



MONASH University

**The experience of Saudi female students attending mixed gender ESL courses in Melbourne,
Australia**

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Ethics approval

The research for this project received the approval of the Monash University Standing Committee for Ethical Research on Humans

(Group approval reference: 2016-1161-1018).

Declaration

This project contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any educational institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the Project.

Signed: Sahar Mohamad Alghamdi

Date: 25, January, 2017

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Glossary

<i>Mahram</i>	Male relation responsible for Saudi women (e.g father, brother, uncle, husband and grandfather)
<i>Niqap (burq'a)</i>	Islamic face veil
<i>Sharia</i>	Islamic law framework
<i>Ird</i>	Family honour and particularly to a woman's chastity

List of Abbreviations

SLA	Second langue acquisition
ESL	English as a second language
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
CLT	Communicative language teaching
IELTS	The international English language testing system

Abstract

This study explored the experience of Saudi female students attending mixed-gender English as a second language (ESL) courses in Melbourne, Australia and the factors that impacted their levels of engagement. A transcendental phenomenological research design was used to provide a thick description of the essence of the Saudi female experience in this learning environment. The participants included four Saudi female students currently attending ESL courses in Melbourne, Australia. Two phases—descriptive and interpretive—were employed in the data analysis to accurately capture the nature of the experience.

This study revealed that, while all the participants held a positive attitude towards their experience, language proficiency level and marital status played crucial roles in their adaptation. Participants with high language skills reported smoother adaptation than students with low language skills. The married students tended to be more inhibited than single students by the attendance of male especially Saudi male. Working solely with males or participating in physical activities with males had the greatest impact on levels of engagement in classroom activities. These findings were broadly in line with the sparse literature available on this phenomenon. Therefore, future research suggestions and practical implications were offered.

Keywords: Saudi female students, English as a second language courses (ESL), mixed-gender classroom environment

Chapter one: introduction

1.1 Reflection

I would like to begin with a brief reflection on my interests and position regarding choosing this research topic. Choosing a topic is usually the most difficult decision a researcher can make because it will affect the entire study. I chose to explore the experience of Saudi female students attending mixed gender ESL courses in Australia based on my experience and observations as a Saudi female student who came to Australia to pursue my postgraduate study. Because I already had a bachelor's degree in English literature, which I obtained in Saudi Arabia, I required minimal preparation through a programme designed for the international English language testing system IELTS exam, which was held, as is traditionally done, in an English as a second language (ESL) college. I came from the most gender segregated environment in the world; therefore, it was my first experience in a mixed gender environment. It was weird, unfamiliar and, for me, an interesting experience. Even though my language skills were good, I faced challenges when trying to fit in with this new learning environment. I tried to avoid direct eye contact with male students in the classroom and, for the first few days, I could not wait for the class to end. I felt that I was behaving inappropriately and pretending to be comfortable when I was not. These challenges did not affect my progress because I was only attending to gain an idea about the (IELTS) exam. In time, I became accustomed to the learning environment, even though I kept my distance from the males in the classroom.

During that programme, I met several Saudi female students who were taking ESL courses, with some at a very low level of English. They had to pass all the English language levels within a specific time period to start their university programmes. Therefore, most of them were under pressure and feared getting behind schedule. I observed their conflicts on a daily basis as they struggled to adapt to an unfamiliar learning environment. I noticed a serious lack of support for this population in the ESL institutes, even from the Saudi scholarship programmes. The lack of awareness shown by ESL teachers

towards the sensitive cultural differences of Saudi students was obvious and left them to adapt on their own. After a tremendous amount of reading, I decided to explore the experience of Saudi female students attending mixed gender ESL courses in Australia. The choice of this topic is described in greater detail in Chapter 2.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The number of international students in Australia has steadily increased in recent years. In October 2016, there were 537,499 international students enrolled in different programmes in Australia, which was an 11% growth from the previous year (Department of Education and Training, 2016). There were 6,433 Saudi students enrolled in Australian universities in 2016.

The experience of international students at colleges and universities has been a widely-explored topic due to their economic importance. Economically, the international education sector has become the third largest export industry in Australia (Larsen, Payne, & Tomison, 2011). Although students from China, India and East Asia are considered the majority of international students in Australia, the number of Saudi students is significant (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013). All international students face certain difficulties in different aspects of their studies; however, Saudi students have a specific cultural background that makes international study quite different from that of most international students. Saudi students come from the most gender-segregated environment in the world; schools are segregated by gender from grade one through the university level (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013). When Saudi students travel internationally to pursue their studies, they often encounter a mixed-gender learning environment for the first time. Although a variety of studies have explored different aspects of Saudi international students, most were conducted in the US, and only a few focused exclusively on Saudi female students and their experiences as international students. Additionally, no research has explored the specific experiences of Saudi female students learning English in a mixed-gender learning environment. Therefore, this study will focus exclusively on the experience of Saudi female students attending mixed-gender ESL courses and the influence of this environment on their levels of engagement. The importance

of this study centres on two aspects: the gap in the literature, which is due to an insufficient number of studies exploring the experience of Saudi female international students, and the significant number of Saudi students attending ESL courses in Melbourne. These factors emphasise the need for more studies exploring this population's experiences and needs.

1.3 Research Questions.

This study explores the experience of Saudi female students attending mixed-gender ESL courses in Melbourne. The research focuses on aspects that may influence their levels of engagement in the classroom. To better understand their experience, two questions were explored:

- What is the experience of Saudi female students in a mixed-gender classroom environment in an ESL course for the first time?
- How does the experience of being in a mixed-gender classroom influence their level of engagement?

1.4 Value Added.

This study provides original contributions to knowledge on this topic in several different aspects. Firstly, this study enriches the literature with new insights about the experience of Saudi female students attending ESL courses in Melbourne that currently have no precedent. It also contributes to the understanding of Saudi females' motives and inhibitions, which affect their engagement in classroom discussions. ESL instructors can use the results of this study to better understand how Saudi females learn in a mixed-gender classroom. The depth of discussion on this topic provides instructors with a better understanding of the sensitive aspects of Saudi culture, which may particularly affect females' levels of engagement. By considering these aspects, ESL instructors could locate more options to help Saudi students. Secondly, the results of this study can be used by ESL course designers to adapt a

classroom discussion environment that best fits these students' needs. The adaptation strategies, which could be based on the results of this study, may help to assure the quality of Saudi female experiences in ESL courses in Melbourne. College personnel, international students' services and orientation programme designers could also benefit from this study to better meet the needs of this specific population and help them adjust to a new educational system. Furthermore, future Saudi female students can gain insights from previous Saudi students' experiences. More importantly, this study will give a voice to an underrepresented population, or what is commonly known to be a 'muted group', which will allow greater expression of their feelings and experiences (Alanazy, 2013; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). It will provide opportunities for them to speak up and offer their own suggestions for adaptation methods that may better fit their needs and sensitivities.

1.5 Chapters Outline

This study is presented in six chapters. The introductory chapter covers the research questions' importance and the value of the study. Chapter 2 describes the literature regarding the topic and the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning this study. Chapter 3 clarifies the rationales concerning the research design, and the data collection and analysis process. Chapter 4 presents the first descriptive phase of the data analysis. It provides detailed descriptions of each individual experience and covers the main aspects of the research questions, including first impression, adaptation and academic performance. Chapter 5 presents the interpretive phase of the data analysis. It is aimed at making the participants' experiences meaningful by linking them to theories and literature. Chapter 6, the conclusion of the study, includes an overview of the findings, its limitations, future research suggestions and practical implications.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Knowledge of the main cultural aspects of Saudi society is essential to understanding the experience of Saudi students studying abroad. Therefore, this chapter will provide insights into those aspects. It will review the existing literature related to international education, Saudi international students and common themes amongst Saudi female students. This will be followed by conceptualization of the Saudi female experience and demonstration of the theoretical perspectives that underpin this investigation.

