

Let's Hear it from Them: An Interview-Based Exploration of Male Teachers' Perceptions of Gender Imbalance in the English Language Teaching Profession

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Abstract

The presence of gender disparities, marked by a shortage of male teachers, has been a longstanding concern within the TESOL profession. Drawing on the concept of human flourishing, which advocates for equality and respect beyond gender and social standing, this research seeks to challenge gender stereotyping in foreign language teaching. Guided by personal observations and the stories of three male English language teachers, this article seeks to answer how male ESL/EFL¹ teachers perceive gender playing out in their careers. By examining their *perezhivaniya*, or lived experiences, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics within TESOL, filling a critical gap in the existing literature and offering new insights into the subjective emotional experiences shaping the professional lives of male teachers in this field. The research demonstrates how the feminization of the ELT environment affects their sense of self-worth and fulfillment and ultimately their commitment to stay in the profession.

doi: 10.1002/tesq.3311

INTRODUCTION

I remember the year 1991 when I became a student at the Teachers' Training Institute, Faculty of Foreign Languages, in my hometown.

¹While I acknowledge the role of English as an International Language (EIL) or *lingua franca* in the contemporary world, the term English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) accurately represents participants' qualifications and the educational contexts in which they operate where English is taught as a second or foreign language. The word "foreign" also reflects the perceived status of expatriate English teachers as "foreigners" in these countries.

Along with the joy of being accepted to the most prestigious course, came a baffling realization: out of 35 students, only four were male. What was even more intriguing, as I found out later, is that none of these male students ever stepped foot in the classroom, having opted for other, less demanding, and, in Williams's (1993) words, more "appropriate" (p. 3) jobs. Since I graduated, I have taught in numerous places, including schools and universities, and each time I have found myself working in consistently homogeneous, predominantly female English language teaching (ELT) environments. This situation in my professional domain is reflective of the broader trend within the teaching profession that exhibits a marked gender disparity. As reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017), two-thirds of teachers at most educational levels, excluding the tertiary level, are women. The underrepresentation of men² in teaching generally, and in language teaching specifically, raises a number of important questions. What drives men to choose a career in language teaching? What factors influence their decision to remain in or leave the profession? The literature on occupational disparities offers some potential answers, attributing this gender imbalance to stereotypes suggesting superior language abilities among women (Carr & Pauwels, 2006), and the lower salaries of teaching compared to traditionally male-dominated professions like engineering (Moreau, 2019). However, these explanations seem insufficient. My observations in the Middle East, where teaching packages for expatriate ESL/EFL teachers are appealing, further contradict these reasons. Male teachers continue to be underrepresented in the region (Alkhatieb, Romanowski, Chaaban, & Abu-Tineh, 2022), suggesting that factors beyond linguistic competency and economic disparity contribute to this trend.

Research indicates that societal perceptions, such as the stereotypical belief that teaching is not a masculine occupation (Skelton, 2003) influence men's career choices. As teaching is an inherently caring profession, females are traditionally regarded as more suitable for this role (Whitehead, 2000); therefore, when males choose teaching as a career orientation, they are often perceived as "feminine." When men take on job roles associated with motherly duties, they are labeled as "inadequate" (Jones, 2008, p. 700) and "unnatural" (Thornton, 1999, p. 46). These considerations can be easily applied to the foreign language teaching field,³ which, in my view, increasingly demonstrates

² The binary terminology used in this paper aligns with the specific focus of the inquiry into feminization of the teaching profession but does not intend to negate or overlook the plurality and fluidity of gender identities beyond this binary construct.

³ In my claim, I follow Sunderland (2019), who maintains that foreign language education "is in one sense a 'woman's world'" (p. 309).

signs of various prejudices toward male teachers comparable to the ones mentioned above that endanger their enthusiasm for what they do. The prevalence of female teachers in the ELT profession has potential consequences, such as creating an environment of feminization where male teachers may find themselves marginalized similar to men engaged in early childhood education (Cushman, 2005), potentially impacting their self-perception and professional relationships. Furthermore, these men may face prejudiced attitudes in the workplace, which can negatively affect their work performance and job satisfaction. In my observations, at staff meetings, usually led by female team leaders, men's voices are silenced by the female majority when it comes to decision-making. Such an imbalanced power division inevitably leads to changes in men's work attitudes. As one of my male colleagues confided to me, "Men don't matter anymore, so why speak at all?" Given the insubstantial critical attention the existing literature on occupational gender disparities has afforded to the voices of men teachers, the article helps fill this gap by presenting the stories of three male English language teachers: Sebastian, Danilo, and Mikel (pseudonyms are used throughout). What started as a personal observation evolved into a determined effort to address the pressing issue of gender imbalance in ELT, inspiring me to conduct this study. Its objective is to gain a better understanding of men's perceptions of gender imbalance in language teaching and its possible causes. In doing so, the article seeks to answer the question, How (if at all) do male ESL/EFL teachers feel their gender plays out in their careers?

