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THE ROLE OF GENDER ON ESL LEARNERS' PERCEPTION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Partibaraaj Nagasundram¹, Suyansah Swanto^{2*}, Megawati Soekarno³, Wardatul Akmam Din⁴

¹ Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

Email: partibaraaj17@gmail.com

² Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

Email: suyansah@ums.edu.my

³ Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

Email: megawati.s@ums.edu.my

⁴ Centre of Internationalisation and Global Engagement, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

Email: wardadin@ums.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

ESL learners have varying perceptions towards their English language learning experience because no one student is alike with the other. Gender differences is an important aspect of ESL learners' identity which is frequently overlooked because English curriculums and teaching methods are usually carried out in classrooms with a one-size-fits-all concept, and does not cater to the different needs and learning styles of their students. This study aims to determine whether gender plays a significant role in shaping ESL learners' perceptions towards English language learning. This study was conducted via the systematic literature review method. A total of ten literatures were chosen for inclusion in this study based on specified criteria and gathered from various online journal databases. Based on the results, it was found that gender does play an important role on ESL learners' perception due to societal and environment factors that feed into stereotypical gender roles. Also, the inherent biological and psychological differences between males and females can affect ESL learners' perceptions and attitudes when learning English.

Keywords:

English Language Learning, ESL, Gender, Learner Perception, Student Perception.

Introduction

In more recent years, gender differences have been paid more attention on than ever before. As the world progresses and modernize even more, stereotypical gender roles barriers are being broken. But in the context of language learning, gender still remains as a feasible aspect of language learning and how it is affected by it, either due to reasons such as natural biological differences between males and females (Qian, 2015), or even societal or cultural norms (Ellili-Cherif, 2017; McCaughan, 2009) for example. The American Psychological Association (2012) defined gender as the attitudes, feelings and behaviours of a person in society that is associated with their biological sex, which implies the psychological, behavioural, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female. Sex, which is commonly mistaken to be similar to gender, is the usage of the terms “male” or “female” (American Psychological Association, 2015). Hence, gender can be a factor which influences a person perception due to the sociocultural norms which shapes their attitudes, behaviour or beliefs (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). A person’s gender has been found to be a factor which influences learners’ perception in some previous studies (Alsuraihi et al., 2016; Ashong & Commander, 2012; Yaman, 2012; Dabaj, 2009). On the other hand, there are past studies which found that gender has no effect on learners’ perception, thus directly contradicting the previous findings (Główka, 2014; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2009).

Past research on English language learning has established that multiple sociocultural and demographic factors such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status represent facets that influence ESL learners’ perceptions and attitudes. However, there is a gap in knowledge concerning specifically gender and its role on learners’ perceptions in the English language learning context which have not been thoroughly explored. To the best of the readers’ knowledge, there were no systematic literature reviews that have been carried out on this issue. Therefore, this systematic review was conducted with the objective of finding out whether gender plays a significant role in shaping ESL learners’ perceptions towards English language learning. This research question that is asked in this study is:

- Does gender play a significant role in shaping ESL learners’ perceptions towards English language learning?

This study will review recent literatures that have been published by past researchers to extract findings that are relevant to this study to answer the research question above, hence providing us a clearer picture on this matter.

Methodology

This study was carried out using the systematic literature review method. This method was utilized to identify related studies regarding how much does gender play a role in shaping ESL learners’ perceptions on the English language learning process. The first stage of this review was to determine the main keywords that will be used for database keywords searches in order to locate relevant studies. The researchers came to a mutual agreement after a discussion that the keywords that will be used are “gender” and “student perception” or “learner perception” and “ESL” or “English language learning”. These keywords were used to conduct a database search on UMS subscribed databases in addition to manual searching from other sources. This is because there was a clear lack of previous research leading to a larger spread of studies obtained from various other countries and sources. After the corresponding studies were identified, a screening process was carried out in accordance with

the criteria that was agreed upon. To circumvent bias and preconception, the systematic review was carried out objectively and in an impartial manner by the readers.