2.1 Background of Saudi Society

Undoubtedly, most international students face challenges in their studies due to cultural differences and being away from family and friends. However, Saudi students may face more difficulties in adapting to Western culture because the gap between the two cultures is great, which makes the Saudi international student experience unique. Saudi Arabia is a religious country with a very conservative societal structure that thrives on cultural beliefs. It is in the southwest corner of Asia in the heart of the Middle East, with a population of 27 million people and Arabic as its official language. Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, with the government dominated by the royal family; therefore, the position of king is inherited. Before the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia was a very poor country. In the 1950s, when oil was first discovered, the country gained significant power, both politically and economically. Saudi Arabia is also extremely religious; importantly, it contains two of the main holy Islamic destinations (Makkah and Al Madinah) for all Muslims around the world. All economic and political laws of Saudi Arabia follow Sharia law (Islamic law) (Otterbeck, 2012).

Wahhabism is a key concept to understand regarding Saudi society because it influences all aspects of life. Wahhabism is a form of Islam that can be defined as “a complex ideology that was subjected to and influenced by particular interpretations of Islamic teachings, Arabic culture and political conditions” (Alhazmi, 2013, p. 73). Gender segregation is a significant aspect of Wahhabism’s ideology.

Saudi Arabia has the most gender-segregated environment in the world (Yamani, 2004), and this segregation influences all aspects of life. Schools, universities, hospitals and even restaurants must provide separate places for families and single males. Family gatherings are influenced as well, with separate spaces required for males and females in every house. Under Wahhabism's ideology, women are prohibited from communicating with males who are not considered as *Mahram* (e.g. father, brother, husband or uncle)—and vice versa for men—unless it is necessary, such as for doctor's visits. Therefore, most Saudi women have had no contact with males other than their *Mahram* throughout their lives (Pharaon, 2004). Until recently, women were not even allowed to work in a shop or supermarket as a cashier. As such, males generally control all the communication practices outside the house.

The societal position of women presents another complicated situation in Saudi Arabia. Women are treated as second-class citizens. They are not allowed to drive and, until recently, they were not allowed to vote. In public places, women must be accompanied by a *Maharam* (male guardian) at all times so that they will not need to interact with strange males. In addition, Saudi women must obtain approval from their *Mahram* if they intend to get a job. To study abroad, a Saudi female, regardless of either her marital status or age, is required to have a legally acceptable male companion, who will be required to travel with her and remain with her until the completion of her scholarship study (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016).

Female modesty is also a crucial aspect of Saudi society because it is associated with family honour and religious commitment. This includes the way women wear the *Hijab* (Islamic head scarf) and *Neqab* (face veil), which are seen as important representations of female modesty. Another sensitive aspect of female modesty is the *Ird* (عرض). This refers “to family honour and particularly to a woman's chastity” (Alhazmi, 2013, p.81). Soffan (1980) also confirmed that the *Ird* is a very sensitive aspect of Arab life when he stated that, in Arab societies, “a woman is the repository of moral deeds in her family; thus, she can destroy the honour of the family. She carries her family honour with her even after marriage, and she continues to represent her family through modesty” (p. 18). Therefore, women in

Saudi Arabia are under a great deal of pressure to protect their families' honour and reputation, which present challenges when leaving the country. When Saudi students travel internationally to pursue their studies, they often encounter a mixed-gender learning environment for the first time. Because they must adapt quickly so that they can engage effectively in their new learning environment, this transition can have a significant impact on Saudi students' experiences when studying abroad.

2.2 Literature Review

The role of the literature review in this study was similar to most qualitative studies; it had specific and limited involvement (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). To allow the researcher to both approach the study in the bracketing mood (which will be discussed in the methodology Chapter 3) and maintain subjectivity, the literature review was used to clarify the key concepts of the phenomenon. It was also used to contextualise and conceptualize the context being investigated (Creswell, 2009). It clarified the context of the study and highlighted certain aspects of the research questions. It was also used to locate existing knowledge about the phenomenon to verify the significance of this investigation.

International education is a widely-explored topic in the literature due to its economic importance. There are currently 537,499 international students enrolled in Australia's universities (International Education, 2016). Economically, the international education sector has become the third largest export industry in Australia (Larsen, Payne, & Tomison, 2011). Therefore, a significant number of studies in the literature have explored different aspects of international students' experiences in the US, the UK and Australia. Most of these studies have focused on students from East Asia and India, whom are considered as the majority of international students. In 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz established a new scholarship programme that allowed thousands of Saudis to pursue higher education by creating numerous opportunities for Saudi students to study at leading universities around the world in fields that are not yet available in Saudi Arabia (Shanmugham, 2015).

Aspects of international students' intercultural adaptations and sociocultural adjustments have been discussed widely in the literature (Andrade, 2006; Coles & Swami, 2012; Gill, 2007; Zevallos, 2012). Culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Furnham, 2004) as well as cultural competence are common phenomena among international students (Nieto & Booth, 2009). However, no studies have focused on Saudi international students; notably, they are not even mentioned as participants. While most international students are from East Asia (China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia etc.) (Department of Education and Training, 2016), the number of Saudi international students is quite significant. Several studies have examined Saudi international students, focusing on aspects such as intercultural engagement (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013). Rundles (2013), for example, explored the psychological adjustment of Saudi Arabian international students. In the literature, Saudi female international students have been, until recently, a 'muted group', with few studies examining the experience of Saudi female students exclusively and most conducted in the US only (Alanazy, 2013; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum & Keen, 2015). However, some common themes regarding Saudi female students have emerged across these studies:

- They are inhibited in the presence of males, especially Saudi males, due to their upbringing. Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum, and Keen (2015) examined the experience of Saudi female graduate students in the US at the Comprehensive Doctoral University in a narrative study using grounded theory. They found that the most difficult period of adjustment to the new culture of the host country was the first few months, which is usually the English language training period. They also found that Saudi female students felt uncomfortable with the attendance of males, especially Saudi males, in their classes. They stated, "The presence of Saudi males was generally inhibiting because our participants felt that their co-nationals constantly watched and judged them" (p. 370). Moreover, Alanazy (2013) conducted a quantitative research study in the US of 277 Saudi female students' perceptions towards online and face-to-face discussions. Alanazy found that the Saudi female students felt inhibited by the attendance of males, especially Saudi males, during face-to-face discussions. Marital

status and home region in Saudi Arabia seemed to be crucial factors in Alanazy's study, which found marital status was an important factor that related to Saudi students' attitudes toward online and face-to-face discussion. Home region was also another important aspect, with Alanazy finding that Saudi students from the eastern region of Saudi Arabia were the most inhibited regarding face-to-face discussions with Saudi males.

To understand these results, certain geographical characteristics of Saudi Arabia must be explained. Saudi Arabia consists of five regions: northern, middle, eastern, western and southern. The middle region is considered as the birth place of the state, and it contains the capital city. The western region comprises the two holy mosques, which receive millions of Muslim visitors annually from all around the world. The people of the western region are "recognized by Saudi society as an open-minded people due to their exposure to different cultures" (Alanazy, 2013, pp. 115–116).