GENDER IMBALANCE IN THE LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFESSION

The issue of gender imbalance has been a subject of much research in the field of gender and language education, with scholars exploring the historical, social, and cultural factors that have contributed to the growing presence of women in the teaching profession (e.g., Appleby, 2014; Cameron, 2005; Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; Norton & Pavlenko, 2004; Sunderland, 2000). In the process of exploring why men are less represented in language education, it became apparent that certain historical patterns that affected women's entry into the field of education are common for all teaching-related occupations. Drudy, Martin, Woods, and O'Flynn (2005) report that historically, in countries such as the US and the UK, teaching was a predominantly male occupation until the second half of the nineteenth century. One of the possible explanations could be the fact that prior to 1850, boys were provided with the opportunity to receive an education, while girls

were mainly taught how to handle domestic responsibilities. Another reason is the limited admission of women to higher education (Cott, 1987). Things have changed considerably since then, and the gender distribution nowadays is quantitatively in favor of women teachers, with their largest share in pre-primary and primary education (UNESCO, 2022).

A similar numerical prevalence of men has been recorded in ELT. A report from the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2017–2018 academic year shows that in the area of ESL or bilingual education, about 91.4% of the teachers were female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). According to Zippia's (2023) data on ESL teacher demographics in the United States, approximately 69% of ESL teachers are female, while 31% are male. Howatt and Widdowson (2004, p. 295) observe that "there were very few women" in the field before 1960. Appleby (2014) links this situation to the establishment of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching as an independent profession during the early twentieth century as a result of the Anglo-American imperial expansion whose purpose was to secure the hegemonic ideal of an English teacher as a white, Western, native-speaking male. This fact stands in stark contrast to the present-day reputation of ELT as a "feminized" profession (Schmenk, 2007).

As mentioned at the beginning, much work has been done by scholars to address gender imbalance and the inequalities associated with it. The vast majority of this work, however, has so far focused on the voices of women teachers and their experiences of marginalization, whereas men in teaching remain largely unexplored (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Several studies exploring male teachers report that men also fall victim to discrimination and marginalization. Among injustices they encounter are accusations of pedophilia (Cooney & Bittner, 2001), patronizing behavior from older female colleagues (Cushman, 2005), social isolation within female-dominated workplaces (Xu, 2019), negative portrayal of male teachers in society/media (Reid, Palmer, Drummond, & Cruickshank, 2019), and many others.

Marginalization in TESOL to a larger extent is associated with "native"/"nonnative" distinctions and, to a lesser extent, with other dimensions such as gender. Very rarely is marginalization of male language teachers explicitly addressed in the literature, but whatever evidence is available points toward a pattern of subtle yet significant gender-based biases within the field. Such evidence is found in Garcia-Ponce's (2020) research, which involved a study of 78 Mexican EFL teachers, of whom 26 were male. While the "native"/"nonnative" discrepancies were named as major sources of personal disappointment and professional dissatisfaction, discrimination based on gender was a

recurrent theme in the data set. One participant, in particular, expressed his frustration with institutional attitudes, noting a prevalent belief that male teachers are less committed than their female counterparts. Preservice male English teachers in Turkey in Güney's (2023) study described the discriminatory treatment of certain sexualities within heteronormative discourses of their educational settings. Furthermore, Sunderland (2019) observed a tendency for the symbolic "exclusion" of male students in foreign language departments in universities worldwide. Shah and Shaikh (2010) explored challenges faced by Muslim male teachers in advancing to leadership roles in English secondary schools due to their religious/ethnic affiliations. Finally, presenting boys as underachievers in language learning is another 'othering' discourse that has a direct impact on men's career choices (Heyder, Kessels, & Steinmayr, 2017). The current study is another attempt to address gender inequalities and hear what male teachers have to say about them. In doing so, the purpose is not to make a case against women teachers or those who do not conform to conventional gender roles but rather to think about how they can work together toward creating a more inclusive and equitable work environment where all educators, regardless of gender, can flourish.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

Human Flourishing

Martha Nussbaum's theorization of human flourishing is helpful in understanding my approach to the issue of gender disparities in language teaching. Although it was not originally intended for direct application in TESOL, it is still relevant in meaningful ways. According to Nussbaum (1999), the idea of human flourishing encompasses several overlapping aspects of "personhood," including "autonomy, self-respect, and a sense of fulfillment and achievement" (p. 55). Autonomy in a philosophical sense is having control over one's choices in life without being subjected to external criticism and judgment (p. 58). In Nussbaum's (2013) vocabulary, human beings are "not just passive recipients of fortune's blows" (p. 120) but individuals who seek a meaningful and active life. Self-respect refers to positive feelings and beliefs that individuals have about themselves, based on their personal values, achievements, and character. Closely connected to it is the idea of nonhumiliation, which is "being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 41). The idea of equality is stressed in Nussbaum's writings in various ways, and there is no space to engage with all of them here, but some are

worth mentioning. The first one deals with the notion of human dignity as a concept that refers to the inherent worth and value of human beings, regardless of their social status, abilities, or circumstances (Nussbaum, 2006). This idea rejects discrimination against individuals in any form, especially on grounds of race or gender, and treats denial of equality as harmful “to wellbeing and opportunity” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 28). Human dignity is closely related to the concept of “equal worth,” according to which men and women should be recognized as having “equal intrinsic worth and being objects of equal respect” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 120). Together, the discussed notions form the principles of human flourishing, which promote people’s participation in the world on equal and respectful terms. The pervasive association of teaching, particularly in non-STEM subjects such as languages, with being a women-only occupation undermines the role of men in education and is an impediment to their flourishing.

