL), Eiman inadvertently disadvantaged herself by moving from teaching in a public to a private school. Delaying her decision to learn English meant she was ill-equipped to keep up with the students in the private school where she taught. Eiman said, "I see the little girls laugh at my accent and when I have to use Arabic to explain something, because I could not say it in English."

Afaf joked about her regrets and feelings of remorse and guilt that she had not started learning English earlier. "If I knew then that by learning English my husband would get off my back, I would have done it ages ago."

Theme 2: Defiance discourse

Some participants interpreted learning EFL as an act of defiance (e.g., insubordination, disobedience, resistance) against gendered norms and Westernisation. Three specific defiant stances were identified: gendered identity, professional hegemony, and Eurocentrism defiance.

Gendered-identity defiance

The data reflected elaborate coverage of their *gendered roles*. Many participants discussed the importance of Saudi women's role in Saudi society with a consensus that a societal shift is needed away from "the traditional role of the Saudi woman" (Nouf) as a mother, caretaker of husband and children, and repository of morals and religious education. The participants were explicit that pursuing English language does not make less or more of them. Faiza, Noura, and Nouf elaborated on this point.

I'm a wife. I'm a mother, and I'm a sister and a daughter. Nothing makes me prouder than being the one who takes care of my family, educating and protecting them. However, in Saudi Arabia, people still limit women's roles to these things... We need to stop limiting our girls and start treating them as decision makers with free will who are capable of more than taking care of husbands and children (Faiza).

Many Saudi women unfortunately succumb.... Women should strive to refuse the identity others give to them and build their own identity within acceptable Islamic teachings and cultural traditions. (Noura)

You need to understand that Saudi women are under, what you can call, a 'burden of representation'.... We are under the burden to represent our religion first, our country second, our families third, and lastly, if ever, ourselves. So, to attribute any importance to anything other than Islam and Arabic to Saudi women is to argue against what we are supposed to represent and what we have always been exposed to at schools and homes. (Nouf)

Noura added another dimension to the theme by saying that "older women in the Saudi society have been long cultured to be misogynists" [i.e., lack tolerance and respect for women]. In a similar fashion, several other participants criticised the older women in their families (e.g., mothers, mothers-in-law, grand aunts) for being fiercely disapproving and discontented about their pursuit of English learning.

Muntaha (a bank employee) explained that her decision to learn English on her own was interpreted by a female bank colleague as a sign of defiance.

She approached me asking me about the English courses.... Then she sarcastically said, 'Do you think that by doing this you'll twist their arm to move you up?... I'm not sure [the male branch manager] will like that!'"

Professional-hegemonic defiance

Hegemony refers to one group dominating and controlling another through entrenched power asymmetry (Anderson, 2014). Muntaha disclosed that men at her workplace (bank) were being sent to attend language courses to prepare them for managerial positions, while she was denied these learning opportunities. She was convinced that "the male dictatorship mentality still prevails. I heard it from [male colleagues]."

Salwa similarly described deciding to learn English as "*tampering with the hierarchy of power.*" She further explained that

... Saudi society is built on the premise that the man is the head of the household, and the head of everything, really. I have heard my relatives discussing this topic saying that having a woman as their boss is taboo. They rendered this action as the 'end of times.'

Muntaha contended that by being deprived of the opportunity to pursue in-job English courses, which would have enabled her to climb the bank's corporate ladder, she was being subjected to a systematic de-skilling scheme that caused her skills to slowly erode and fossilise. To stave off this eventuality, Muntaha commented that "being restrained at work ... heightened my creativity to find an EFL course at a local language school that could be tailored as a business communication course." She, in effect, had engaged in professional hegemonic defiance.

Another example of professional hegemony defiance falls under the umbrella of, what Faten labelled, “haves and have nots” meaning people with English proficiency and those without. A university lecturer, Faten disclosed that the English-speaking staff – Saudis and others – “monopolise many resources and opportunities by virtue of their fluency of the English language.” Like Muntaha, Faten had engaged in professional hegemonic defiance. She said that

... the university where I work offers endless opportunities for staff and faculty to pursue professional development – of course with their superior’s approval. Whenever I applied for an English language course, my supervisor rejected it while approving other Arabic-language courses. So, I decided to take matters into my own hands and pursue English away from university funding, hoping that I will break this monopoly.