Participants in Alanazy's (2013) study experienced difficulties adjusting in the beginning (they refer here to the ESL courses that they took). Most international students, and Saudi international students in particular, must take an English course to meet university English language proficiency requirements, such as the IELTS test. Private colleges or institutes provide these English courses, such as Monash College and the RMIT English Language Institute. In these English courses, Saudi females often experience a mixed-gender environment for the first time (Alanazy, 2013; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum & Keen, 2015). They spend more than a year in these courses until they feel confident about their English skills. Therefore, most of their difficulties and challenges occur in ESL courses because these classes often represent their first experience in a mixed-gender setting with males of no relation to them. They do eventually become familiar with the environment in their university life, which emphasises the need to investigate these initial difficulties to determine methods for easing this transition. However, there is no current research that explores the experiences of Saudi female students attending mixed-gender ESL classrooms. To fill

that gap, this study will focus on the experience of Saudi female students learning English in a mixed-gender learning environment and its influence on their levels of engagement in the ESL classroom.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

According to Maxwell (2005), the conceptual framework for any research is “the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied” (p. 33). To identify the main features of the phenomenon being investigated requires use of the research questions as a starting point to identify the conceptual perspectives. As such, two fundamental questions were asked to explore the phenomenon of Saudi students attending mixed-gender ESL courses:

- What are the experiences of Saudi female students who attend ESL courses in a mixed-gender classroom environment for the first time?
- How does the experience of being in a mixed-gender classroom influence their level of engagement?

From these two questions, the phenomenon investigated was based on two main concepts: the experience in a mixed-gender learning environment and the level of engagement. These two concepts are related to the context of a gender-segregated learning environment in Saudi Arabia. Although the term ‘experience’ represents one of the main concepts in this study, this can be problematic because ‘experience’ is epistemologically complex (Holmes, 1971). The adopted meaning of the term ‘experience’ is that it is a dynamic phenomenon that results from the interaction between individuals and their context (Glassman, 2001). The interaction between Saudi female students and their new learning context is the main scope of this study. To gain deeper understanding of their experience, the researcher discussed their adaptation and adjustment processes. The researcher has adopted definitions for these two concepts regarding the scope of the study. Kim and Gudykunst (1988) defined adaptation as “the complex process through which an individual acquires an increasing level of “fitness” or “compatibility” in the new cultural environment” (p.

9). Therefore, adaptation in this study refers to the process of trying to fit in with a mixed-gender classroom environment. The adjustment concept is referred to as the outcome of the adaptation (Matsumoto, Hirayama, & LeRoux, 2006). In this study, it might be seen as the outcomes of the process of fitting in with the mixed-gender classroom environment and the level of comfort and well-being that Saudi female students have achieved over time (Alhazmi, 2013, p. 222).

2.4 Theoretical Framework (Investment Theory)

The theory adopted in this research concerns Norton's (2000, 1995) investment theory, which called for reconceptualization of the learner within second language acquisition (SLA) theories. Norton wanted to shift the belief of considering the entire experience of learning a second language into motivation factors. Her theory refers to aspects beyond motivation that affect the second language learning process. Darvin and Norton (2015) stated that, "a student may be a highly-motivated learner but may not be invested in the language practices of a given classroom" (p. 37). Investment theory emphasises the role of language practices that can influence the language learning process. Darvin and Norton (2015) wanted to shift the traditional beliefs of learners as good or bad to a view that "recognizes that the conditions of power in different learning contexts can position learners in multiple and often unequal ways, leading to varying learning outcomes" (p. 37). The great integration between second language learners and the language learning environment is a fundamental factor to determine the success of the language learning experience.

For Saudi female students, language practices that involve engagement with males may influence their engagement levels. Even if they are highly motivated, these language practices might not fit their needs. Norton and Toohey (2004) referred to investment theory as a way "to consider how, in diverse sites of language education, practices might be modified, changed, developed or abandoned in efforts to support learners" (p. 2). To illustrate, this theory may play a crucial role in this study because it may help the researcher better understand Saudi female students' experiences in two different aspects. Firstly, it will help define the relationship between the learning environment and the learner's investment

in the classroom. Secondly, it will specify the different aspects that may affect Saudi female students' levels of engagement as well as analyse their perspectives in learning practices in a mixed-gender classroom.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the main aspects of Saudi cultural background which was followed by an investigation of the existing literature about the investigated phenomenon. The conceptual framework of this study was also discussed. Lastly, the theoretical framework underpinning this study was clarified. The next chapter will discuss the methodology and the research design that the researcher has adopted to answer the research questions.

Chapter Three: Research Methods

This chapter presents the research design and methodology. It firstly clarifies the choice of using a qualitative study and its advantages. It then presents the rationales for using a phenomenological research design, specifically transcendental phenomenology. Secondly, the process of data collection is discussed thoroughly, which is followed by explanations of the data analysis process. Lastly, assuring trustworthiness strategies and ethical consideration was presented.

3.1 Qualitative Research

Both qualitative and quantitative research contribute to knowledge in different ways. While quantitative research provides answers to how many and/or what links certain variables, and questions a hypothesis, qualitative research can provide unique and valuable insights about lived experiences (Barbour, 2013). The qualitative research method best fits this study because its main aims are to explore Saudi female students' experiences and to provide valuable insights about those experiences.

Qualitative research also allows the researcher to “access these “embedded” processes by focusing on the context of people’s everyday lives, where such decisions are made and enacted” (Barbour, 2013, p. 13). It has “a concern for meanings and the way people understand things” (Denscombe, 1998, pp. 207–208). Qualitative researchers are entrusted with determining how people understand and make sense of their experiences (Barbour, 2013 & Denscombe, 1998). However, qualitative research uses many different approaches, including phenomenology, grounded theory, case study and ethnography (Creswell, 2014). For this study, phenomenology best meets the needs of the research, and is discussed in the next section.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Transcendental Phenomenology. The aim of this study was to explore the experience of Saudi females attending a mixed-gender ESL classroom. To achieve this aim, a phenomenological research design suited this study best because it could increase understanding of “what they experienced and how

they experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Furthermore, Lopez and Willis (2004) stated that phenomenology “offers scholars a way to understand individuals and their interactions with others and their environments” (pp. 189–190). A phenomenological research design can provide a thick description of the investigated phenomenon and particularly provide the essence of an individual’s lived experience by describing “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Phenomenology also improves the understanding of common experiences, which could help develop appropriate practices and/or policies. Therefore, if ESL instructors and course designers can better understand the experience of Saudi female students, they can develop methods to ease their adjustment.

To illustrate, there are two types of phenomenological research: hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). The major difference between the two approaches is that hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to reflect on the meaning of the lived experience. In contrast, transcendental phenomenology sets the researcher aside to allow for a fresh and pure perspective towards the phenomenon from the informants (Creswell, 2007, 2013). Lewis and Staehler (2010) stated that transcendental phenomenology is “to do away with interpretation and to let the things themselves speak for themselves” (p. 6). This type of phenomenology played a crucial role in the current study because the researcher was trying to provide a dense description of Saudi female students’ experiences, which is difficult to do entirely (Creswell, 2013, 2007; Hycner, 1985).

3.3 Data Collection Method

3.3.1 Individual interviews. One-on-one interviews are the most common data collection instrument used in both qualitative and phenomenology studies (Barbour, 2013; Kvale, 1996). This is because a one-on-one interview helps the researcher obtain “nuanced descriptions from the different qualitative aspects of the interviewee’s life world; it works with words and not with numbers” (Kvale, 1996, p. 32). It also allows “respondents to focus on the issues of greatest importance to them rather than the agenda being determined entirely by the researcher's interests” (Barbour, 2013, p. 17). In this research, data

were collected via one-on-one interviews, and the interview techniques were mainly based on Kvale (1996) and Barbour's (2013) methods.