Perezhivanie

Beyond Nussbaum’s conceptual framing, I employ the notion of *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1965) to examine male language teachers’ experiences of gender imbalance. *Perezhivanie*, loosely translated as “experiencing” (Vasilyuk, 1991, p. 11), describes a person’s emotional or lived experience, encompassing their subjective thoughts and feelings about the environment. The subjective character of this experience acts as a prism through which all future events are interpreted and understood (Van der Veer, 1994). Essentially, *perezhivanie* is about “how an individual is aware of, interprets, and affectively relates to a certain event” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). The way I view *perezhivaniya* (plural) is also consistent with Blunden’s (2016) understanding of the concept as “units of our autobiography” (p. 282), making up the sequence of critical events that shape the development of the self.

In the field of TESOL, the concept of *perezhivanie* has spiked the interest of many scholars, particularly in recent years. Feryok’s (2020) study, for instance, illustrated how past experiences of a novice English teacher from Armenia connected to her personal and professional growth. Smirnova (2020) used the term in a similar sense to gain insight into the emotional responses of Russian teachers of English to integrating technology into their practice. Despite the growing attention paid to *perezhivanie* in language education, its application in exploring the nature of gender dynamics is markedly limited. A notable exception is a recent project by Weng, Troyan, Fernández, and McGuire (2023), which investigated the evolving intersectional identity of a cisgender, gay English language teacher through his *perezhivaniya* highlighting their emotional

dimensions. My study represents an effort to address this gap, offering a focused examination of the role of *perezhivanie* in understanding male language teachers' experiences of gender imbalance.

THE STUDY

Method

The study employs qualitative inquiry as a “situated activity” that “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach... to make sense of [human] phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43). Episodic narrative interviewing (Mueller, 2019) was utilized as an innovative and rigorous way of collecting phenomenon-driven narratives. The primary purpose of interviews was to learn about participants' experiences of working in female-dominated contexts. The list of questions can be found in Appendix A. The interviews, 60 min each on average, were transcribed in the NVivo automated transcription, and the transcripts were analyzed following the principles of Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic framework. Ethical approval from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow was obtained prior to interviewing. To ensure participants' confidentiality, their personal data have been pseudonymized.

Data Collection

To gain insight into participants' perceptions of gender imbalance in ELT, episodic narrative interviewing (ENI) (Mueller, 2019) was employed as a data collection method. This is a “methods fusion” (p. 4), which manifests itself in an equitable compromise between *narrative inquiry*, *semi-structured interview*, and *episodic interview*. *Narrative inquiry* is a study of narratives that provides a way to unravel the inner worlds of people through their storied lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). *Semi-structured interviewing* is probably the most widely used format in qualitative research (Mason, 2002), aimed at uncovering knowledge through interaction, which Burgess (1984, as cited in Mason, 2002) calls a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 62). *Episodic interviewing* (Flick, 2021) is a data collection technique that derives its roots from the psychology of memory and knowledge. More specifically, it builds on the concept of “episodic memory” (Tulving, 1972), which refers to a vivid recollection of specific situations that happened in the past and treats such specific experiences as *perezhivaniya*.

At the initial stage, the participants were supposed “to define, describe, or characterize” (Mueller, 2019, p. 6) gender imbalance. However, gender is one of the potentially sensitive topics that must be approached with great care. To avoid possible “response barriers” (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000, p. 249), such as embarrassment or reluctance to answer, I relied on the projective technique called *vignettes*, which are sometimes regarded as “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances” (Finch, 1987, p. 105). I created two scenarios (see Appendix B) in which two male English teachers found themselves in exactly opposite situations. In the first, the teacher recounts positive encounters with female colleagues in his workplace. In the second, the teacher comments on the negative experiences of working among women. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the participants to read the scenarios and comment if they had ever found themselves in any of the described situations. This nondirective manner of questioning served as “the stimuli to initiate dialogs” (Padilla, 1992, p. 182) and a useful lead-in into the next stage of interviewing with further exploration of the topic.

Selection of Participants

The selection of participants for this study was purposeful and based on two criteria. First, they were males who worked in predominantly female settings. Second, they had been teaching English for more than 8 years. With this level of experience, they would have likely faced various challenges, successes, and changes within the settings where females were the majority. This purposeful approach allowed me to identify participants with “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 178), that is, possessing characteristics and knowledge sufficient to inform my research question. The recruitment process involved outreach through personal contacts, leading to one volunteer interviewee from my professional network. Additionally, a Google form was disseminated via my social media platforms to engage further interest. This strategy enabled me to attract two additional male educators willing to participate in the study. Three male teachers were selected based on the above criteria. All of them identified themselves as cisgender male, Caucasian, “nonnative”⁴ English teachers with work experience spanning 10–20 years. At the time of the interview, Sebastian, originally from Serbia, and Mikel, from Turkey, were working in universities across the Middle East. Danilo was teaching at a secondary school in Russia, his home country. The interviewees, all in their late 30s or early 40s, represent individuals at a mid-career stage in their professional

⁴ I use the inverted commas to signal a recognition of the complex and often contested nature of the native/nonnative dichotomy in TESOL.

journey. During their careers, they have worked in various teaching environments in which women numerically outnumbered men.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase reflective thematic analysis (RTA) was implemented to make sense of the data. The data was coded manually and in cycles. After initial coding, 61 labels were generated as a result of both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches.