Keyword Search Procedure

To locate relevant studies, the keyword search was carried out on two multidisciplinary databases which were ProQuest and Scopus. However, due to the lack of studies on this particular subject area in these databases, a manual search was also carried out on Google Scholar with similar inclusion and exclusion criteria. The search strings that were used such as “gender” and “student perception” or “learner perception” were used in tandem with study requirements which are first of all, the studies have to be scholarly journals or peer-reviewed published texts with open access to full text. Also, the time span the studies were published in was limited to the past five years which was between mid-2016 to mid-2021. The last criterion is the language that the study was published in must be in English. Tables 1 and 2 are a summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria of The Systematic Review

Inclusion Criteria	Search Limits	Identified Articles	Removed Articles
Keywords	“Gender” and “Student perception” or “Learner perception” and “ESL” or “English language learning”	602	0
Type	Peer-reviewed journals with full text	89	513
Year	Past 5 years (2016 to 2021)	42	47
Language	English	41	1

Table 2: Exclusion Criteria of The Systematic Review

Exclusion Criteria	Reason	Remaining Articles	Removed Articles
Area of study	Non-relevance	32	9
Empirical Evidence	Gender is not a variable/No outcome	10	22

The first step of the search on the databases and other sources using the keywords produced a total of 602 studies which were related to gender or ESL learners’ perception based on the title, abstract or content of the articles. After refining the search limits in consideration of the first inclusion criteria where the articles have to be scholarly journals or peer-reviewed published texts with full text access, there were 89 articles left. Next, taking into account that the studies need to be published between the past five years from 2016 to 2021, there were 42 papers left. Then, one study article was omitted because it was not published in the English language thus the final number of articles left was 41. The titles, abstracts, authors and other details of the remaining articles were exported to an Excel sheet to make it easier for the readers to review and screen. After thorough reviewing and screening, 31 articles were filtered because the studies did not include “gender” as a variable with empirical evidence or outcomes on learners’ perception or focused on subject areas that were not pertinent to this review. Thus, 10 study articles were kept to extract relevant findings. A flowchart of this systematic literature review’s methodology is included below (Figure 1).