The data were collected over one month in late 2016. The participants were asked open-ended questions (see Appendix C), and the researcher followed a semi-structured style. This style is mainly based on flexibility and versatility, which provide the researcher with opportunities to gain deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Barbour, 2013; Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). The main advantage of using this style is that it has been “found to be successful in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant . . . enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participants' responses” (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016, p. 2955). This style helped the researcher ask participants additional questions based on their answers and allowed the participants to speak at length about their experience. Prior to the interviews, the researcher formulated questions that covered the main aspects of the research questions (see Appendix C) and that explored the participants' experiences in ESL mixed-gender classes. Each participant was firstly asked to sign a consent form giving her permission to have the interview audiotaped with an iPhone. To create a friendly atmosphere, the researcher began each interview with general questions before moving on to the prepared questions.

3.3.1 Details of the participants and the research site. The researcher invited Saudi female students currently attending ESL courses to participate through the Saudi Association in Australia. These ESL institutes provide English language courses for second language learners, especially international students. Most of these courses are academic in style and designed to prepare students to pursue their education in Australian universities. Several Saudi female students were both interested and willing to participate in this study. The researcher contacted them directly by mail and chose four through purposeful sampling, which is essential in phenomenology because it helps represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this study, all participants, were experiencing a mixed-gender classroom for the first time. The demographic included females from different age groups

and different home regions of Saudi Arabia who had differing relationship statuses. The age of the participants ranged between 26 and 36 years, and the relationship statuses included both married and single Saudi female students. Age, home region and relationship status all affect how a person adapts to a new cultural environment. More importantly, these variations helped the researcher capture the experience of Saudi female students from different angles and allowed the exploration of different perspectives. The identities of all individuals were kept anonymous, with participants identified by a pseudonym only. The researcher was extremely careful about discussing informants or setting, and both confidentiality and anonymity were assured on the consent form.

After the purposeful sampling process was complete, the students (who were chosen by the researcher) and the researcher agreed to meet at a mutually convenient time in a public place, such as the Monash University library. At the day of the interview participants received the explanatory statement and the consent form to sign (see Appendix A, B). Participants were asked to read the explanatory statement and sign the consent form before the interview began. The interviews took approximately 45–50 minutes, and they were conducted in Arabic to best capture the experience. The participants were still enrolled in English language courses and therefore may have been unable to express themselves effectively in English. Speaking in their mother tongue allowed participants to express their experience effectively and efficiently because language interacts with thinking and consciousness dialectically (Vygotsky, 1962). Therefore, the researcher concluded that they likely felt more comfortable speaking in Arabic, which created a chance to gain deeper knowledge about their experiences.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

3.4.1 *Phenomenological strategies.* Considering the phenomenological underpinning of this study, the data were analysed using transcendental phenomenological strategies. These strategies are mainly based on the ideas of Hycner (1985), Husserl (1999) and Lopez and Willis (2004).

Transcendental phenomenology (as discussed earlier) aims to bracket and suspend the researcher's interpretations and assumptions to provide a subjective description of the investigated phenomenon based on participants' experiences (Hycner, 1985 & Lopez and Willis, 2004). For humans, being subjective and descriptive might often be challenging, if not impossible. However, this study had two main phases: descriptive and interpretive. The descriptive phase, which included the raw data, is described in Chapter 4 as 'data explication', and the interpretive phase is described in Chapter 5 as the data analysis and discussion.

3.4.1.1 Descriptive phase. For descriptive attitudes, there were several possible strategies to follow, including bracketing mood and phenomenological reduction.

Bracketing mood refers to "the act of suspending judgment about the natural world that precedes phenomenological analysis" (Lien, Pauleen, Kuo & Wang, 2014. p. 192). Furthermore, Lewis and Staehler (2010) defined bracketing as a process where "all prejudices and ready-made opinions are bracketed, and we focus entirely on the way in which the world and objects appear to us" (p. 15). In this study, my goals as researcher were to avoid any prejudgments and to try and listen to participants without any preconceived ideas. The bracketing mood helped the researcher suspend any prejudgments or assumptions related to the phenomenon, even though it could not be done entirely. The bracketing mood also influenced most of the data analysis stages. Regarding formation of the interview questions, the researcher formed free pre-assumption questions, and they tended to be general. The researcher tried to be in the bracketing mood throughout the data analysis process and avoided selectivity or discrimination in descriptions of the participants' experiences.

Another notable consideration is the context of the participants. To provide a thick description of the essence of the Saudi females' experiences, context is essential (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). The reader needs to understand both the social and cultural environments to fully understand the essence of the participants' experiences. The cultural norms and complexity of Saudi society were briefly

introduced to make sense of the informants' experiences because Saudi society views the interaction between males and females from very different perspectives than many other societies.

Phenomenological reduction in this study included several steps. Once the collected data were transcribed, the researcher immersed herself into the data by rereading and listening to the interviews multiple times. It is critically important in phenomenological studies to “provide a description of the authentic experience . . . that adequately covers the complexity of the situation. The description, therefore, must be fairly detailed” (Denscombe, 1998, p. 98). Hycner (1985) also emphasises the importance of “writing a summary of each individual interview” (p. 291). Hence, the detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences were introduced in Chapter 4: Data Explication. This approach was used to provide an in-depth understanding of each individual's experience rather than presenting it as a whole. The chapters were constructed through different stages. After thoroughly reviewing the data, the researcher generated initial categories for the main concept of the Saudi female students' experience that were relevant to the scope of the study and helped answer the research questions. In this stage, the researcher focused on the main quotes that expressed the participants' experiences and attempted to develop a list of “nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements” to cover different aspects of their experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Initial attitude, adaptation and academic performance were the main common aspects that were both relevant to the research questions and covered the participants' experiences. In all categories, there were explanations of *what* and *how*, including detailed examples of Saudi female students' experiences regarding what had happened and how they felt. The explanations provided examples of setting, including where the Saudi female students experienced a mixed-gender classroom and how they handled the situation.

3.4.1.2 Interpretive phase. This is the second phase of the phenomenological methodology used in this study which is discussed in Chapter 5. It was applied after completion of the data explication. It is a helpful tool for understanding the structure of the participants' experiences. In other words, it is about the essence of the experience. Even though interpretation may not be the main goal of

transcendental phenomenology, Finlay (2009) argued that “interpretation [in phenomenological investigation] is not an additional procedure: It constitutes an inevitable and basic structure of our “being-in-the-world”. We experience a thing as something that has already been interpreted” (p. 10). Therefore, the interpretive phase provides a meaningful description of the participants’ experiences. This approach will be used in Chapter 5 to mainly answer the research questions, link the findings to existing knowledge and emphasise the contribution of the investigated phenomenon to the existing knowledge.

The final stage of transcendental data analysis includes the researcher writing a summary to “accurately capture the essence of the phenomenon being investigated” (Hycner, 1985, p. 294). The researcher combined what and how Saudi female students experienced mixed-gender ESL classrooms to provide the essence and full descriptions. By the end of this stage, the reader should state, “I understand what it is like for someone to experience that” (p. 82). The researcher made every effort to maintain subjectivity and thus the integrity of the study.

3.5 Establishing Trustworthiness

3.5.1 Researcher reflexivity. Even though subjectivity “cannot be done entirely in social science researches” because researchers are human, there are some strategies available to minimize their reflections (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 44). Aside from the bracketing mood, which is one of the essential strategies of a transcendental phenomenological researcher, there are some common strategies to help researchers to put their interpretations aside from the study. In this study, the researcher was auditing and monitoring her biases via a reflexivity journal, where all assumptions, ideas and reflections were recorded (Berg & Lune, 2012; Creswell, 2013, 2014). In addition, the researcher went back to the journal at each step in the research and reviewed all the recorded assumptions and ideas to ensure that none interfered with the findings. The goals were to be attentive to subjectivity and to provide authentic findings throughout the study.

