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Penning Her Way to Power: Feminism and Writing in Women’s EFL Classrooms in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

In this literature review, I highlight the need for investing in the second-language (L2) writing classroom as a platform for critical literacy. Namely, I hone in on the context of L2 women writers in Saudi Arabia. As I argue for a feminist pedagogy for teaching L2 writing in this context, I emphasize writing as a tool of “languaging,” define feminism, and explain the significance of critical literacy in relation to education, women’s rights, and waves of social change in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, situating this paper in the field of composition, I survey the development of concepts relevant to empowerment through writing in feminist first-language (L1) composition, in feminist L2 composition, and in research on Saudi ESL writers and/or learners. Finally, I explain the gap that this literature leaves unaddressed and propose directions for further research.

Keywords: L2 writing, feminist pedagogy, critical literacy, women in Saudi, Saudi education

Introduction

Humanity has at times borne a long and persistent history of social inequity against women. Many women worldwide have had to endure gender-biased restrictions on their social roles, access to financial resources, physicality, appearances, and language use (to mention a few). Destructing and deconstructing such patriarchal molds, feminism emerged from a sense of human conscience and social responsibility to validate and advocate for the lives of women. Aware of the historical conflicts among Western feminists regarding whether and how to define feminism (Offen, 1988), I define feminism here in simple and basic terms that speak to my experiences and aspirations as a woman and educator in the Saudi context. To me, feminism is the advocacy for equal treatment, agency, and responsibilities for both men and women; that is, it is the affirmation that no gender should overtly or covertly control the social and familial rights, liberties, roles, and/or choices of the other.

The marriage of feminism, in this sense, and writing can be a promising investment for our societies. This is because, while literacy can be a form of power, writing—in particular—can be a magnificent tool for meaning making and self-discovery—a venue for critical consciousness and thus informed self-voice. In other words, writing can be a
powerful exercise of “languaging,” which is the use of language “as a way of cognising [sic], making sense of the world,” and “becoming conscious of oneself” (Lankiewicz & Wąsikiewicz, 2014, p. 2).

In this literature review, I speak for the need for feminist composition in my own context—female L2 writing classrooms in Saudi Arabia. I consciously choose to refer to “women in Saudi Arabia,” rather than “Saudi women,” as not to abet the citizenship privilege, which often renders non-White foreign women in the country particularly susceptible to racist, classist, or sexist discrimination and consigns their feminist liberties to oblivion. It is noteworthy, however, that the focus on women learners here is due to gender segregation in most contexts of Saudi education; otherwise, feminist consciousness is just as valuable in the context of the male classroom, which is the target of my future research. Moreover, although this inquiry addresses adult English as a Second Language (ESL) education, much of the pedagogical exigency explained here apply to girls alongside women in Saudi Arabia. To situate this need, the following sections explain the context of women, education, and social change in Saudi Arabia and review related scholarship and milestones in this area of research.

Education, Women, and Social Change in Saudi Arabia

Education in Saudi Arabia can be best described as instrumentalist. As Macedo (1993) explains, the instrumentalist approach to education relies on a what Paolo Freire termed a “banking model” (1970), in which teachers accept the status quo and students are expected to mechanically gain literacy skills and reproduce knowledge without critical reflection. Echoing this definition, students in Saudi public schools usually have to memorize information and regurgitate it in tests that use true/false or fill-in-the-blank questions. Such tests are the most common method of assessment, while writing is implemented in a significantly limited scope: Students write to describe nature or a trip, rather than to argue for a cause or explore new frontiers. This de-voicing of students is further reflected in authoritarian and teacher-centered teaching styles, such as teachers’ reliance on lecturing without the incorporation of critical student discussions.