The recursive and reflexive process of reviewing and refining themes and sub-themes culminated in the construction of the thematic map consisting of eight key themes, which were further adjusted to four with an overarching theme of "Human Flourishing": (1) Motivations and aspirations, (2) Study and work environment, (3) Sense of self-worth, and (4) Reimagining a future self. Following this focus, the next section will present the findings that respond to the research question, illuminating the participants' perceptions of gender imbalance as experienced through their *perezhivaniya*.

FINDINGS

Motivations and Aspirations

Danilo's decision to study and teach English was motivated by his mother, who was also his language tutor. As a learner, he derived his inspiration from the ability to use English in order to access the worlds of Jack London and Herbert Wells. But seeing his mother's struggles, the idea of becoming a teacher did not seem like a promising career path for him. Having dedicated her entire life to teaching, she had never been properly recognized for her hard work and commitment. Her salary was meager, and she had to work long hours just to make ends meet. He describes this situation very well when he says, "Working as a teacher means you're out of money all the time."

Sebastian grew up with the idea that certain professions, such as engineering, were more suitable for men, and teaching was not among such occupations. This belief likely shaped his initial reluctance toward a career in teaching, despite his passion for English. He explained, "So I have always wanted to study languages, and English was one of them," but he also recalled turning down an opportunity to work at his university, a decision influenced by a perception of "bad influence" among some teachers. He recounted:

I didn't want to work at that university, and I didn't want to be among those people because of the bad influence I have among some of the teachers, the lecturers I had.

It was the encouragement of his colleagues and a sudden opportunity to teach that led him into the profession. His affinity for interacting with people, especially university students, quickly solidified his choice:

Then I liked it so much because I'm a people person and working with, let's say, university students is far better than working with kids to me.

When Mikel told me that he comes from a family of teachers with his grandparents, parents, and other relatives working in education, I was not surprised to hear that it was them who influenced his decision to become a teacher. But he did not follow in their footsteps because they told him so. On the contrary, everyone tried to talk him out of it, knowing how difficult and unprestigious this occupation is. Looking back, he felt relieved that he had not listened to their warnings.

Because where I come from, it's not very appreciated like a profession at the moment. You don't... Like before, at least you got the gratitude. Now you don't even get that. But when I went like, No, no, I'm never going to be a teacher. And all these people are telling me not to do that. And it turned out I now I came to the point that I really like it. I really like teaching.

The above excerpt encapsulates a profound journey of Mikel's self-discovery and defiance of societal norms. His initial resistance to teaching, fueled by the diminished appreciation for the profession in his community, speaks to a broader societal issue where teaching is often undervalued. The sentiment, "Because where I come from, it's not very appreciated like a profession at the moment," reflects a significant challenge encountered by teachers worldwide: the lack of societal recognition and undervaluation of their role.

In summary, participants' narratives demonstrate how, despite the stereotypes associated with the teaching profession, a deep-rooted passion for education and language can prevail, leading them to choose teaching over other careers. These stories set the stage for a deeper exploration of study and work environment, where participants operate and where these dynamics are further manifested.

Study and Work Environment

After finishing school, Danilo hoped to continue studying it at a military foreign language university. Unable to fulfill his dream, he joined a teacher-training university in Russia, where he studied Japanese and

English. In his group, he was the only male among eight female students. While the gender imbalance was noticeable, especially during events like the celebration of March 8, it was not what made him feel uncomfortable, but the fact that he was “a guy from a small town” who was treated with arrogance by the “capital citizens”, as he called local students. There was no specific mention in Danilo’s recollections of the treatment he received from female students, nor was there any suggestion that they behaved unfairly toward him on account of his gender. Instead, his discomfort appeared to be more related to his self-perception, his sense of being an outsider, and his attempts to fit in, even referencing his attempts at humor like “Chandler in Friends.”

When Sebastian enrolled in an English language and literature course at the university, he already knew that he would be a minority. The reason was that teaching in his culture was typically perceived as “good for ladies only” due to the factors suggested by research (e.g., Acker, 1995), such as flexible hours of work that enable women to look after their children and lesser pay compared to what men should get. Despite being the only male in his language department at a university, Sebastian humorously referred to being “lucky” due to the large number of “nice-looking, good-looking and beautiful ladies” in his department. His relationship with his female classmates appeared to have been built on mutual respect and collaboration:

I cannot say that I was not ignored. I was listened to in the class because I was always free and I always feel myself comfortable to share my ideas and they listen.