3.5.2 Adequacy of data (member check). After transcribing all the interviews, the researcher sent a final draft of the transcription to participants to ensure that their points of view were reflected clearly. These are known as member checks, which can be “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). Participants were also given the opportunity to delete comments and/or clarify any of their points. All clarifications were made prior to the data analysis. Notably, the researcher used direct quotes from participants to support the description of the essence of their experience in this study.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

3.6.1 Privacy. The identity of all individuals was kept anonymous, with each participant only identified by a pseudonym. The researcher was extremely careful about discussing informants or setting, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured via the consent form (see appendix A) (Berg & Lune, 2012; Creswell, 2013, 2014). Importantly, the interviews were conducted in Arabic to best capture the experience because the participants were still in English language courses and may not have been able to express themselves effectively in English. Therefore, their ability to speak more freely in Arabic allowed the researcher to gain more in-depth knowledge of their experiences

Chapter summary:

This chapter has clarified the rationale for using the qualitative approach as a methodology to answer the research questions. It discussed the reasons for choosing transcendental phenomenology as a research design, followed by a detailed description of the data collection process. Two phases of the data analysis process, descriptive and interpretive, were discussed. The next chapter will discuss data explication, which is the first phase of data analysis.

Chapter Four: Data Explication

The previous chapter discussed the steps used for both data collection and analysis. In this chapter, the findings of this research were developed and generated via the participants' descriptions of their experiences in an ESL mixed-gender classroom environment. Participants' descriptions were treated phenomenologically to capture the essence of their experiences. From the participants' descriptions, common themes were generated, and they involved concepts of adaptation and academic performance. A short biographical description of each participant is included.

4.1 Zahra's Experience

4.1.1 *Biographical description.* Zahra is a 34-year-old Saudi student who is married, has four children and is from a city in western Saudi Arabia. She was taking English courses to meet the university English language proficiency requirement to complete her master's degree. She has been in Melbourne for nearly a year and finished five levels of English at two different English language institutes in Melbourne. Zahra was experiencing a mixed-gender classroom environment for the first time.

4.1.2 *First impression and adaptation.* Zahra was asked about her first impressions of and adaptation to a new learning environment. Zahra referred to her first impression as 'horrible' because she was assigned to a class where she was the only female student. She was shocked when she arrived at the first class and found only males present: "I couldn't attend the first class. I went and discovered that I was the only female there; that was shocking. As you know, we haven't faced something like that back home (referring to Saudi Arabia)".

4.1.3 *Academic performance.* Zahra was asked which aspects most impacted her English language learning process, both positive and negative. She found the learning strategies helpful, and the activities encouraged her to engage in class and practice her English more. In some situations, Zahra

found herself inhibited, such as when she was assigned to work in a pair with a male student on an activity. She found sitting too close to male students in either group or pair work very uncomfortable. Zahra was asked if she discussed this discomfort with any of her teachers.

They noticed, even if I didn't tell them (referring to her teachers). It was obvious; I was not talking that much. I talked to him once (referring to one of her teachers), but he said that most of the classes are male, so he did not know how to help me.

Zahra had an experience where she was assigned to a paired activity with a male. The activity required both students to write on the same A3 paper and hang it as a poster in the classroom: "I felt uncomfortable; I was trying to move my chair away and felt under pressure, which prevented me from concentrating on the task".

She added that, during these activities, she didn't engage much and preferred to remain quiet. After Zahra spent four months at one institute, she decided to move to a different one for the following reasons: "I'm under pressure. I have to finish this year (referring to the English requirements). I felt uncomfortable at the first institute. Instead of wasting time, I decided to move to another one".

The limited time for her to meet the English requirements put her under pressure and, because she was not feeling comfortable in that learning environment, she felt that she would not be able to learn and thus fall behind schedule.

4.2 Lolo's Experience

4.2.1 Biographical description. Lolo is a 36-year-old Saudi student who is married, has two children and is from the northern part of Saudi Arabia. She finished her master's degree in Saudi Arabia and came to Australia to complete her PhD. She has been in Melbourne for approximately six months. Because her English was poor upon arrival, she had to start from level one. Lolo was experiencing being in a mixed-gender classroom for the first time.

4.2.2 First impression and adaptation. Lolo had the same attitude as Zahra when she described her first impression of the class: “I felt lost, distracted and didn’t know what to do or how to react. The classroom environment was totally new for me”.

Although her first teacher was male, she had a good attitude about him. She had no problem dealing with any of her teachers. Lolo also faced difficulties in the beginning. She felt out of place, and other students stared at her because she was wearing a veil.

They were staring at me and asking a lot of questions . . . (she laughed) . . . but, you know, I got used to it, and when they asked me about it, I didn’t usually answer; they will never understand.

She added that she had built some good relationships with other female students in the classroom.

4.2.3 Academic performance. Lolo was asked what had most impacted her level of engagement and/or academic performance in the classroom. She also referred to sitting too close to male students, especially Saudi male students. She was also asked if she had shared her discomfort with any teachers: “Yes, I did. I was assigned to an activity with a Saudi male student. The activity was to discuss a specific topic; but I couldn’t even talk to him, and he was very shy too”.

The teacher noticed that they were not discussing the topic, and he went to them, trying to encourage them to speak. After the class ended, Lolo went to her teacher and said: “I was trying to tell him that I felt uncomfortable being assigned to work with a male, especially a Saudi male; but because my language is not good, I couldn’t explain it very well”.

She added that she wished her language had been better so that she could have explained that nothing was wrong with Saudi males; she simply was not accustomed to talking to them. The language barrier seems to have been an obstacle for Lolo in this environment: “I don’t even talk to my cousins.

As you know (gesturing to the researcher), in Saudi Arabia, even family gatherings are separate; I feel so shy”.

Lolo was asked about the group work and how she engaged with other students. She had no problem in group activities and described herself as very active and talkative; however, if most of the group included males, she tended to be quiet. Lolo mentioned that there were times when others struggled to understand her due to her veil.

Once, I had an older male teacher for a few weeks. I think he couldn't hear well. I had to repeat what I wanted to say multiple times. Maybe it was because he couldn't see my lips, so I preferred not to talk much.

4.3 Afaf's Experience

4.3.1 Biographical description. Afaf is a 26-year-old single Saudi female student. Her 18-year-old brother accompanied her as Mahram throughout her studying period. She earned a bachelor's degree in English language in Saudi Arabia, and she came to Melbourne to work on her master's degree. She needed only two advanced levels of English, which she took at one of Melbourne n's English language institutes. As with Zahra and Lolo, Afaf was experiencing a mixed-gender classroom for the first time.

4.3.2 First impression and adaptation. Afaf found it interesting to experience this new learning environment. She did not seem to have the same difficulties as Lolo and Zahra. The only thing that bothered her in the beginning of the class was the attitude that other students had towards her wearing a veil.

In the beginning, they were staring at me as if I came from a different planet. No one wanted to sit next to me. I don't know why; maybe they were afraid. In time, I did build good relationships with some Chinese girls.

Afaf added that she was asked many silly questions such as “*How do you eat and drink when you are wearing this (referring to the veil)?*” These questions annoyed her, but she remained confident.

4.3.3 Academic performance. Discomfort was common among all participants when asked about sitting next to a male during activities. Afaf was also assigned to pair and group work with male students, which she found uncomfortable.

I was assigned to work with a Vietnamese boy, and the activity was an argument. We argued our points and, once we finished, the boy approached me to shake hands. I refused to do so and was about to explain why, but he didn’t wait to hear my reasoning. He was very upset because I refused to shake his hand.