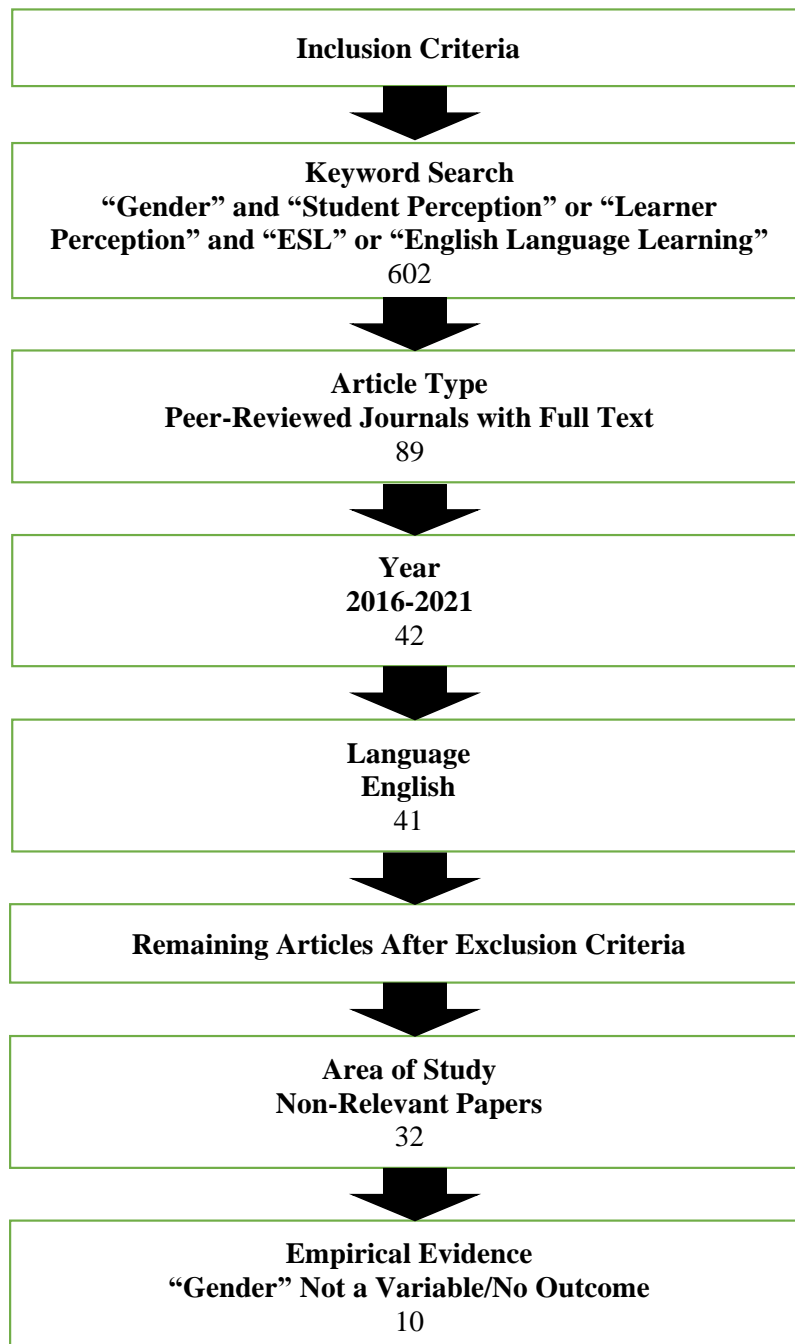


Figure 1: Flowchart of the Review's Methodology

Results**Table 3: Findings of the Systematic Review**

Author & Year	Country	Title	Sample	Outcome	Relevant Findings
Robinson, Basco, Mathews, Dancel, Princena & Kever, 2017	South Korea	ESL Student Perceptions of VLE Effectiveness at A University in South Korea	686 Korean college students	Positive	There were significant differences in perception of the use of Blackboard in ESL learning when grouped by gender. Male students found it to be more advantageous and helpful while female students perceived it as having its limitations and needs improvement.
Pakirathan and Kepol, 2018	Malaysia	Perceived Teachers' Self-disclosure, Writing Performance and Gender of Malaysian ESL Undergraduates	75 Malaysian final year undergraduates	Mixed	There was no difference in perception for both genders in terms of amount and relevance towards the teacher's opinions and experiences to explain course content. However, female students had slightly more positive perception compared to males.
Mohtasham and Farnia, 2017	Iran	English Speaking Anxiety: A Study of the Effect of Gender on Iranian EFL University Students' Perceptions	175 Iranian university EFL learners from 6 universities	Positive	In relation to the research question of the study "Do EFL university students' gender differences influence their perceived foreign language anxiety?", it was found that there was a statistically significant difference in males and females perceived anxiety. While impromptu in-

					class speaking activities contributed to both male and female learners' anxiety, statistically female learners had more negative perceptions.
Bensalem, 2018	Saudi Arabia	Foreign Language Anxiety of EFL Students: Examining the Effect of Self-Efficacy, Self-Perceived Proficiency and Sociobiographical Variables	261 Arabian students from 3 public universities	Negative	Female learners experience more anxiety compared to their male counterparts when learning English, demonstrating that gender can be a predictor of Foreign Language Anxiety. However, the relationship between gender and English self-perceived proficiency was not significant.
Mayo Torres and Ericson, 2019	Philippines	English Learning Motivation and Self-Efficacy of Filipino Senior High School Students	160 Filipino senior high school students	Negative	There were no significant differences between levels of English motivation or English self-efficacy and gender. Both male and female students in the study had similar perceptions regarding how they engage and carry out English communicative tasks such as listening, speaking, reading and writing regardless of their gender.
Idrus and Salleh, 2017	Malaysia	Perceived Self-Efficacy of Malaysian ESL Engineering	338 Malaysian private university students	Positive	The study found that female students had significantly more positive perception than males regarding their self-efficacy

		and Technology Students on Their Speaking Ability and Its Pedagogical Implications			levels in terms of ability and aspiration.
Khatoon, Abidin, Mirza & Hussain, 2020	Pakistan	Blogging In ESL Class- Gender- Based Attitude of The Engineering Students	6 Pakistani undergradua te ESL learners	Negative	There was no significant difference in attitudes or perceptions of male and female ESL learners towards using blogging in their English language learning.
Nami, 2020	Iran	Educational Smartphone Apps for Language Learning in Higher Education: Students' Choices and Perceptions	447 Iranian undergradua te university students	Negative	The results implied that there was no significant relationship between gender and students' perception towards English language learning applications.
Al-Shoaibi and Shukri, 2017	Saudi Arabia	Foundation Year Students' Perceptions of Using Social Network Sites for Learning English in the Saudi Context	20 Saudi Arabian foundation students	Positive	The results from the study found that male students had positive perceptions and attitudes compared to female students who had generally negative attitudes towards the usage of SNSs to learn English.
Abulhassan and Hamid, 2021	Saudi Arabia	Perception and Interest of English Language Learners (ELL) toward	424 Saudi Arabian ELL secondary school students	Mixed	There was a significant difference in perception between male and female English language learners when collaborative teaching