Mikel’s memories of his time at the university were similarly positive. Despite being part of a minority group with only 20–30 males out of approximately 80 students, Mikel did not perceive any gender-based animosity or differential treatment. His observations, like Sebastian’s, underscored a sense of luck, describing the environment as “very healthy” and free from gender bias:

[...] there was never something like ... I could never at least feel any animosity or that anybody’s being treated differently based or based on their gender. Everybody was treated equally. [...] And so it was a very, very healthy environment to stay.

Participants’ revelations painted a picture of their work communities, which reflected an inclusive atmosphere where they felt comfortable and valued as individuals, irrespective of being in a gender minority. In describing his first work environment, where an impressive 90% of the staff were women, Sebastian’s *perezhivaniya* were markedly positive. He felt more than merely accepted; he felt “welcomed,” “treated well,” and “respected” by his female colleagues. For him, “liv

[ing] on decent and respectful terms with others” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 274) became possible by acknowledging other colleagues’ opinions and being helpful and professionally knowledgeable. He expressed strong disapproval of the societal essentialist gender labels, proposing instead to “go for personal things,” such as a “positive approach” and appreciation of “different perspectives.” He found that the idea of equality was to treat people with respect and care, regardless of gender. He believed that “If your approach is positive, they [female colleagues] always listen to you.”

Whether it was a public or private school, Danilo’s memories of working with and among women were comparable to those of Sebastian. He recalled that upon joining a private school, his initiatives were met with significant praise and support from the principal, who was a female math teacher. In the Department of English Language, which consisted of 12 members, he was one of only three men. Despite the noticeable disparity in gender, his opinions were highly valued and frequently sought after. Danilo remembered fondly a touching story of how female teachers cared for him, expressing his sentiment that, “I feel not dominated by women. I feel cared by women.” To illustrate this sense of care and support, Danilo shared an instance when the school collectively gathered funds for him during significant life events, such as the birth of his children and the loss of his parents.

Mikel’s experiences as a male English teacher among female colleagues also seemed to have been characterized by respect and acceptance. When describing his first job at the village school, Mikel’s words conveyed a sense of contentment and fulfillment:

[...] it was a very small environment, and I was respected and was appreciated... it was a really, really good atmosphere and I really like working there.

The above statement indicates that being in the minority did not detract from Mikel’s job satisfaction. On the contrary, his fond recollection of the “really, really good atmosphere” reflects a deep sense of contentment and belonging. His emphasis on the value he felt in this setting underscores how a nurturing and inclusive atmosphere can significantly enhance the professional experience, particularly for those in minority positions.

Despite teaching in female-prevalent environments, some participants saw being a minority as an advantage. Sebastian, for instance, noted that

...sometimes people want different genders in different positions. So that’s an advantage because you will be one of the candidates for sure because there aren’t many. And if you are good, you have a high chance.

By saying this, Sebastian points out that there is a demand for gender diversity in certain roles, which can work favorably for male teachers due to their scarcity. This viewpoint suggests that, in some instances, gender imbalance can create unique opportunities for minority groups.

Mikel remembered getting a job at a language school for the same reason as Sebastian.

I only got hired there because the student specifically asked for a male teacher because it was... he was a male student from [country], and... school had no male teachers. And so that's how I got it [laughter].

Mikel's story about securing a job at a language school reinforces Sebastian's point about the benefits that come with being a male minority in a female-centric teaching setting. The tone implied by his laughter suggests both a recognition of the unique combination of factors that worked in his favor and the irony of such circumstances.

Overall, no negativity was detected in the initial reflections of the participants on their experiences working in female-dominated environments. However, as our conversations progressed, some underlying tensions did surface, hinting at the more complex nature of their relationships with female peers. The next section delves into these nuances, uncovering the subtler aspects of their interactions with female colleagues and students.

Sense of Self-Worth

In examining this theme, my goal was to examine situations where participants felt empowered, valued, or uplifted, as well as those that might have involved experiences of gender-based marginalization or inequitable treatment. Through an analysis of these *perezhivaniya*, I sought to understand how their experiences could either fortify an individual's self-worth or, conversely, contribute to feelings of lesser value compared to their female counterparts.

While Sebastian's memories of being appreciated by women teachers surfaced in many parts of our conversation, his reaction to the vignettes in which he positioned himself "in the middle" revealed that "sometimes it [injustice] is the case". Although he said that he never found himself "in the second one's [scenario] shoes," indicating no experience of gender-based unfair treatment, his story of how female colleagues reacted to his promotion speaks volumes about their gender-biased attitudes. He seemed offended by the fact that when he got promoted:

... they [female colleagues] just thought that I was chosen because of not my skills, not my knowledge or anything. It's because of my gender because there weren't many options.

Responding to vignettes, Danilo also located himself "somewhere between." "Being treated in a bit different way" was something he referred to, but not in a negative sense. Conversely, he explained such "differing" as being valued as a man who "carr[ies] some male duties," such as "settl[ing] down" a misbehaving student or handling an angry parent. His voice radiated warmth as he compared his work environment to a "big family" with a "calm and friendly" atmosphere where "every opinion is being considered." Nussbaum's (1999) idea of "equal worth" (p. 5) is traceable through his recollection of the moments when he was listened to and treated with equal respect and appreciation as his female colleagues by his principal.