She added that she felt bad for offending that student, but had no choice. She shared another experience where the teacher asked all the students to stand against a wall for an activity. The only spot left was between two males. She approached two girls and asked if she could squeeze between them. They asked why because they could see a free spot. She said: “I didn’t want to stand between those male students. Unfortunately, the male students heard what I said to the girls, and one of them said he didn’t want to stand next to me either”.

She felt bad because she did not want to hurt anyone’s feelings and found nothing wrong with the boys; she simply felt that she could not stand between them. Afaf was asked if she had tried to explain herself to the boys later. She stated that she had preferred not to do so because she did not want to complicate the situation.

Afaf referred to another challenge she faced when she was assigned to give a presentation. Because she was wearing a veil, the teacher asked her to do her best to ensure that everyone could understand her because they could not see her lips. She was unsure if failure to do so would affect her grade.

4.4 Fato's Experience

4.4.1 Biographical description. Fato is a 28-year-old Saudi student who is married, has two children and is from a city in the southern part of Saudi Arabia. She came to Melbourne with her husband after he received a scholarship to complete his master's degree. Fato is planning to enrol in a master's course as well; therefore, she started taking English courses in Melbourne at the English language institute. Her English language was poor, so she had to start from level one. She has been in Melbourne for approximately six months. As with all the other participants, Fato was experiencing a mixed-gender classroom environment for the first time.

4.4.2 First impression and adaptation. Fato decided to join a Melbourne English language institute that she had heard offered female-only English classes, which were provided at the request of many Saudi students. She then found out that they only offer one class, and it is at the intermediate level. Because Fato had to start from level one, she could not join the female-only class until she passed the beginner level.

Her first impression of the mixed-gender classroom was similar to that of the other participants: "I felt strange and kind of confused. Actually, I was lucky because the class I was assigned to had only four male students, and they were all of different nationalities (meaning non-Saudis)".

When asked about her experience overall, she seemed satisfied. Her adaptation to the new classroom environment took her time but she felt comfortable after the first month.

4.4.3 Academic performance. When Fato was asked about how this experience impacted her engagement in the classroom, she referred to several aspects, with one of them being physical activities, such as writing on a board as a group.

There was an activity where the class was divided into groups, and the teacher read a definition for a word. One member of each group would then run to the board to write it first. It was fun, but then one of the male students got too excited; he grabbed my hand and pulled me to the board. I knew

he had done it accidentally, but I was shocked. That was the first time in my life that a strange male had touched me.

Fato shared another experience that was similar to Afaf's:

It was an exam day, and the teacher said he knew that everyone was stressed out because of the exam. He asked that we stand up and shake hands with the person next us to help relieve stress (she laughed). Actually, it created more stress because the person next to me was a Portuguese male student. When he approached me to shake hands, I apologized and said that I could not.

She was asked if she had tried to explain why she could not shake hands. She stated that she felt that her English language ability was an obstacle. She was afraid that she might not be able to adequately explain with her limited English; therefore, she preferred not to engage in such a discussion.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the raw data from the participants' descriptions of their experience. It also provided brief biographical descriptions of each participant. The researcher has highlighted some main aspects of their experience, especially parts that relate to the research questions. Significant quotes concerning the participants were presented. The next chapter will discuss the data with an interpretive attitude to create the essence of their experience.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Analysis

(The Essence)

The previous chapter presented findings of the investigation, with the data explicating each participant's experience. In this chapter, I explore the participants' experiences and present the findings and discussion. Demographical information about each participant is provided in Table 1. This chapter is constructed to answer the research questions. An overview of participants' experiences in attending a mixed-gender ESL classroom in Melbourne is discussed, followed by the main aspects that played crucial roles in their experiences. It also covers the main aspects that impacted their levels of engagement in the classroom. Lastly, it linked the findings to the theory and the literature.

Name	Age	Home region in Saudi Arabia	Length of time in Melbourne	Marital status	Level of language proficiency
Zahra	34 years	Western region	Nearly a year	Married with three children	Intermediate (level three)
Lolo	36 years	Northern region	Six months	Married with three children	Intermediate (level three)
Afaf	26 years	Northern region	Four months	Single	Advanced (level six)
Fato	28 years	Southern region	Six months	Married with two children	Beginner (level two)

Table 1: Participants' demographical description

5.2 Saudi Female Students' Experience in the Mixed-gender ESL Classroom Environment

In the previous chapter, participants' experiences were presented explicitly, and common aspects were discussed. To answer the first research question, a general overview of the participants' experiences was discussed, followed by their adaptation and an adjustment discussion.

5.2.1 Overview of the Participants' Experiences. The common attitude of all the participants towards their experience in ESL institutes in Melbourne was quite positive. They agreed that it was a fruitful and productive experience, and they were amazed by the learning strategies that the Melbourne institutes used because of the difference in learning style from those in Saudi Arabia. They believed that they learnt better and faster due to their direct interaction with native speakers and other students who only communicate in English. This might be because, once a second language learner is immersed in an English-speaking context, the student must relearn speech structures and update colloquialisms for fluency (Duhaish, 2014).

Even though culture shock is common for most international students worldwide (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Furnham, 2004), each participant (Zahra, Fato, Afaf and Lolo) experienced it differently. The Australian lifestyle is extremely different from that of Saudi Arabia, with the mixed-gender environment being one of the main cultural differences. However, unlike most international students, none of the participants reported being lonely. Due to the Saudi Ministry of Education's requirements, they each had a Mahram throughout their studies abroad. They felt secure and supported by having a family member at their side. Economically, most Saudi scholarships are generous, often covering all travel costs and living expenses for both applicants and their dependents (Shanmugham, 2015). Therefore, most Saudi students are free of financial pressure, which contributes to a good experience when studying abroad.

5.2.2 Common aspects of the participants' experience. The main objective of this study was to explore what all the participants had in common when they experienced the same phenomenon. The findings suggest that the participants went through significant adaptation and adjustment processes in their experiences, and both English language proficiency level and marital status played crucial roles. All

participants experienced ranges of challenges when trying to fit in with a new classroom environment. When participants were asked about their initial attitude towards the new learning environment, they all referred to difficulties with both adaptation and adjustment to their experiences. It is essential to emphasize the definition adopted in this study for the concepts of adaptation and adjustment (which were discussed in Chapter 2 and revisited below).

5.2.2.1 Adaptation. Kim and Gudykunst (1988) referred to adaptation in their framework as “the complex process through which an individual acquires an increasing level of “fitness” or “compatibility” in a new cultural environment” (p. 9). Therefore, adaptation in this study refers to the process of trying to fit in with a mixed-gender classroom.

5.2.2.2 Adjustment. Adjustment is the outcome of the adaptation. In this study, it might be seen as the outcomes of the process of fitting in with a mixed-gender classroom environment and the levels of comfort and well-being that Saudi female students have achieved (Matsumoto, Hirayama, & LeRoux, 2006).

5.2.3 English language proficiency level. The adaptation process seemed to have common aspects among all participants, with English language proficiency level being the most significant. In this study, participants with high English language levels reported smoother adaptation than those with lower English language proficiency levels (see Table 5.1). Due to their limited language skills, some participants feared being either misunderstood or misinterpreted. Therefore, in multiple situations, participants’ English skills were the main obstacle to smooth adaptation and clear expression. Zahra, Lolo and Fato referred to their language skills as the main obstacle. They always felt unable to express themselves clearly; therefore, they tended to remain silent. For example, Zahra felt unable to ask the teacher not to assign her to a project with a male student because she felt her English was too poor to adequately discuss it. Instead, she either did not engage in activities or did not talk with the male student. She thought that the teacher would understand her feelings through expressing this attitude (see [4.1.3](#)). In contrast, Lolo had the courage to go

to her teacher; however, she felt that her limited English skills kept the teacher from fully understanding her wishes (see [4.2.3](#)). The impact of participants' limited language skills extended to outside the classroom. They faced numerous situations where they felt devastated by their limited English. They reported difficulties dealing with state agents, car rentals, hospitals etc.