Proponents of this instrumentalist approach applaud it for putting politics aside and focusing on the objective transmission of knowledge, rather than the transformation of a complex social reality. Nonetheless, putting politics aside is a political act in and of itself. Macedo (1993) points out that “the very act of viewing education as neutral and devoid of politics is, in fact, a political act” since it “maintain[s] schools as sites for cultural reproduction and indoctrination” (p. 5), thus serving existent religious, political, and social powers. Indeed, perpetuating social inequities through education is reductive to the agencies of both male and female students in the context of a non-democratic government. Yet, the bitter consequences compound for women as a gender minority within the general non-voting sociopolitical minority.

Although many of us try to look on the brighter side, if not even sugarcoat realities and disguise them as choices, women in Saudi Arabia usually have to endure many gender-biased restrictions. Some of these restrictions are officially
established while others are tacitly agreed upon in the society as they might be diversely derived from certain religious interpretations, Arab traditions, and/or tribal values. This imbalance of power between the genders is reflected in, for instance, dress-code discrimination, gender roles (e.g., what jobs women can/cannot have), freedom of transportation, family law, common ideologies about honor and female morality/sexuality, and so on. The implications of such restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia are sometimes resonant of those faced by their counterparts in other Muslim and/or Middle-Eastern countries. Yet, in the case of women in Saudi Arabia, the pressure might compound as the land they represent is thought to be the cradle of Islam. While many women claim that they choose to embrace some or all of these aspects of gender-based discrimination, not every choice is informed and thus empowering; many choices are mere results of the all-too-common instrumentalist approach to education that, as explained in this section, leads to power-serving social reproduction, rather than independent self-voice.

The implementation of a feminist pedagogy in the L2 writing classrooms of Saudi Arabia is possibly timelier today than ever, for we see both wounds and hopes on the horizon. As media outlets celebrate news of allowing women to drive and loosening the grip of male guardianship in the kingdom, it is important to note that the revoking of these restrictions is only partial: The official de-establishment of these restrictions does not always guarantee the overcoming of social ideologies at the root, which continue to be normalized and even valorized.

Still, with both the ongoing rises and falls of the so-called Arab Spring, a wave of grassroots consciousness, calling for equity and social justice, wakes up Arab youth. This hunger for social change is often unveiled through social media outlets. Although not fully free of control, such outlets can sometimes provide opportunities for Arab youth to voice themselves and pursue social change. This can especially hold true for many women who can feel finally safe to opine freely under social media pseudonyms (as in the top-trending hashtag that translates as “I am my own guardian,” which many women in Saudi Arabia participated in to rebel against the male guardianship system). The opportunities for voice on social media alongside the rebellion against authoritarian regimes in neighboring countries are not the only invitations for social transformation in Saudi Arabia. In fact, the decline in the Saudi economy is another factor that might erode at the roots of a rentier system, in which the state trades voices of the individuals for petrodollars; individuals are expected to appreciate the generous oil-funded gifts of the paternal state, such as fully covered scholarships and subsidies for studying abroad, in place of political representation and full-fledged social liberties. “Furthermore, as oil has afforded opportunities for more Saudis to cross the borders for education, especially in 2015 (Al-Ghabri, 2017), many of the women who were privileged enough to be allowed to join this experience have often come back to their homeland with refreshed visions of a better life for women in their country. These factors beckon educators to set the stage for feminist critical literacy in women’s (and girls’) classrooms in Saudi Arabia.

Highlighting a gap and promoting possibilities for an educational inspiration in women’s English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Saudi Arabia, the
following section maps out some routes that have already been paved by feminist compositionists and other researchers who gave attention to relevant areas of inquiry.

**Feminist Composition: Some Answers, Many Questions**

The three upcoming sub-sections trace the development of concepts of feminist empowerment in L1 (first-language) feminist composition and L2 (second-language) feminist pedagogies (as L2 literature focuses more on holistic classroom pedagogies than on composition practices). I also survey literature on Saudi ESL writers/learners and illustrate a significant gap in current research: feminist critical literacy in women’s L2 writing classrooms in Saudi Arabia.