When Mikel read the vignettes, he reacted, with the same negative undertones as other participants, saying that his experiences working in predominantly female settings were "somewhere in between, depending on the workplace." In contrast to his first teaching episode, his next work experience was "kind of leaning more towards the second vignette." He remembered the times when he felt "just like that proverbial person in that [second] vignette" when the ideas he put forward were rejected by his female colleagues. Even though Mikel did not regard it as a "really striking bad experience," he added in the end, that he "lost motivation" to come up with any initiatives in the future. Further discussion revealed more instances of unequal treatment and even discrimination based on gender. When asked about one of his job experiences, he admitted:

... when I applied, I got rejected at one language school because I was male. And they only hired female teachers because the owner of the school said, and I quote, that 'Men are not capable to be teachers. It's not in our DNA'.

This account is a compelling illustration of discriminatory gender-based work practices. As someone who has never been denied job opportunities on the grounds of gender, I could only imagine how such a "denial of equality" (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 28) may have affected his sense of self-worth and motivation to stay in the teaching profession.

Despite their distinct experiences, the participants' stories converge in highlighting the nuanced interplay of gender dynamics in their professional lives. Whether it is the perception of gender-biased attitudes toward promotions, the value of assuming "male duties" (Danilo), or the direct encounter with gender-based discrimination, these reflections point to a

multifaceted reality within the teaching profession. For Sebastian, this complexity extends to the everyday practices and discourses at his workplace, necessitating a careful navigation of gender roles. For example, he asserted that, unlike men who “just do their job,” women “look for many things in many ways.” He explained that with female colleagues, he had to “be very careful about what you’re saying, how you’re saying it, and what you’re doing.” Sebastian also found these differences in his approaches, particularly when teaching gender-segregated classes. He elaborated on his strategy in the following excerpt:

Say, for example, with the female sections here, I try not to make a lot of jokes. Normally, I make a lot of jokes. I’m very comfortable with this, but with female sections, I am very, let’s say, limited in my wording and choice of words and everything and approach.

Danilo’s story reflected the same belief in gender-based approaches to teaching. His observation that “some kids prefer dealing with women and [others] with men” suggests a perception that male and female teachers inherently bring different qualities to the educational environment, which can resonate differently with students. The same gender-stereotyping orientations could be traced in the following excerpt:

She [student] admitted she was afraid and you know I’ve got some well rather low pitched voice. I’m quite energetic and sometimes I can press, and I believe some kids, some kids cannot bear it. Well, that doesn’t mean that I’m quite pressing person, *no* [emphasis]. But they feel that I am a leader in animal way.

Danilo’s reflection on his teaching style and its reception by students reveals his perception of masculinity in the classroom. He acknowledges his “low pitched voice” and “energetic” nature, and how he could sometimes “press” on his students. His belief that some students, particularly the girl who was afraid, “cannot bear it,” aligns with traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity associated with assertiveness and dominance (Davies & Hunt, 1994). His use of the phrase “leader in animal way” further reinforces a stereotype of male authority rooted in strength and maleness, which he perceived as impactful, albeit potentially overwhelming for some students. His impressions of women as “wearing skirt[s]” resonate with stereotypical, binary views of gender roles associating women with nurturing and supportive roles only.

Reimagining a Future Self

When planning his future, Mikel was certain that whatever he decided to do next would be linked to teaching because this was what

he was good at. He concluded by joking, “I don’t see me changing careers unless I win the lottery.” He further explained that men would be encouraged to go into teaching if they had more “benefits,” meaning the maternity leave to which all women are entitled in any job.

Comparing this advantage to the privileges that men get, he lamented:

[...] for guys, unfortunately, it’s the same like what if you’re a teacher, if you’re a waiter, if you’re an engineer or if you’re a garbage man, you get this much and you get that much days off and you get this much sick leave.

Despite these downsides, Mikel found teaching “good a career as any.” In his observation, “more and more men [are] becoming teachers or doing some sort of education.” This tendency, according to him, goes against common generalizations that “teaching is for girls and machines are for boys.”

Sebastian struck me as a person who strives to resist the discourses of privilege and marginalization based on gender. He saw the main source of gender injustice in the stereotypical portrayal of teaching as a “generally female-dominated profession.” The following excerpt exemplifies his strong desire for gender balance and equality in the profession:

I want people not to have stereotypes among ANYTHING. I mean, why it’s a female job? Why do we have this label? So anyone who wants to, who has the skills and who has the capacity, ability should go for that.

Sebastian was genuinely concerned about the shortage of men in ELT. To attract more men into teaching, he proposed a number of measures he named “circumstances.” The first circumstance is to pay “what they [teacher] deserve.” If fulfilled, it would lead to an increase in the “value” of teachers and the overall prestige of the profession. Despite this fact, Sebastian did not exhibit any desire to change his career in the near future. On the contrary, whatever changes life might bring him in terms of working in a different place or promotion, he planned to continue “to be in touch” with his teaching self.