Afaf's higher level of language proficiency made her adaptation process both smoother and faster compared to the other participants. Because of her more advanced English language skills, she was confident enough to express herself clearly and discuss any topic with her teacher. She felt comfortable and adjusted within two weeks.

5.2.4 Marital Status. Another factor that affected the experiences of Saudi female participants attending mixed-gender ESL courses was their marital status. Afaf was the only single participant. She seemed to feel less pressure towards adapting to the new classroom environment. She felt more comfortable and less inhibited by the attendance of males, even though she preferred not to engage in any discussion with Saudi males unless it was urgent. The married students tended to be more hesitant and cautious. Their adaptation to the new mixed-gender classroom seemed to take longer and include more complications (for examples, see [4.2.2](#), [4.4.2](#) and [4.1.2](#)) because the married students had a greater fear of being either judged or labelled by Saudi males. Having a friendly chat with a strange male is considered inappropriate in Saudi society and is completely prohibited in some regions of Saudi Arabia. As an example, Fato felt inhibited by the attendance of her husband's friend in the same classroom. She felt watched and judged (even though he might not have been doing either) simply because the environment was new and uncomfortable for a Saudi female student.

Another consideration was that two participants who wore veils (Afaf and Lolo) reported additional levels of discomfort not experienced by the other participants. Both Afaf and Lolo seemed bothered by other students' questions and glances regarding their veils. Afaf mentioned that no one wanted to sit next to her, and Lolo felt that she was treated like an alien (see [4.2.3](#) & [4.3.3](#)). While their first few classes were the most difficult, they reported increasing levels of acceptance among other students after several weeks.

Participants in this study showed a high level of awareness regarding other students' cultural differences. They understood that some students had not seen a face veil before and were therefore curious about it; however, they preferred not to answer other students' questions about either their face veils or their mode of dress. They felt it was a complicated issue to discuss in simple words and in a short conversation. Lack of English language skills and culture gaps were the main reasons stated for not engaging in discussions about their beliefs.

5.3 Levels of Engagement in Classroom Activities

All participants in this study experienced a mixed-gender classroom environment for the first time. Therefore, this learning environment was unfamiliar to them. To answer the second research question, this section discusses the aspects that impacted Saudi students' levels of engagement in the classroom.

5.3.1 I felt uncomfortable. Notably, all the participants repeated this phrase. This feeling was common among participants when engaging in classroom activities with male students. Zahra, Lolo, Afaf and Fato all preferred to step back and not engage. Common causes of discomfort included sitting too close to a male during an activity or working solely with a male student.

As discussed previously, most Saudi female students have had no relationships with males other than their *Mahram* due to cultural norms and beliefs. Therefore, experiencing a mixed-gender classroom environment for the first time would obviously have the potential to create difficulties with fitting in, especially considering their stages of life. The age of the participants ranged from 26–36 years (see Table.1), and they all came to Australia to earn postgraduate certificates in different fields.

Working with male students in group work was acceptable to most of the participants; however, they all found it difficult to work as a pair with a male, or to complete physical activities with males. All participants experienced this kind of activity due to the nature of the classroom learning style. Based on the participants' descriptions of classroom activity styles, it seems that their ESL teachers were promoting communicative language teaching (CLT), which mainly encourages students to engage and communicate.

According to, Bianco and Slaughter (2009) “CLT is the now the dominant second language approach all over the world, although it is often not implemented systematically” (p. 30). However, in some situations, Saudi students can be at a disadvantage regarding this learning strategy. All participants reported that they were not allowed to choose their own pairs because the teacher wanted ensure that all students were paired with someone from a different language background to prohibit speaking in their native language. The teachers’ perspective seemed logical; it was a good way to ensure that students practiced speaking in English.

While all participants in this study reported feeling uncomfortable, they used different approaches to overcome it. Some tended to show their discomfort by choosing not to engage effectively. For example, Zahra hoped that her disengagement would inform her teacher of her discomfort (see [4.1.3](#)). Conversely, Lolo attempted to explain to the teacher that she did not want to work solely with a male, especially a Saudi male; however, she felt that her point of view was not made clear due to her limited language skills, and she feared being misunderstood. She wanted the teacher to understand that her discomfort was due to her shyness and not a problem with Saudi males (see [4.2.3](#)). Afaf and Fato both experienced unfavourable situations when working with male students. Afaf was approached by a male student wanting to shake hands after a discussion (see [4.3.3](#)), and a male student grabbed Fato when he wanted her to write on a board (see [4.4.4](#)). This was very difficult for both Saudi female students to accept after being raised in a gender-segregated environment. They were shocked, uncomfortable and distracted. Even though Afaf possessed a high level of English language skills, she lacked “an awareness of her right to speak” (Norton, 1995, p. 25).

Regarding the available literature on this topic, the findings of this study support the results of other qualitative studies, which have reported that Saudi international students consider learning the English language as one of the most difficult aspects of their adaptation and adjustment processes (Alhazmi, 2013; Alanazy, 2013 & Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern ,2015). A US study by Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) found that Saudi female students’ adjustment to their environment was influenced by

social support, relationships, awareness of cultural differences and English fluency. They stated that Saudi female students with low levels of English felt that “communication was difficult, studying in another language was challenging and the English language felt like a barrier to their successful adjustment” (p. 15). Their adaptation and adjustment processes were dependent on their language skills; hence, the higher the language skills, the smoother the adaptation.

Moreover, Alanazy’s (2013) study of Saudi female students in the US found that marital status was a critical element of Saudi female adjustment. In her study, married students tended to be more inhibited by the class attendance of males, especially Saudi males. The participants in the current study mirrored that attitude towards dealing with Saudi male students, which sparked the question of why Saudi females struggle to interact with the opposite gender. Aside from the fear of being judged and/or labelled by other Saudi students in the classroom, Alhazmi’s (2013) study (which included both male and female Saudi students), found the following:

The other Saudi students are a “symbol” and “sign” that has been constituted in the Saudi context, which involves gender segregation and its cultural strictures; thus, the other Saudi students are potentially used by the active self to shape any interaction activities with other Saudi students. (p. 232).

To illustrate, the symbolic meaning of interacting with the opposite gender comes from Saudi students’ cultural beliefs, which affect their comfort levels and confidence. The images that they have developed about the nature of mixed-gender interactions affect their manners. Alhazmi’s explanations may help understand Saudi female students’ attitudes towards male students and vice versa. All participants preferred to limit their interactions with Saudi males to only urgent and necessary discussions. Unlike in Alanazy’s (2013) study, the home region of the participants seemed to have either a small or no role in the participants’ experience.

From the theoretical perspective, although Saudi female students seemed to be highly motivated learners, they were not invested in certain situations. Language skills, marital status and activities that required them to work with males tended to negatively impact their participation. Participants in this study were all economically secure, socially supported and motivated to start their postgraduate journeys. Yet, from the findings, there were situations where participants preferred to disengage for reasons related to the language learning practices presented rather than their own motivational factors. Integration between the second language learner and the language learning environment is a fundamental factor for determining the success of the language learning experience. Norton (1995, 2000) and Norton and Toohey (2001) called for reconceptualization in second language acquisition (SLA) theories and a study of the factors that affect the learning process of the second language learner. Norton (1995) argued that a student

. . . might be described as someone who is unmotivated with a high affective filter; perhaps an introverted personality who is unable to interact appropriately with her interlocutors . . . or be portrayed as a poor language learner who has not developed sociolinguistic competence. (p.10)

This is the traditional interpretation of a learner's characteristics regarding disengagement in ESL classroom activities. Based on this theory, the participants sometimes seemed to be labelled as unmotivated learners because certain language practices did not fit their needs, which may have impacted their performance and learning outcomes. The lack of sensitivity and cultural knowledge among the participants' ESL teachers created more challenges and obstacles. Therefore, the more a learner can develop a high level of comfortable and fitness in language learning practise, the better their potential language learning outcomes. Knowing more about the cultural sensitivity of Saudi students may provide teachers with improved understanding of their disengagement. Seeking factors beyond motivational aspects that may greatly affect a second language learner is critical.