**Feminism in L1 composition.** In the 1960s and the 1970s, feminist activism flourished in the United States. Feminists at that time worked diligently to reinstate women’s belief in themselves and secure equality, especially in the workplace. Those feminists realized that attaining women’s rights in the public domain is inseparable from attaining women’s rights in the private, personal domain, e.g., issues involving sexuality, body image, and childcare. Thus, feminist consciousness-raising groups underlined the value of women’s personal narratives in uncovering sexism and fighting against it (Walters, 2005). Inspired by these magnificent historical efforts, feminism emerged in composition studies during the 1970s to anchor women’s independence and their personal life experiences through classroom pedagogies.

For example, in her canonical article, “Identity and Expression: A Writing Course for Women,” Howe (1971), a leader of the contemporary feminist movement, shares her experience in teaching a writing course designed for women. This course aimed to empower women through specific learning strategies while focusing on female identity development. Women read relevant texts on critical female issues in society and wrote reflections on their identities. In addition, to break the passive and dependent attitudes that women had been acculturated into, Howe (1971) fostered an atmosphere of collaboration and connectedness, rather than patriarchal competitiveness and hierarchy. Women decided on the readings and chose their own deadlines and writing topics; they directed the discussions, received notes instead of grades on their writings, and were free to follow the writing processes that were unique to them.

In the same vein, Howe (1971) implemented women’s personal narratives, identity self-reflection assignments, and women’s choice of women-related writing topics. Kirsch and Sullivan (1992) use the term “proactive feminist pedagogy” (p. 40), which echoes Howe’s narrative-based practices in the composition classroom. Proactive feminist pedagogy “generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences” and “recuperates … women's experiences, perceptions, and meanings, as the starting point of inquiry or as the key datum” (Kirsch & Sullivan, 1992, p. 40). Following Howe’s (1971) footsteps, other feminist scholars adopted proactive feminist pedagogy, including Annas (1985), who encouraged giving voice to “women’s experience in content and form” (p. 370), and Rich (1979), who
emphasized the need to believe “in the value of women’s experience, traditions, and principles” in the writing classroom (p. 240).

On the other hand, “reactive feminist pedagogy” in L1 composition “focuses on received knowledge … and re-examines [it] in the light of feminist theory to uncover male bias and androcentrism” (Kirsch & Sullivan, 1992, p. 40). This approach is incorporated in the work of Howe (1971) as she invited her students to critically examine relevant literature on women’s issues. Scholars who similarly espouse this approach include Greenbaum (2002), who points to the scrutiny of media as integral to the emancipatory pedagogy in the L1 composition classroom. L1 writers’ participation in a community of their choice, where they can both reflect on their own experiences and observe the lives of others, can be an example of a reactive-proactive approach. Greenbaum (2002) guided students in critical ethnographic research of an unfamiliar community (e.g., women as housewives, secretaries, factory workers, single parents, wives of alcoholics and abusers.). The experience was supported with readings and critical analysis of this community’s representation in popular culture. The writer points out that writers’ conscious participation in an unfamiliar community can facilitate an ensuing criticality about power dynamics within and between groups; this awareness can, in turn, be transferrable to how students view power dynamics between genders, thus developing feminist consciousness.

In addition to the independent classroom environment, proactive practices, reactive practices, and the reactive/proactive ones, advocating equal deference for feminine styles of writing has also been a main concern for L1 feminist compositionists. Gendered differences within the writing classroom is reflected in the works of many feminist compositionists, such as Bridwell-Bowles (1995), DeRuiter (1996), and—most significantly—Flynn (1988). As a pre-eminent social activist, feminist, and compositionist, Flynn (1988) demanded equal consideration in composition pedagogy for women’s approaches to writing in a world where male perspectives are the standard. To advocate that, she referred to scholarship in psychology and sociology to show that men and women are different in their relational attitudes, as well as their moral and intellectual growth. She analyzed samples of student writings showing how they reflect these differences and emphasized that teachers should be able to accommodate these differences in student writing.

