

Understanding Gender Stereotypes in the Context of Foreign Language Learning through the Lens of Social Cognitive Theory

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Abstract

Using Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework, this study explores the relationships between gender stereotypes and language learning experiences, particularly in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It aims to provide a better understanding of the role of gender stereotypes in the language learning process focusing on how they both influence and are influenced by various behavioral, personal, and environmental processes. To achieve this, a qualitative study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews was conducted with a total of 32 participants, including 17 teachers and 15 learners from six different universities in Turkey. Results revealed that both EFL teacher and learner participants were aware of certain gender stereotypes in language learning. These stereotypes were found to create diverse and distinct learning experiences for female and male learners, influenced by behavioral (i.e., perseverance, sense of responsibility), personal (i.e., attributions, emotions), and environmental (i.e., significant others' expectations) processes. The study further highlighted the deep-rooted and differential influence of societal norms and cultural expectations on female and male learners' experiences. These findings emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing gender stereotypes in language education to promote an inclusive and equitable learning environment and support learners' engagement and success, regardless of their gender.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes (e.g., “men are good at mathematics”; “women are good at languages”) in education, particularly within STEM fields (Master, Cheryan, & Meltzoff, 2016; Shapiro & Williams, 2012). Extensive research, educational initiatives, and policy interventions have been dedicated to addressing the potential underrepresentation and underachievement of women in these fields. Such efforts have resulted in significant progress in promoting gender equality in the traditionally male-dominated areas. For instance, previous studies have demonstrated that initiatives such as mentorship programs and bias-awareness training have been effective in mitigating stereotypical behaviors and creating a more inclusive environment for women in STEM fields (e.g., Jackson, Hillard, & Schneider, 2014). However, gender stereotypes and their effects extend beyond women and STEM alone. They also impact the educational outcomes and experiences of both women and men in other traditionally gendered domains, such as foreign languages, which are often associated with female participation (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chaffee, Lou, Noels, & Katz, 2020; Kutuk, Putwain, Kaye, & Garrett, 2022b). Therefore, to promote equal opportunities and inclusive education for everyone, it is imperative to examine how gender stereotypes manifest in these domains and their implications for individuals’ educational experiences.

Investigating the relationship between gender and foreign language (FL) learning is not simple and straightforward. The multifaceted nature of this relationship and the potential for nuanced findings present unique challenges which may often discourage researchers from effectively exploring this area (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Schmenk, 2007). The challenges stem from deeply rooted common-sense beliefs regarding gender and FL learning, where individuals tend to rely on personal experiences and cultural narratives rather than evidence-based understanding. These beliefs are further influenced by unconscious biases sustained by strong social and cultural stereotypes. For instance, previous research has demonstrated cases where FL learning is stereotypically viewed as a domain more closely associated with women, despite such association not necessarily aligning with actual competencies (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chaffee et al., 2020; Li, McLellan, & Forbes, 2021; Schmenk, 2004). These unfounded gender stereotypes pose distinct challenges for both women and men, significantly influencing their FL learning experiences and outcomes.

Male learners, on one hand, may face self-doubt and a sense of alienation due to the perception that FL learning is more favorable

toward female learners (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Lu & Luk, 2014), which may result in their low motivation and engagement in FL learning (see Henry, 2009; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017). The perceived disconnect between male students and the FL learning environment, along with the attributed lack of value and limited career prospects associated with FL learning, may further exacerbate their challenges (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Schmenk, 2007). In line with these assertions, for instance, several studies have revealed that male learners are often perceived to show lower levels of enjoyment, participation, and effort in FL classes compared to their female counterparts (Dewaele, MacIntyre, Boudreau, & Dewaele, 2016; Kissau, Kolano, & Wang, 2010; Lu & Luk, 2014). On the other hand, despite often being portrayed as having higher motivation and positive attitudes toward FL learning (Kobayashi, 2002; You, Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2016), the expectation for female learners to excel in language learning can place undue pressure on them. Furthermore, societal expectations play a significant role in shaping female students' choices of fields of study and their academic careers as they are often directed toward areas that align with traditional gender roles or stereotypes (Whitehead, 1996). As a result, female learners may feel compelled to opt for language studies perceived as more "appropriate" or "suitable" for their gender, rather than pursuing their true passions and embracing diverse linguistic and cultural opportunities (Barone & Assirelli, 2020). Such pressures sustain gender stereotypes, undermining the value and cognitive demands of FL learning for all learners. These suggest that individuals, regardless of their gender, can be influenced by gender stereotypes in FL learning contexts in diverse ways. It is, therefore, essential to develop a better understanding of the relationships between gender stereotypes and language learning experiences, especially by considering perspectives of various stakeholders involved in the language learning process.