Eurocentric defiance

Data analysis also revealed some participants’ annoyance with the Eurocentric mentality exhibited by their EFL teachers. Eurocentrism refers to regarding the Western civilisation and European culture as preeminent (Wasserstrom, 2001). This Eurocentric defiance was especially clear in Abrar’s pushback against the identity positioning in which her American EFL teacher put her. Abrar explained that

... when I first registered in the language school, I started noticing that our American teacher was treating us in a very stereotypical manner. I mean, she would spare us certain pages from the book, referencing our roles as Saudi women by saying things like ‘I’m sure your children will like that... Your husband will appreciate that... When you go shopping abroad you can say this and that.’ I started thinking that this lady thinks that we are a bunch of moms and wives who are hungry for English to shop and please our families. Therefore, I approached her and explained my rejection of the way she was treating us and explained to her *my* purpose of learning English.

Eurocentric defiance also showed up in the guise of participants refusing the accent reduction techniques offered by some EFL teachers. To illustrate, Nouf said that

... the EFL teacher insisted that I pronounce words like an American, and I insisted that I don’t need to do that. I will pronounce the way I pronounce; after all, I’m not an American, and I don’t want to be. When the teacher asked me about my reasons for resisting, I stopped and corrected her by saying, ‘you [the EFL teacher] see it as resistance. I see it as my right to pronounce the way I wish ... as long as I’m understood, I’m fine.’

Discussion

The authors’ intuitive sense that Saudi women can experience guilt and defiance while learning EFL was corroborated per the findings of this exploratory study. Guilt pertained to child rearing, L1 (first language) loss, and regret for not learning English sooner. Defiance manifested in three types of defiant stances: gendered identity, professional hegemony, and Eurocentric (westernisation) defiance.

The study queried: (a) how are the discourses of guilt and defiance manifested in Saudi women's EFL investment? and (b) what are the implications of these discourses on Saudi women's EFL investment? Discourse means spoken or written communications about an issue whose analysis reveals power structures and relationships (Sheyholislami, 2001). Despite personal and other-attributed guilt and shame, study participants defied societal and cultural norms and chose to invest in learning EFL.

In short, they felt bad that they did not learn English sooner, and that they may have undermined their children's allegiance to Saudi Arabia and their appreciation for the beauty and significance of the Arabic language. They regretted being perceived by their children as a hypocrite, and they deigned to endure judgement by older women in their family system. They pushed back against discriminatory behaviour at work and in their EFL classes, and they challenged the patriarchal and Eurocentric paradigms. Their investment in learning EFL meant *that* much to them. As suggested by Rich et al. (2009, p. 300), their "defiance is a 'proud shameless reaction'" to threats to disobeying rules and norms.

The discourses about the emotion of guilt and the action of defiance manifested (were revealed or established) in the women's beliefs, braveness, intentions, convictions, actions, commitment, and perseverance. The implications of these discourses on their investment in EFL were clear. Their agency made them more determined, single minded, resourceful, and caring of their actions on loved ones. They tolerated prejudice from others, found imaginative ways to end run power relations at home and in the workplace, and persisted in their studies despite others guiltling them for exercising their agency. Supportive key findings and discussion points are now presented using the two overarching themes: guilt (emotion) and defiance (action).

Unpacking participants' guilt and shame emotions

"Shame and guilt are reactions to undesirable actions and outcomes that can instinctually underscore the demarcation between a culture's socially desirable and undesirable behaviors" (El Alaoui et al., 2018, p. 35). But the research questions for this study focused on guilt, not shame. Member checks revealed that some participants eschewed the Western dictionary definition of the term guilt, which denotes feelings pursuant to breaking the law or committing an offense (Anderson, 2014). Instead, for the participants, the term guilt was more akin to shame; that is, the feeling of self-reproach (i.e., directing blame at oneself). That said, participants agreed that the term guilt could be used when describing their EFL learning experience because of how society reacted to their decision to invest in EFL; that is, others tried to guilt them for their behaviour. Also, many participants expressed guilt for their own insistence that their children learn EFL and, in some cases, ESL (risking L1 loss and westernisation) (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Study participants who defied patriarchal cultural norms did not explicitly express shame or say they felt ashamed for doing so (i.e., remorseful, embarrassed, contrite). Instead, they reacted with guilt to the direct and indirect ways their action of studying EFL had