Nevertheless, other scholars questioned this emphasis on differences as it could veer into essentialization. Looser (1993) claims that it is limiting for students when we emphasize and, thus, possibly essentialize feminine and masculine differences in writing (e.g., establishing co-operative or personal writing as feminine discourse that male students might feel guilty to engage in). Instead of arguing for eliminating the discussion of these differences, Looser suggests that composition teachers should help students understand that such outlining of gender differences is meant for advocating equality when considering composition styles, rather than for limiting their choices or making them feel ashamed for adopting a so-called masculine or feminine style of writing.
Other scholars seem to focus on these differences as feminist but not necessarily feminine. For instance, feminist scholars such as Caywood and Overing (1987) encourage collaboration in the classroom as a feminist way of empowerment. The rationale for conceptualizing collaboration as such lies in Bruffee’s (as cited in Trimbur, 1989) consideration of it as the seed for “participatory democracy,” which “occurs along with free universities, grass-roots organizing, the consciousness-raising groups of women’s liberation, [and] the anti-war movement …” (p. 605). Meanwhile, other writers such as Ashton-Jones (1995), problematize this feminist glorification of collaboration, since gender power dynamics can still be reproduced even within students’ collaborative groups.

In a louder rebellion against the essentialization of differences, confrontational and oppositional styles in L1 composition are positioned in favor of feminism, as exemplified in the works of hooks (1989), Jarratt (1991), and Greenbaum (2002). For instance, Greenbaum (2002) expands on this proposition in a chapter interestingly titled, “‘Bitch’ Pedagogy: Agonistic Discourse and the Politics of Resistance.” Departing from the essentialist view of the female style as maternal, nurturing, cooperative, and nonconfrontational, this chapter advances feminist pedagogy in the writing classroom as unabashedly confrontational. The term “bitch pedagogy” stems from the fact that the word “bitch” has come connotatively to mean whatever can be threatening to patriarchy: “Female sensuality, even carnality, even infidelity, have been supplanted as what men primarily fear and despise in women. Judging by the contemporary colorations of the word bitch, what men primarily fear and despise in women is power” (p. 54) and the challenging of authority.

**Feminist pedagogies in the L2 classroom.** The important role of feminism in transforming the ESL classroom has been vocally and powerfully advocated in the works of Vandrick (1994, 1995, 1998). Vandrick is a trailblazer in laying out different theoretical principles and general hands-on practices, such as introducing women’s issues and citing women authors (Vandrick, 1994), which ESL teachers can draw on to promote feminism in the ESL classroom. Similar to Vandrick’s writings, most of the literature in L2 feminist research often taps into the literature offered by L1 feminist compositionists. For example, researchers’ discussions about collaboration and de-centralizing the teacher’s authority have transferred into the realm of L2 teaching in the name of feminism (e.g., Mackie, 1999).

Thus, empirical examples of feminist work with ESL writers often replicate general, familiar themes. Schenke (1996), for instance, followed the footsteps of Howe’s (1971) proactive pedagogy by implementing “memory work” (p. 156)—i.e., personal narrative—and the reactive pedagogy by asking her ESL students in Canada to analyze gender in Western media and literature. The writer just recommends providing paraphrased feminist reading materials for students to accommodate their linguistic resources. She also recommends not imposing Western feminist theory on ESL students uncritically; still, handling many of students’ specific cultures is a blind spot in feminist ESL research.
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Just like feminism, gender in general has often been one of the most controversial topics in the field of second language teaching (Casanave & Yamashiro, 1996; Pennycook, 2001). Prominent scholars in L2 research have explored different aspects of gender as a complex, hybrid, dynamic identity, which is inseparable from learner’s access and privilege/disadvantage and is thus influential in the language learning process (Norton, 2000). Inspired by this critical perspective, Norton and Pavlenko (2004a) compile case studies of ESL practitioners who fostered feminist ESL classrooms in diverse contexts (e.g., the US, China, and Japan). As evident across those diverse case studies, feminist ESL teachers always draw on students’ personal experiences and realities because that would ensure students’ engagement:

[W]e emphasize that feminist curricular innovation is not equivalent to traditional ‘thinking up’ of new programs and classes. Rather than working with a fully predetermined and decontextualized curriculum, critical TESOL educators organize and reorganize the curriculum around the needs and lived experiences of particular populations, be they young Japanese women, unemployed Latina immigrants, or male college students in Malaysia. (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004b, p. 507)

Indeed, this takeaway from Norton and Pavlenko’s (2004a & b) research is a further indicator of the need to develop contextualized feminist practices that interact critically and responsively with the contexts of EFL women writers in Saudi Arabia.

However, enacting feminism in the ESL classroom is not always easy for teachers—it is a political stance that evokes questions, dilemmas, and responsibilities in the professional lives of teachers. Hafernik, Messerschmitt and Vandrick (2002) explore the complex ethical issues that come along when enacting a feminist pedagogy, and they remind us that political concerns that teachers are passionate about should never trump over students’ learning and progress, which I find significant to constantly remember in my advocacy for feminism among my EFL students in Saudi Arabia. Since teachers can be role models for their students, feminist teachers’ identities in and of themselves raises key questions regarding issues such as teacher dress codes (Vandrick, 2017).

Challenging sexism in the ESL classroom is one well-trodden area of L2 research that combats the patriarchy. For instance, Sunderland (1994) reminds teachers to give sufficient attention to female students in the ESL classroom and encourage male students to be supportive of the voices of their female peers. Moreover, Cohen (1994) points out that teachers should look out for aspects of sexism that can contribute to the silencing of female ESL students in the basic writing classroom, including the power dynamics between these women and their male counterparts who share the same cultural background. Similarly, Vandrick (1997) provides insights into ensuring an environment of equity within the mixed ESL classroom.

Sexism in ESL textbooks has also been addressed in the pursuit of equity in the ESL classroom. Researchers such as Hartman and Judd (1978), Porreca (1984), and Sunderland (1994) sparked the conversation about different dimensions of sexism in the textbooks that are used in the second language classroom. Such researchers point out patterns of female exclusion or stereotyping in ESL textbooks and how ESL
teachers should handle them critically when teaching second language learners. For instance, sexism in ESL textbooks is usually normalized through visual representations, assignment of gender roles, turn-taking in conversations, or issues of gender-biased language (e.g., as using “man” to refer to the human race). Analyses of the sexism in ESL textbooks continued to be widely adapted across specific contexts, such as English language textbooks in Germany (Hellinger, 1980), Japan (Sakita, 1995), Australia and China (Lee & Collins, 2010), Iran (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Hall, 2014) and the Philippines (Tarrayo, 2014).

Beyond the scope of sexism and gender, feminist pedagogy in the ESL classroom is demonstrated in a dedication to supporting any students who are racially, ethnically, or linguistically marginalized. Reflecting this facet of feminist pedagogy, Lukkarila (2012) utilized three classroom practices, “the ‘campfire’ discussion circle; the public writing forum; and the parts-before-whole instructional approach” (p. 76) to help ESL students, as linguistic and sometimes racio-linguistic minorities, break through the psychological barriers that hinder their learning of academic writing as an Anglo-American genre.

Another significant takeaway from empirical ESL research is that it is never too early to invest in some adapted form of critical literacy (including feminist pedagogy), even with beginning ESL learners. Lau (2010) comes to this conclusion after narrating her successful critical literacy experience in the ESL classroom. In her study, she helped her beginning ESL students in Canada dissect the simple story of Cinderella through a feminist lens (discussing, for example, how the story plays on gender ideologies by portraying women’s ultimate goal as merely marrying a rich man and portraying the man as the heroic savior of the victimized woman). Then, she helped them re-write this story. The writer clarifies that the students’ “limited proficiency level was not the greatest barrier.” Instead, Lau encountered difficulty primarily in assisting the ESL learners in “break[ing] out of their usual passive role” (p. 168), which the learners were able to do with the instructor’s affirmation and support. Knowing that language learning should not be an obstacle to critical consciousness when the proper support and adaptation of strategies are provided is, indeed, a motive for furthering the research on localized approaches to feminism in different levels of the female ESL writing classroom in Saudi Arabia.