Collaborative
Teaching;
Evaluation
towards
Group
Activities

techniques were used
in English language
learning, but no
difference was found
in regards to learning
in group activities

Study Characteristics

The table above is a list of the literature studies that was reviewed by the readers with the reported outcomes and findings. All 10 studies were published in English and varies in terms of country of origin. There was a total of 6 different countries: Saudi Arabia (3 articles), Iran (2 articles), Malaysia (2 articles), Pakistan (1 article), Philippines (1 article) and South Korea (1 article) (Figure 2). Every one of the articles were peer-reviewed publications. 7 of the studies employed quantitative research methods using surveys and descriptive statistics, another 2 studies utilized the qualitative method using interviews or open-ended questionnaires while 1 study used a mixed method model. A total of 7 studies sampled students from the tertiary education setting, 2 studies sampled high school students and only 1 included foundation level students in the sample (Figure 3). Lastly, the distribution of studies by outcomes were divided by positive outcome (4 studies), negative outcome (4 studies) and mixed outcome (2 studies) (Figure 4).

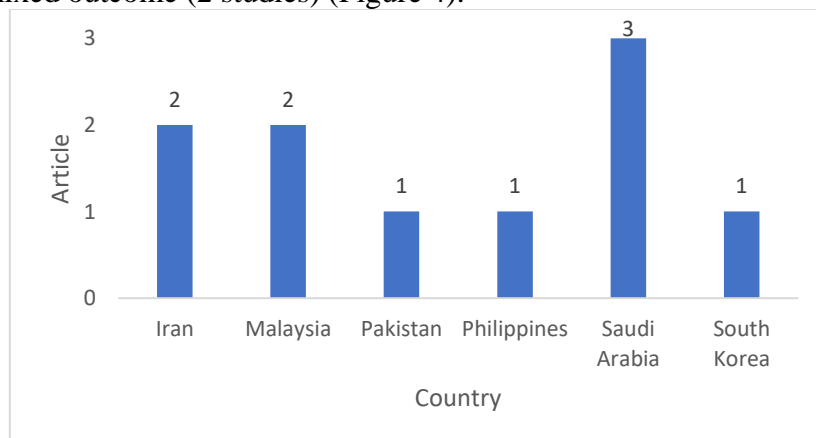


Figure 2: Study Distribution by Country

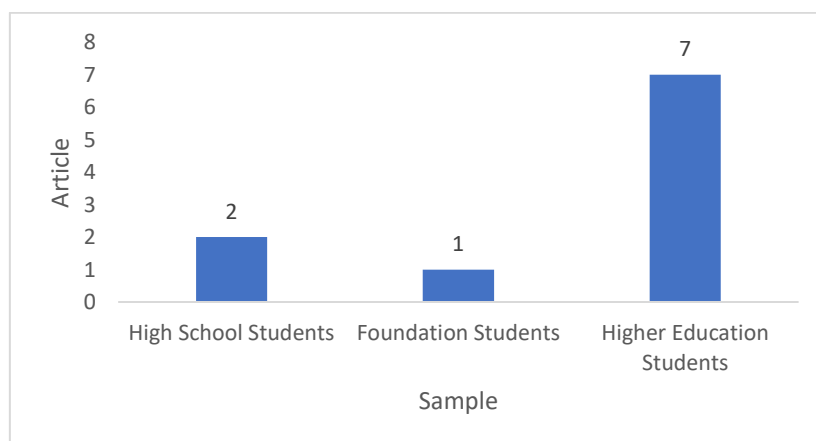


Figure 3: Study Distribution by Sample

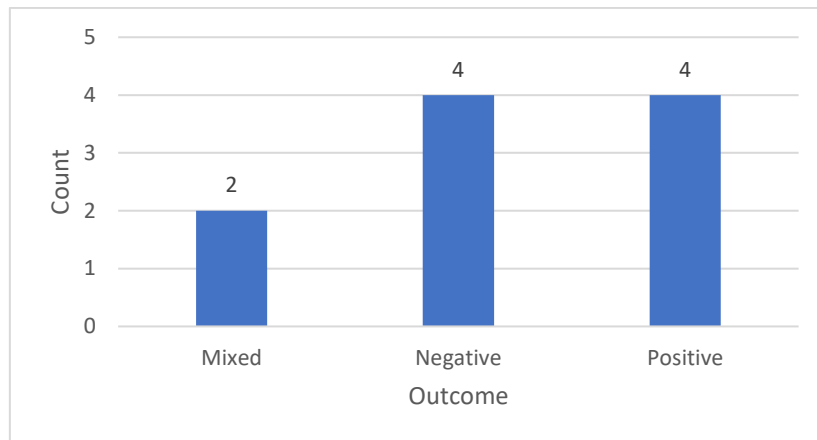


Figure 4: Study Distribution by Outcome

Discussion

This section discusses the findings to answer the research question of this systematic literature review. After extensive reading of the articles and journals, the researchers found that overall gender does play a significant role in ESL learners' perceptions towards English language learning. It was ascertained that generally female ESL learners had more negative perceptions and motivations than male ESL learners due to their confidence levels and gender bias especially in societies where women are traditionally more submissive. However, female learners were more accepting of various ESL instructional strategies than male learners.

Of the 10 studies reviewed, 4 reported positive outcomes in their findings (Figure 4). The researchers found that gender had a significant role in the learners' perceptions in their English language learning process. The chart from Figure 2 shows the distribution of the 10 studies by country and Saudi Arabia was the country with most published articles. It can be observed that a more than half of the studies (6 articles) were of Middle Eastern origin while the rest of the studies were from Asian countries. Based on the findings, only 2 studies from Middle Eastern countries had positive outcomes while the rest reported negative outcomes. The study carried out by Mohtasham and Farnia (2017) in Iran produced similar results to Al-Shoaibi and Shukri (2017) in Saudi Arabia. Both studies found differences in perceptions between male and female students, where females students had more negative perceptions as compared to male students. In both studies, the researchers reported that female learners are less confident and more anxious when learning English whereas males were more experienced and confident. Likewise, a study conducted in South Korea by Robinson et al. (2017) reported significant difference in ESL learners' perceptions between males and females. Female students were less accepting of using Blackboard in their ESL class, perceiving it to be quite limited in its use and needing improvement whereas male students feel it is helpful and advantageous in improving their ESL skills. Idrus and Salleh's (2017) study on Malaysian ESL engineering and technology students reported findings that coincide with the aforementioned study albeit with flipped results. Idrus and Salleh found significant difference in perception between female and male students towards their self-efficacy levels in terms of ability and aspiration. The female students instead were more confident and have a more positive outlook towards learning or speaking in English compared to male students.