Answering my question about him remaining in teaching, Danilo noted that he did not wish to end his teaching career, but his future flourishing as a teacher depended on shifting from a traditional school environment to private, freelance teaching. His comment, “Freelancing is more . . . well, earnings are quite high. Maybe twice,” indicated his concern for financial stability. When mapping out his career, Danilo was conscious of the expectation that, as a man, he would likely have a more extended career span:

And, you know, since I’m not a woman, I feel that I can work up to sixty-five [the official age when Russian men retire].

DISCUSSION

In this article, I have endeavored to answer the question of how (if at all) gender plays out in the careers of men in ELT. The findings demonstrated that being a minority among the majority did not factor considerably into the motivation of the participants to enter, stay, or leave teaching. Studies on the motivations to choose the teaching profession (e.g., Huberman, 1993; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997) have shown that men do not initially consider the teaching profession as their top career choice and are motivated by such factors as salary and prestige, in contrast to women, who often choose to teach for more altruistic reasons. This probably explains why all three participants initially pursued jobs outside of teaching. It is not to say, however, that men are motivated only by financial rewards. In my case, motivations to start teaching or return to it were justified by the desire to make positive contributions to students' lives by sharing their love for languages and being a role model. There is much evidence (e.g., Stroud, Smith, Ealy, & Hurst, 2000) to suggest that one such influence is the ability to inspire their students to become teachers.

Feminization of teaching was a major concern among participants, but not because women outnumber men. As previously stated, women's numerical dominance in teaching did not affect their desire to discontinue a career in education. This finding supports Mills, Haase, and Charlton's (2008) claim that feminization of teaching environments is not a significant factor in deterring men from entering the teaching profession. What mattered for my participants was the universalized image of the teacher as a "good mother" (Acker, 1995, p. 529) that they perceived as "suppression of their masculinity" (p. 100). Such associations can be particularly prominent at elementary levels where the proportion of women teachers is the highest (Whitehead, 2000). Teaching young children requires male educators to exhibit qualities such as sensitivity and care, which are traditionally rendered feminine. Furthermore, those who choose to work with young children often have the fear of being accused of pedophilia, as was the case with participants in Skelton's (1991) study. This tension between their responsibilities as early childhood educators and their identity as males could explain why my participants were more comfortable teaching teenagers and adolescents. Some participants tried to affirm their masculinity in order to resist their own feminization (Lupton, 2000). It was apparent in Danilo's *perezhivaniya* when he constantly performed "father figure" and other "masculine" roles with students and colleagues. This can also be attributed to the pressure to live up to heteronormative societal expectations that compelled him

to play a particular gender role, such as being a role model or disciplinarian for boys. As evident from Mills et al.'s (2008) case study, the failure to play the "gendered game" often leads to male teacher isolation and even resignation.

The work practices of privileging men (Sebastian and Mikel) have been labeled by scholars as a form of "positive discrimination" (Moreau, Osgood, & Halsall, 2008, p. 568) that appears desirable in order to retain male teachers and increase diversity in the profession. Foster and Newman (2005), on the other hand, see this preference as a form of desperate situation in which "any man will do." For male teachers who believe they were hired on the basis of their merits, this approach could reinforce feelings of distress. In any case, such a stance further promotes gender inequalities through preferential and discriminatory behavior toward the opposite gender.

Enabling study and work environments adds a sense of value and appreciation among male teachers. Sebastian and Danilo emphasized the role of a "good," "comfortable," and "welcoming" atmosphere as one factor that makes male teachers feel valued and appreciated. In contrast, environments that created and supported gender-related prejudices and barriers were seen as *disabling* and even damaging to their thriving as human beings. This point was particularly prominent in Mikel's recollection of his efforts not being acknowledged by female colleagues, resulting in a loss of motivation and feelings of depreciation.

Statements, similar to the one made by the school principal that "men are not capable to be teachers" (Mikel) have comparable effects on their motivation. Among the reasons for a weakening commitment of men to the teaching profession, participants named the ones that are often found in the literature on occupational disparities (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2001). They have low salaries, fewer benefits compared to women, and an overall loss of status and prestige of the profession. Nonetheless, women did not get to be blamed for these disadvantages by the participants.

Overall, the men's accounts suggest that societal perceptions of teaching as predominantly a female realm contribute significantly to their feelings of inferiority and a presumed unsuitability for the role. One prominent set of responses revealed that the equilibrium between men and women teachers remains a distant goal. This was particularly evident in the ways in which participants saw their work as male language teachers as different from that of their female counterparts. These include beliefs in "masculine" and "feminine" learning styles (Keddie & Mills, 2007) and teaching approaches. Sebastian's expressed beliefs and techniques regarding educating students of opposite genders embody an affirmative politics that perceives maleness and femaleness as distinct

and contrasting (Alloway, 1995). This manner of interacting, namely equating all female instructors with being mothers, is more likely to endorse than challenge gender. Schmenk (2007) cautions us against such beliefs as lacking scientific grounding. Equally problematic is the premise that female teachers act “like mothers” (Sebastian) to students. It would be erroneous to assume that identifying with the role of a mother is universal among individuals of the female gender, or that all women lack discipline, authority, and leadership qualities.