Closely focusing on the EFL context, Yoshihara’s (2017) book is a timely addition and a hallmark resource. The writer provides extended insights on the struggles and progressions that feminist EFL teachers experience in the Japanese context. More specifically, she examines the compatibility between the beliefs, identities, and classroom practices of 6 EFL teachers who identify as feminists in Japan. Using her data, she revisits the definition of feminism in TESOL in light of post-structural feminism. Since mainly “[t]he feminist teachers in [her] study often situate themselves in conflicts,” the writer reaches that feminist pedagogy in TESOL should shift towards the deconstruction of oppositional binaries—including “voice/silence, egalitarian/authoritarian, safety/unsafety, empowerer/empowered, and rationality/affectivity” (p. 110). Yoshihara’s work is a reminder of the complexity that underlies the feminist EFL classroom. This complexity can be easy to forget when examining non-Western EFL contexts, especially the Saudi context,
which is often essentialized as representative of the negative sides of the binaries that Yoshihara lists.

However, the Saudi context is different from Yoshihara’s in some significant ways. As early as 1970, social uprisings in Japan led to Uman Ribu, the woman’s liberation movement that contributed to the evolution of feminism in Japan (Shigematsu, 2012). Meanwhile, although many women on social media have been advocating for women’s social rights, such as women’s driving, Saudi Arabia has not experienced historical, large-scale, and organized feminist movements women’s liberation. In fact, the tight fist of religious and sociopolitical authorities, which is vividly present in the public memory and identity, has often stifled any propagation of uncompromising feminist thought in Saudi Arabia, labeling it as anti-Islamic and chaos-causing. Thus, considering the issues raised by the particular contours of the Saudi context, we are still left with questions regarding how to empower women in the EFL classroom and support them to be active social agents in pursuing their human rights. We are also left wondering how to do so in culturally responsive ways and with special attention to the transformative tool of writing.

**Empowerment of L2 Saudi writers/learners.** As ESL classrooms have been an answer to Saudi students’ need to simply catch up with globalization and speak the world’s lingua franca, the concern has been how to transfer, rather than transform, knowledge. In other words, the emphasis in ESL research has usually been on how to transfer native-level language skills to ESL Saudi students, rather than on how to help these students transform their self-perception and roles in society through the labors of language. In line with this emphasis, English writing for Saudi ESL students has often been perceived as a goal, rather than as a means to a more meaningful end. Researchers have focused on the question of how to help Saudi ESL students with learning to write—as in Saba’s (2013) study, in which the goal is Saudi students’ learning to write appropriately in academia. Meanwhile, research offers little in response to the question of how to help Saudi ESL students with writing to learn about, think through, scrutinize, and positively transform themselves, their ideologies, their social roles, their society, and the world.