affected their children's cultural identities, which were based on religious beliefs (Karmani, 2005). Participants consistently mentioned that they feared being viewed as hypocritical by their children, as they would ensure their children did not focus too heavily on learning English, despite that the mothers were doing so themselves. Their defiance of these cultural norms made them feel guilty, but *not* ashamed, however. Regarding shame, some *were being* guilted by the inner circles of their communities and families who saw their actions (choosing to learn EFL) as a source of shame, but study participants themselves did not say they were ashamed of their own actions (Fossum, 1989; Lewis, 1971; Wong & Tsai, 2007). They were proud of them.

This interpretation of the data is supported by the shame/guilt literature. Guilt pertains to one's own actions or behaviour. Shame pertains to self and to one's response to others' reactions to their behaviour (Fossum, 1989; Lewis, 1971; Wong & Tsai, 2007). In their study about shame and guilt in the Arabic context, El Alaoui et al. (2018) also found that feelings of shame were related to oneself. And previous studies have documented the "salience and commonality of shame among inhabitants of nations of ... the Arab League" (El Alaoui et al., 2018, p. 39). Consider that some participants regretted not heeding the government's call for Saudi citizens to learn EFL. They lamented not taking the opportunity sooner to improve their potential. Although they described this feeling using the verb *guilt*, it may well reflect shame, which is about a flawed self (Alaoui et al., 2018).

Actually, similar to our findings, El Alaoui et al. (2018) could not substantiate that "Arabic-English bilingual speakers would differentiate between shame and guilt" (p. 37). Our interpretation of our data prompted the strong recommendation that other scholars should work on developing a guilt/shame continuum that ranges from (a) guilt that emanates from wrongdoing at one end, which is usually associated with corrective actions and (b) self-worth guilt at the other end, which entails being shameful of not fulfilling one's potential thus taking corrective action to better oneself.

The difference between the two polar ends is as follows. Wrong-doing guilt pertains to someone breaking a set of societal and cultural norms agreed upon by everyone including that person. In this case, the person fully understands that he/she has broken a norm or a law. In contrast, self-worth guilt entails the person breaking their *own* personal belief or goal with the resultant feeling of being ashamed prompting corrective action to better oneself (see Herman, 2018; Wong & Tsai, 2007). Somewhere in the middle would be guilt associated with the fallout of their decisions and behaviour on others (e.g., on their children). Companion scholarship would focus on clarifying Saudi notions of guilt and shame relative to each other and to Western connotations (El Alaoui et al., 2018).

Defiance and agency

Few studies have looked at the status of English in Saudi Arabia as the *structure* within which learners exercise their *agency* (Mustafa & Troudi, 2019). Our review of the literature prompted us to propose a connection between defiance and agency for Saudi women learning EFL. Defiance is pushback, open resistance, or bold disobedience (Anderson, 2014). Agency is taking control of one's life and attendant decisions (Barker, 2005).

Conrad (as cited in Spolsky, 2004) believed that learning a language increases the learner's *power*.

We deduced that so many Saudi women deciding to learn EFL (Staff Writer, 2012) was evidence of a pervasive desire to gain or exercise agency through defiance of gendered and cultural norms. Learning EFL to gain agency would transform who they were as Saudi citizens giving them a different identity (per Wenger, 1998). This supposition was supported by our findings and their interpretation. There was strong evidence of defiance amongst Saudi women learning EFL, and it manifested along three dimensions: gendered identity, professional hegemony, and Eurocentric (westernisation) defiance.

Gender identity in this study pertained to Saudi women's role in Saudi society. Evidence for the subtheme gendered-identity defiance included participants describing their proudness in taking care of their families while at the same time using their ability to exert their own agency by making decisions for themselves by choosing to learn English. They defied strong cultural norms about gender identity to exercise this agency (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Although challenging and defying this norm exposed them personally, their resistance and defiance may help change the gendered norm in the future (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Marcus et al., 2015). Faiza poignantly said that "we need to stop limiting our girls and start treating them as decision makers with free will who are capable of more than taking care of husbands and children." Future researchers should design longitudinal studies to determine the long-term effect of bravely defying cultural norms to build an agency-informed identity and effect cultural change.