Chapter Summary

The chapter has provided an overview of participants' attitudes toward their experience in ESL institutes in Melbourne, followed by a deep analysis of data, from which concepts emerged that played a

crucial role in their experience. These concepts were related directly to answering the research questions. Subsequently, the researcher discussed the findings with existing literature related to the phenomenon. Lastly, the researcher reflected on investment theory concerning the findings and felt that it provided a meaningful understanding of the analysis. The next chapter presents the conclusion along with limitations, future research suggestions and practical implications from this study.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This last chapter revises the research questions and highlights the main findings of the investigation. It also provides practical implications for three parties: future Saudi students, ESL teachers and ESL institutes. Finally, it discusses future research suggestions and limitations.

6.1 Conclusion

This research has explored the experience of Saudi female students attending mixed gender ESL courses in Australia and the aspects that may have impacted their levels of engagement. The general attitude of Saudi female students towards their experiences in Australian mixed gender ESL courses was highly positive, which means that they adequately adjusted via their adaptation efforts. The findings revealed that both language skills and marital status played crucial roles in understanding the Saudi female experience in a mixed gender environment. Participants referred to their English language proficiency level as the main obstacle; hence, participants with a low level of communicative competence reported difficulties in their adaptation, and participants with high skills noted smoother and faster adaptation. Married participants seemed to be more inhibited and concerned about the class attendance of males, especially Saudi males, than the single participants. Their levels of engagement in classroom activities were affected by certain teaching styles. Participants preferred to disengage when required to either work solely with males or participate in physical activities with males. These findings have broadly in line with to several other studies in the literature. From the theoretical perspective, participants seemed to be highly motivated learners yet not highly invested in certain situations.

6.2 Study Implications

The findings of this investigation can suggest practical implications for three parties: current and future Saudi students, ESL teachers and ESL institute or colleges.

For current and future Saudi students:

- It is highly recommended that they improve their English language skills before moving to Australia (or any host country) to start their academic journey because adaptation is an important tool.
- Both positive adjustment and adaptation can be achieved by improving awareness and knowledge about the main cultural aspects of the host country.

For ESL teachers:

- Even though the diversity of a learner's background in the ESL classroom may create challenges, the ESL teacher should have knowledge of different cultural backgrounds, especially culturally sensitive aspects of specific populations.
- More effort should be made by ESL teachers to adapt their teaching strategies to fit all students in their classroom and to assure a comfortable learning atmosphere.

For ESL colleges or institutes:

- It is highly recommended that they provide short workshops for ESL teachers to identify difficulties that Saudi students may face regarding gender to ensure the quality of their experience.
- College personnel and international students' services at Australian institutes could arrange a cultural orientation program that respectfully provides information on the main aspects of different cultures.
- International students' services could provide international students with a counsellor for academic and social issues.

6.3 Limitations and Future Study

Due to the nature of this research project, time and word count were the main limitations. The researcher was done in four months' time, with a limited word count, which required that the researcher invite a small number of participants and use a certain research design. Even though the research

provided thick original descriptions of the participants' experiences, the results cannot be generalized to all Saudi female students attending mixed gender ESL courses in Australia.

This study was limited to Saudi female students in ESL courses in Australia. Widening the scope to include English language teachers in ESL institutes in Australia would be another interesting area for future study. It would gather essential contributions towards understanding the phenomenon by gauging their knowledge about sensitive aspects of Saudi culture that they have encountered and their methods for handling them. Moreover, inviting male students to share their experiences when attending a mixed gender classroom environment would be an interesting study as well.

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Appendices

Appendix A (CONSENT FORM)

Project: ‘The experience of Saudi female students attending mixed-gender ESL courses in Australia’

Chief Investigator: *Susan Grieshaber*

Researcher: Sahar Alghamdi

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

	Yes	No
I consent to participate in the above research project	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have received the explanatory statement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I authorize the investigator to interview me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I give my permission to be audio taped during the interview	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I acknowledge that:

- 1) I have been informed that I can withdraw from the project at any stage and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
- 2) I have been informed that the security of the data will be assured during and after the study.

Name of Participant _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B (EXPLANATORY STATEMENT)

Project: (The experience of Saudi female students attending mixed-gender ESL courses in Australia)

Chief Investigator's name : *Susan Grieshaber* Student's name : *Sahar Mohamad Alghamdi*

Department of Education

Phone: 99044036

Phone : 0434043565

email: sue.grieshaber@monash.edu

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You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above.

What does the research involve? The main aim of this study is to explore Saudi female students' experiences and to provide valuable insights about those experiences. The participants will be asked open-ended questions, and the researcher will follow a semi structured style to allow the participants to express their feelings freely. Before the interview, the informants will be asked for their permission to audiotape the interview. If they are not comfortable with that aspect, the researcher will take notes throughout the interview. The interview may last for about 50 minutes and a follow up interview will be conducted if needed.

Why were you chosen for this research? You have been invited to participate in this research because you are a Saudi female attending a mixed gender ESL course in Australia. The contact details of the participants won't be given to any person other than the researcher herself.

Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research

Participants will be provided with a consent form to sign and return. You have the right to withdraw from further participation at any stage and the possibility to withdraw some data. Withdrawal will have no implications for participants and effect on the research.

Possible benefits and risks to participants: There is no direct risk to the participants because there will be no chance of being identified and the researcher will be extremely careful about discussing informants or settings. Participants benefit from this study by sharing their experiences and suggesting changes which may impact future students.

Payment: As an acknowledgement of the participant's time, they will be offered a coffee and muffin during the interview.

Confidentiality: The data will be used in a research project in education as part of Master of TESOL. The identity of all individuals will be kept anonymous, with participants identified by a pseudonym. The researcher will be extremely careful about discussing informants or setting, and confidentiality and anonymity will be assured on the consent form.

Storage of data: The data will be stored as word documents in my own computer and no one will have access to the data other than the researcher. The data will be destroyed according to Monash University policy retained for at least 5 years before deletion. Then, the electronic files will be permanently deleted from the researcher's computer.

Results: The results of this study will be released following completion of the project. Participants will be provided with a summary of the findings of the study by email by the end of February 2017.

Complaints: Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics (MUHREC):

Executive Officer

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)

Room 111, Chancellery Building E,

24 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus

Research Office

Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052 Email: muhrec@monash.edu Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

(insert Chief Investigator's signature)
Grieshaber

Chief Investigator's name: *Susan*

Appendix C (Topics of the interview)

(Because this interview will follow semi-structured style, there will not be a set of questions. the researcher will go through the main topics throughout the interview.

Here are some main questions to discuss with participants

- 1) What did you feel in your first mixed gender classroom?
- 2) In what way you think that this experience has impacted your learning process?
- 3) How did you react when you were first assigned to work with groups that included males?
- 4) How would you describe your experience thus far?
- 5) Have you tried to discuss this issue with your teacher? if yes what happened?
- 6) From your point of view, what could a teacher do to help you adapt in this learning environment?