Instead, setting “good” writing as the ultimate goal has resulted in an emphasis on the patterns of error that Saudi ESL writers tend to make—a theme that can be traced even in relatively recent research (e.g., Abu Rass, 2011). The focus on error leaves the creative and transformative potentiality of ESL Saudi writers without due recognition. The focus on learning to write as a goal and the ensuing focus on error can definitely be a useful, if not necessary, theme that many ESL Saudi writers, especially in beginning and intermediate levels, need. However, there’s a need to couple this theme with an acknowledgement of the transformative capacity of ESL writing. To do otherwise is to undermine students’ capacity to develop critical literacy—i.e., to reflect on their social roles in social issues—which current literature has failed to consider. Even when glimmers of a more transformative vision of Saudi ESL learners loom on the research horizon, obstacles cloud the view. Strategies to teach critical thinking and self-voice in the writing classroom are a case in point. Those strategies, which are essential for critical social change, have
been examined in the Saudi context but only with a focus on male students, as in the
work of Barnawi (2011). Meanwhile, the more pronounced restriction on females’
utilization of such skills in the Saudi context has been overlooked. Al-Muhaideib
(2011) gives us a chance to learn more about the women in this context. The
researcher empowers Saudi women by acknowledging their preferred styles of
learning English as a second language—namely a preference for learning the
language through visual aids, rather than kinesthetic and auditory ones. Nonetheless,
the goal that the researcher sets for these women is that they learn the language
through convenient means. However, through such a limited focus in researching L2
Saudi women, we do not get to explore Saudi women’s laboring with language to
achieve other more profound goals, such as investing in critical thinking, self-voice,
and—eventually—social action.

Exploring uncharted territories, Alharbi (2018) redefines the goals and questions
of Saudi second-language writing through a brave and critical poststructuralist lens.
Alharbi moves beyond the conversation of error, skills, and learning preferences and
explores Saudis’ second-language writing as a battlefield where identities,
ideologies, and power structures are constantly shaped and re-shaped. More
specifically, Alharbi examines the concept of “voice” in the academic writing of
both Saudi men and women studying in graduate programs in the US and how it is
influenced by the institutional practices in both these students’ home country and
their new context abroad. Alharbi’s work on the concept of “voice” opens up a
powerful and unique conversation that feminist researchers and women themselves
can further problematize and build on.

With more Saudi women crossing borders as international students (especially
since the Saudi economy reached its latest peak), Saudi women’s view of their
relationship to language has been growing and attempts to negotiate local and global
perspectives on gender rights have started to emerge. The one study that seems to be
part of this evolution is Al Sweel’s (2013) The Impact of English as a Second
Language on Saudi Women’s Roles and Identities. This work does acknowledge the
power of language in changing society through its exploration of how the spread of
English as a second language has influenced Saudi women’s roles and identities in
society. She explains how English as a second language—with the different
worldview it brings along—encourages Saudi women to re-visit their culturally
inherited values and beliefs regarding gender roles.

Nevertheless, as much as it fascinates me, this study still leaves a gap—maybe
even a wound. After the writer points out the tension that ESL Saudi women face
between the feminist gender values that the English language exposes them to and
the ones held in their society, she seeks to explain “Islamic feminism” as the
ultimate culturally appropriate resolution for this tension—as an ideal for
empowering women in this context. The writer defines the so-called “Islamic
feminism” (Al Sweel, 2013, p. 210) as the celebration of the human rights that Islam
gives to women and as the re-interpretation of Islam’s attitudes towards women in
ways that are compatible with feminist values.

Presenting “Islamic feminism” as the culturally responsive resolution to the
tension in gender values in the Saudi context might be problematic in significant
ways. While the writer claims that Islamic feminism is a way for “embracing cultural knowledge as power” (Al Sweel, 2013, p. 71), the emphasis on this concept silences the voices of marginalized, often in-the-closet non-Muslim and ex-Muslim ESL Saudi women, who are probably already in fear of revealing their own non-conformist identities and non-Islamic gender values. Indeed, it pressures them into submissively seeking harmony with the Muslim hegemony. This representation of “Islamic feminism” as culturally responsive is problematic, since it may only serve to reinforce the Islamic hegemonic power, many authorities of which have systematically oppressed women in the first place. I believe that teachers can be culturally responsive without having to empower hegemonic forces and without suppressing any minorities among women.

The works in this section obviously leave behind another minority: non-Saudi students in EFL classroom in Saudi Arabia. Namely, non-Saudi women who live in the country under the sponsorship of privileged male or female Saudi citizens are often pushed to the margin in dialogues of women rights and the EFL experience in Saudi Arabia. In the Saudi context, these women undergo much of the institutional and cultural patriarchal practices and ideologies that Saudi women face, and sometimes they even have to navigate even more challenges (think of Asian maids who are sometimes objectified as temptresses for males in a household and thus forced by their female Saudi sponsors to wear the hijab all day). A genuine practice of teaching for social justice leaves no woman in the shadows of another.