Learning the English language can be a means to liberate women from the confines of gendered patriarchy (e.g., Corson, 2001; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; Kouritzin, 2000; Norton, 2000). Engaging in professional hegemony defiance allowed some study participants to challenge the Saudi male-dominated workplace power hierarchy. In some cases, men were being offered English language programs, but women struggled to obtain this same opportunity, opting instead to look elsewhere for EFL training. This open resistance and insubordination (the epitome of defiance) enabled them to learn EFL. They also encountered colleagues and family members who tried to guilt and shame them for their EFL-related choices and behaviour (Fossum, 1989; Lewis, 1971; Wong & Tsai, 2007); yet, they persevered and refused to succumb to either emotion. Future studies could examine the long-term effect of women learning EFL in higher education institutions, workplaces, and other learning institutes. Which venue serves them best regarding contributing to both Saudi's nation building and breaching professional hegemony?

Although participants expressed guilt about their children absorbing Westernised ideals while they learned ESL (Alshammari, 2015; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014), exposure to Eurocentrism in their own EFL studies presented participants with the opportunity to challenge that system by holding American teachers accountable for their stereotypical views of Saudi Arabian women and by rejecting the necessity for American pronunciations. EFL instructors must be cognisant of their Eurocentric biases when teaching Saudi women EFL. Prejudice and stereotypes can be just as off-putting and

disparaging as Westernised resources and teaching styles (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Elyas & Agrigi, 2014).

Defiance in their EFL classes may not necessarily be rebellious, but it is strong evidence of participants exercising their right to learn the English language in a manner they choose themselves; that is, using their agency to become empowered (Spolsky, 2004). This aspect of their agency was blunted somewhat with the recurring subtheme of L1 guilt, in which participants described anxiety and fear over their children potentially losing the Arabic language and becoming Westernised. It is noteworthy that none of the participants *themselves* expressed a concern that *they* would personally fall victim to Eurocentrism, with some fully aware of and pushing back against it. Future research should investigate the dynamics of Saudi women EFL learners having and exerting the agency and power to defy social and gendered norms. They could examine the influence of personality (i.e., drive to conform or rebel), personal values and ideologies, socio-economic circumstances, and status (Marcus et al., 2015).

Limitations

Findings from this exploratory study are not generalisable to all Saudi women. Future studies could employ a larger sample frame and perhaps consider focus groups to flesh out deeper insights into subthemes pursuant to guilt, shame and defiance when choosing to learn EFL. Longitudinal studies are recommended as are gender comparative studies. How do guilt, shame, and defiance factor into Saudi men's investment in learning EFL, and how does this compare to women? Other scholars may wish to focus on the shame construct amongst Saudi women learning EFL. Saudis' notion of shame may play into this phenomenon (Alaoui et al., 2018).

Conclusion

To reiterate, Saudi Arabia believes that its transition to a knowledge-based economy is dependent on its citizenry learning EFL, including Saudi women. Their access to EFL is affected by their agency and their responses to challenging gendered norms. This study demonstrated the benefit of hearing Saudi women's voices to address the paucity of research targeting their investment in learning EFL. The two main themes (guilt and defiance) and their respective subthemes provided a unique understanding of the implications that accompany Saudi women's choices to invest in learning EFL. Despite personal and other-attributed guilt and shame, study participants defied societal and cultural norms and chose to learn EFL. Navigating through and negotiating instances of guilt, shame, and defiance while learning EFL can either empower women or stymie their agency. Findings update the evolving gender identity of Saudi women and challenge some of the myths around their oppression in a gender-segregated society.

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Please cite as: Alghamdi Hamdan, A. K. & Mustafa, R. F. (2021). Saudi women EFL learners' expressing guilt and defiance discourses: Evolving their gendered identities. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(4), 1007-1028. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/alghamdi-hamdan-2.pdf>