Subsequently, 2 studies had mixed outcomes which were more positively inclined in their results. Pakirathan and Kepol (2018) reported that female had more positive perception than male students overall but in terms of amount and relevance of teacher's opinions and experiences to explain course content, there was no significant difference. The researchers concluded that males and females have different perceptions towards the teaching strategies of the teachers in the English language learning classroom, with female learners being more open and accepting than male learners. Abulhassan and Hamid (2021) also reported mixed outcomes in their study. They found that male and female English language learners had significant difference in perception towards the use of collaborative teaching techniques in English language learning whereas there was no difference for group activities. Male learners were more interested in the collaborative teaching techniques as compared to female learners, while both genders perceived group activities similarly. Therefore, although these two studies had mixed outcomes, ultimately the results were more favourable towards the influence of gender on learners' perceptions in English language learning.

However so, it should be acknowledged that 4 studies reported negative outcomes in regards to the role of gender on ESL learners' perceptions. These studies noted that gender differences prove to be a non-factor when it comes to learners' perceptions towards English language learning. Nami (2020) stated other reasons such as the learning platform that the students used to learn English which could affect their motivations and attitudes due to their own level of familiarity with the applications. In line with the previous finding, Khatoon et al. (2020) in their study also found that there was no significant difference in perceptions between male and female ESL learners. Both male and female learners were equally interested in using blogging as a platform to learn the English language even though there was a clear gender bias in Pakistan where women education is not conventional. This was similar to Bensalem's study in 2018, where he reported non-significance in the relationship between gender and self-perceived English proficiency, although the female learners experienced more anxiety than males when learning English possibly also due to the gender roles in a male-dominated society which may influence their perception on language learning. Next, Mayo Torres and Ericson (2019) carried out a study in the Philippines and found that male and female high school students had similar perceptions on their English language learning process with listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks. There were no significant differences between the genders and their motivation and self-efficacy when learning English. These studies all had similar reasonings behind their results, which was because of the medium used or syllabus for learning English were the same for each student regardless of gender, therefore it does not influence their perceptions.

