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FACILITATING CO-ED COMMUNICATION: CASE STUDY OF A CLASSROOM IN QATAR

Abstract:

Good discussions, key to learning in the language classroom, are limited when only half of the voices in the classroom are heard. Research from Western institutions (e.g. Crombie et al., 2003) shows that, even in today's environment, women participate less than men in class. In the Arabian Gulf, where male-female interaction is highly prescribed, women's voices may be even more underrepresented (Romanowski & Al-Hassan, 2013).

When students matriculate into our American institution's Middle Eastern branch campus, they experience a mixed-sex environment for the first time. In my own classrooms, students self-segregate—males on one side of the class, females on the other, a wide aisle separating them. Their reluctance to interact crosses gender lines, but men still dominate class discussions.

How can instructors bridge the aisle to encourage whole-class interaction in this environment? How can instructors in other countries bridge the communication gap between male and female students from similarly conservative backgrounds? My own classroom research shows that computer-mediated communication may be one way to get students talking.

In this poster presentation, I will show results of a class activity using Google Docs to respond to a text. Data from two classes will be compared, with graphs both quantifying and qualifying comments by sex. Brief excerpts from student journals showing attitudes about participation will also be featured.

With the face-to-face element of discussion eliminated, in one class my female students interacted more; in the other class there was only an increase in female-to-female participation. I will discuss possible reasons for these results, which somewhat reflect those of Caspi, Chajut & Saporta (2008) that women may feel "less intimidated" in online environments. While it would be naïve and idealistic to think that online interaction could eliminate all cultural barriers to female participation, it may be one way to build a bridge, however shaky, across the aisle.

Keywords:

computer-mediated communication; gender; Qatar; teaching