CONCLUSION

Teaching, in general, and foreign language education in particular is predominantly a “woman’s world” (Sunderland, 2000, p. 309). Such a normative understanding of the profession naturalizes gender differentiation into men and women and promotes it as two opposing binaries. This heteronormative categorization not only reinforces stereotypical gender roles but also acts as a barrier to the inclusion of people whose gender identities do not align with traditional classification (Knisely & Paiz, 2021). Additionally, gender stereotypes find their way into language classroom spaces in the forms of ideologies that unfairly position one gender as more academically gifted than others (Pomerantz, 2008). Despite frequent calls for more diversity and equality in the field made by various researchers in the past few years (e.g., Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2022; Güney, 2023), the field continues to fall short of being truly inclusive or equal. It is our collective responsibility to foster an environment that not only values but actively promotes diversity within the profession. By embracing a more dynamic and equitable perspective, we can ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to thrive in this field, both professionally and personally, on an equal footing. If we accept this stance, the first necessary step is to create a culture that values differences instead of producing them. Feminization is a complex matter that necessitates not only the inclusion of women’s insights but also a broader range of perspectives. The prominent focus of scholarly efforts on examining and understanding female teachers, as noted by Sabbe and Aelterman (2007), underscores this need. Therefore, men’s voices in my study are a valuable addition to the debate. Through participants’ *perezhivaniya*, we saw how their perceptions of gender imbalance affect the ways they think about teaching and their future within the profession. More research is needed to find out how gender imbalance affects the personal and professional development of teachers from diverse gender identities, hoping that this understanding will bring us to a “solution that actually does promote human flourishing” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 184).

Limitations and Future Research

There are certain limitations to the current study that warrant consideration in future research. First, I acknowledge that presenting the narratives of only three male teachers could be one of the shortcomings of the study. It would clearly have benefited from a larger sample. Another limitation is the small number of interviews conducted. It is possible that additional rounds of discussion may have allowed a deeper exploration of the issue. I am also mindful of a limitation in the scope of understanding and interpreting participants' experiences solely from a female–male angle while overlooking other vital intersections, such as race, ethnicity, or sexuality. Expanding future research to include an intersectional lens would ensure a more inclusive and representative understanding of gender-related issues. Finally, the focus of the present study was specifically on cisgender males. The inclusion of a broader range of gender identities, such as transgender, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and other individuals, was not within the original scope of this research. However, given the paucity of research available on gender-diverse language teachers, there is potential to incorporate their unique experiences and viewpoints into future studies. Finally, I am aware that merely addressing these issues is an insufficient strategy. Our duty as educators extends beyond acknowledgment; we must actively seek ways to resist the normalizing and homogenizing pressures in our workplaces. Only by becoming “agents of change,” as Güney (2023, p. 1) advocates, can we work toward a more inclusive and equitable future for TESOL.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Professor Nicki Hedge of the University of Glasgow, UK, whose enlightening conversations and insights contributed to this article.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This study was not supported by any funding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This study involves no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data sets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The study was approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow, UK. Application no. 400210168.

CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Please tell a story about what influenced you to become an English teacher.
- What are some memories of those moments when you were in college? How many students were male/female? How did it make you feel?
- When you were studying at university, what were your thoughts about being a teacher?
- What does it feel like to work in a place where the majority are women? How would you describe your relationship with female colleagues?
- Were there times when you felt the effect of gender stereotyping? If yes, how did you respond to it?
- Do you notice any differences between your teaching approach and that of female teachers? Tell me about your students. How do they relate to you as a male teacher? How are your beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions of yourself reflected in your teaching practice?
- What are some positive experiences of being a male teacher? What are, if any, negative ones?
- Are you satisfied with your job? Would you recommend this career to a man considering it as a profession? Where do you see yourself in 10 years? What do you think, if anything, should be done to encourage male teachers to choose ESL/EFL teaching as their career choice?
- What are the things (if any) that should/could be done to reduce unfairness and promote a more flourishing work environment? How do you see your role as a male teacher in bringing such change?

APPENDIX B

VIGNETTE 1

After working as an English teacher for 20 years at my university, I still remember my first workday vividly. I was warmly greeted by a team of English teachers, most of whom were women. I found a welcome note on my desk and a bunch of balloons that said “welcome home.” The cake with a candle was waiting for me in the lunchroom. This was incredible!. At first, I thought it was just a trick to “lure” males into the “cage with lions,” but I was wrong. It was a genuine gesture like many others that followed. I have always felt valued and respected, and I know how strange it may sound, but I felt loved. My opinion was acknowledged during our staff meetings and eventually when I was given the position of the departmental head, I felt honored to be recognized as a leader. These were the best years of my life!

VIGNETTE 2

As the only male English teacher at my school, I have always sensed that I was treated differently from my female colleagues. For example, when they have a student who misbehaves in their classes and whom they cannot handle themselves, they always seek my help to ‘calm them down.’ But when it comes to our meetings, whatever idea I propose is either not good enough or undoable. Once, I suggested to the team leader, who is also a woman, that we should incorporate a “brain break” into lessons, some sort of physical activity to help students recharge their energy. But she said that this will interfere with the lesson plan and take up precious time meant for learning. I have the feeling that my voice does not matter. So I go along with their every decision even though I disagree. You cannot win when you are in the minority, can you?