In terms of sample, it can be seen from Figure 3 that a large majority of the literature reviewed conducted studies on learners from tertiary education settings such as higher education institutions like universities and colleges or pre-university foundation programmes. These studies reported varied outcomes which were generally more positive. Only 2 studies took high school students as their samples. These 2 studies reported different outcomes with Mayo Torres and Ericson (2019) reporting a negative outcome among Filipino high school students whereas Abulhassan and Hamid (2021) reporting mixed but more positive outcome with Saudi Arabian secondary school students. This goes to show that it is still unclear whether gender truly plays a role in ESL learners' perceptions among high school students.

Implications

The findings of this review shows that gender is an important aspect of ESL learners' identity that can shape their perceptions towards English language learning. It is indicated that male and female ESL learners differ in their perceptions and preferences of learning English. Sabra (2018) reiterates that it is not easy to distinguish ESL learners' perceptions and attitudes in regards to gender but male learners' ostensible confidence and female learners' optimistic mindsets may possibly help them to perform better in English notwithstanding in different ways. Therefore, ESL teachers and educators should take into account their students learning style, attitudes and inclinations with respect to their gender because the education system must give rise to equal opportunities for every student (OECD, 2020). Thus, it will allow educators, teachers and administrations to come up with better English language curriculums and syllabuses which can accommodate students' differences and help motivate them to learn English in a safe and supportive environment regardless of their gender. Ahmed (2015) noted that the policy makers and education planners carry an important responsibility to design feasible and learner sensitive curriculum, teachings materials and methods to meet the needs of their students. Shehadeh (1999) also reinforces this by saying that equal opportunities in the ESL can be attained with proper methodology and an appealing curriculum.

Furthermore, when conducting English language classrooms, teachers should take initiative and encourage students to form mixed gender groups during classroom ESL activities. This allows the students themselves to breakdown gender stereotypes among themselves as they learn from one another. As emphasized by Durán (2006), this promotes environments where gender stereotypes can be changed into opportunities to be accepted instead of stigmatized in social interactions between males and females that can encourage equity and respect among students. This can also disestablish favouritism by teachers who stereotype students' behaviours and interest according to their genders (Hand, Rice & Greenlee, 2017). Consequently, the Malaysian education setting can stand to improve on the current practices by adopting and integrating better learning environments where students are able to learn English while taking into account the strengths and drawbacks of the genders to suit them. As a country that has taken positive strides in an effort to celebrate women and their accomplishments in various fields, it is necessary that this can also be applied with students in the school system thus empowering female English language learners while still supporting the males so that all students have a level playing field with equal opportunity to develop and shine (Lydia & Vighnarajah, 2021). In the long run, this can help produce more female and male graduates with a strong grasp of the English language with high employability and marketability to enter the workforce in Malaysia or even overseas (Suhaili & Mohama. 2021; Nesaratnam et al., 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Agenda

First of all, we acknowledge that several studies were excluded from the final sample of this review because gender was not explicitly discussed on its role on ESL learners' perception. Also, within the time this review was written, we recognize that there have been newer articles and studies that were published on gender and its role on ESL learners' perceptions towards English language that were not included in this review. Also, there is a lack of research on this topic in the Malaysian context so a gap is present to compare findings with different countries and locally to account for cultural differences which could help assist future studies.

A suggestion for future research that may be of value is to measure actual learning outcomes of English language learning in the context of gender differences instead of learners' perceptions only. Additionally, it would be useful for future studies to extend this study to ESL instructors and educators to find out their perceptions in regards to students' gender and how it may affect the English teaching process. This can help corroborate evidence to find out to what extent does student stereotyping based on gender by teachers have an effect on ESL learners' perception towards English learning. Lastly, more studies should be carried out on students from the secondary school setting to get a clearer picture of their perceptions on English language learning in regards to gender.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the discussion of the findings from the literature shows that ESL learners' genders plays a significant role in influencing their perceptions towards English language learning. A large majority of the studies indicates that the society and environment that the students grow up in contributes to their perceptions based on how gender roles are commonly viewed between males and females. Also, the intrinsic differences in gender such as the male self-confidence or female receptiveness and acceptance weigh-in on learners' perceptions towards English language learning. Thus, this study provides valuable insight for teachers, educators and administrations to acknowledge students gender differences and come up with a plan of action to improve the future of English language teaching and learning moving forward.

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