The literature surveyed here shows how current research on learners/writers in the Saudi ESL writing classroom leaves us curious as to how to transcend the focus on error; the perception of writing only as an end; the view of women as merely language learners, rather than social agents; and the reproduction of hegemony in the name of feminism. In fact, even the silence in this vein of research can say volumes regarding the context of this inquiry. Many Saudi graduate students that I talk to, indeed, admit that, in their research projects, they approach critical social justice issues—including the advocacy for women’s rights—in their country very carefully, since they fear consequences from their cultural missions abroad or in the job market back home. Moreover, questioning the existing power structures in Saudi Arabia can result in serious penalties, including arrest—and for a woman, the consequences could even be more dire. Women insiders often witness how, if a woman in Saudi challenges religious powers or social norms, she can be branded immoral, impious, unworthy of ethical treatment, or even promiscuous. These judgements stem from the fact that the norms and powers that she challenges are usually perceived in the society as a means of regulating women’s decorum, sexuality, and morality. Any blemish in a woman’s morality (or piety, for this matter) can sometimes result in alienation and defamation, as women are often perceived primarily as the bearers of children and as responsible for acculturating children into these conventions of morality. Women are thus sometimes condemned to silence as they are held to certain standards of morality—more specifically, the society’s framing of morality. It can be a vicious cycle. Social injustice silences, and silences feed into social injustice. Therefore, it is time that we talk about taking a step forward.
Unveiling Hope: Critical Literacy in Saudi Women’s EFL Classrooms

Framing my hope within current academic discourses, I examined in this literature review trends in feminist L1 composition, including rhetorics of difference, opposition, collaboration, and reactive/interactive pedagogies. I then examined research in feminist L2 pedagogies, which reassures us that it is never too early to embed critical literacy in our classrooms and emphasizes the significance of tailoring feminist pedagogies according to specific contexts. After that, I explained how available research on Saudi L2 learners seems to 1) reduce the goals of Saudi ESL writing classrooms to better writing (rather than social justice); 2) tackle empowering aspects of writing (such as voice and critical thinking) mostly in the context of male Saudi writers; and 3) appease religious hegemonies in discussions of gender issues.

Extending my hope beyond current academic discourses, I advocate viewing and investigating women’s EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia as fertile fields for critical literacy—believing in these powerful women as seeds for social transformation and a better future for the female community in the country. This proposal for critical literacy is an acknowledgement of the mission of education at its fullest potential: to help students read both the word and the world (Freire, 1985). It is also an acknowledgement of students’ capability to meaningfully impact the world around them, which is the antithesis of what hegemonic religious, cultural, and sociopolitical powers want women students to believe. In fact, critical literacy is embodied in the principle that all texts—including the ones that naturalize certain patterns in women’s lives—are subject not only to scrutiny but also to re-invention (Janks, 2005). As a woman and an educator in the Saudi context, critical literacy reads “hope.”

But soon, the questions follow: How can we adapt the literature from L1 feminist composition and L2 feminist pedagogies to accommodate the Saudi context? How can we ensure safety when the physical/emotional consequences for having second thoughts regarding women’s place in the Saudi hegemonies can be dire? How can we ensure that feminist thought is handled in this context critically and holistically, rather than butchered and trivialized? How can we create space and form for critical literacy within anti-feminist pre-packaged curricula and rigid institutionalized policies in Saudi education? How can we introduce women in the Saudi context to feminism without disregarding their cultural funds of knowledge, compromising feminist values, or endorsing Western colonial thought? How can we still support the development of women’s L2 learning despite all these tensions? The questions in this context abound, but so do the reasons for hope.

References


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