Taken together, this study seeks to examine gender stereotypes in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning at the tertiary level, investigating not only their manifestations but also the processes that shape and sustain these stereotypes. Specifically, it aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of two key stakeholders, EFL teachers and learners, in Turkey. To achieve these aims the study draws upon Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986). SCT is a theoretically sound framework which understands human functioning as a triadic reciprocal interaction between personal, environmental, and behavioral processes. According to SCT, these interrelated processes create a complex system where each aspect both influences and is influenced by the others. Individuals' thoughts can impact their actions and environments. Their actions can, in turn, shape their

thoughts and environments and the environment can influence their thoughts and actions (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). This theoretical approach provides a useful lens for understanding the dynamic relationships between various personal (e.g., self-efficacy), environmental (e.g., social norms), and behavioral processes (e.g., persistence) and how gender stereotypes in FL learning can both influence and be influenced by these factors, leading to diverse language learning experiences for female and male learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender Stereotypes in Foreign Language Education

Gender is a multifaceted and socially constructed concept that goes beyond the binary category of biological sex, and it is shaped by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The way individuals construct their gender varies and is subject to change due to societal attributions of characteristics, abilities, and roles linked to each gender. The differences across genders are generally used to explain the extent to which individuals are masculine and feminine, rather than male or female. Such shared explanations or assumptions about how one should act based on their gender manifest as gender stereotypes. Specifically, gender stereotypes refer to widely held beliefs and expectations about the characteristics, roles, and behaviors that are considered appropriate for individuals based on their gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). These stereotypes often reinforce traditional gender roles and can influence people's perceptions, judgments, and actions toward themselves and others, shaping opportunities and challenges they encounter in their daily lives. (see Lopez-Zafra & Gartzia, 2014).

In FL learning, gender stereotypes have gained significant research attention due to their impact on learners' attitudes, behaviors, and academic outcomes (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chaffee et al., 2020; Kutuk et al., 2022b; Li & McLellan, 2021; Pomerantz, 2008). Numerous studies have explored the common belief that associates FL learning closely with women or femininity. Among the early investigations, Carr and Pauwels (2006) conducted a study involving 200 boys aged between 12 and 18 in English-dominant communities in Australia. They revealed that a majority of participants believed that studying foreign languages was not aligned with the masculine ideal and it was perceived as something "real boys" do not excel in. In a more recent investigation, Chaffee et al. (2020) surveyed 1,672 Canadian undergraduate students and found a consistent stereotype associating FL

learning with femininity across various cultures and genders. Moreover, a body of research highlights that these gender stereotypes are not limited to students alone but are also held by pre-service and in-service teachers (Altan, 2012; Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Li et al., 2021; Peacock, 2001). These findings provide evidence that gender stereotypes persist among learners of diverse genders, cultures, and age groups and among other key stakeholders such as teachers, highlighting the pervasive nature of these stereotypes within FL education.

Gender stereotypes can influence learners' attitudes toward language learning, interest and motivation levels, active engagement in the learning process, and ultimate academic achievement (see Kutuk et al., 2022b). In their study, for instance Li and McLellan (2021) conducted a study involving 1,165 EFL learners from eight high schools in China, and they found that female learners were stereotypically perceived more positively in terms of English learning aptitude, affect, and achievement. Additionally, the study demonstrated that when male students were primed with stereotypes that favored female learners in FL learning during an experiment, it resulted in decreased performance among boys in a subsequent English test, which indicates the presence of a stereotype threat effect (i.e., the phenomenon that when an individual is targeted by a negative stereotype, they attempt to disprove it, which can divert their focus from the actual task and result in reduced performance, see Shapiro & Williams, 2012). Taken together with previous evidence demonstrating that women consistently outperform men in language arts and FL learning (Główka, 2014; Voyer & Voyer, 2014), these studies suggest that men may face a disadvantage in their language learning endeavors compared to women.

However, the influence of gender stereotypes on language learners is multifaceted and varied as it manifests itself in unique ways among individuals, both within and across genders. For instance, a logical assumption might be that the stereotype associating FL learning with female learners could lead to gender differences in FL learning, with male learners potentially experiencing higher levels of anxiety and lower self-efficacy compared to female learners. However, research findings on this assumption have been inconsistent and conflicting (Dewaele et al., 2016; Kutuk et al., 2022b; Park & French, 2013). As an example, Dewaele et al. (2016) surveyed 1,736 EFL learners aged 11–75 to explore gender differences in enjoyment and anxiety levels during language learning. The results revealed that although women reported higher levels of enjoyment compared to men, they still experienced more anxiety than their male counterparts. Similarly, Park and French (2013) found that women enrolled in an English conversation course in Korea tended to be more anxious compared to men,

reflecting the influence of a traditionally male-dominant society. In another study, Kutuk et al. (2022b) examined 701 EFL learning university students from three Turkish universities. They showed that gender stereotypes affected self-efficacy among women, resulting in improved language attainment. However, there was no significant impact on men’s performance through their self-efficacy. Additionally, gender stereotypes did not affect language anxiety in either women or men. These results suggest that the impact of gender stereotypes on language learning experiences is not simple and straightforward. Rather, it is dynamic and complex depending on how these gender stereotypes are understood, processed, and perceived by individuals.

Social Cognitive Theory as a Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the social cognitive theory (SCT), which posits that human functioning is shaped by a triadic reciprocal interaction between personal, environmental, and behavioral processes (Bandura, 1986; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020) (Figure 1). More specifically, personal processes include attributions, beliefs, perceptions, and emotions (Schunk & Usher, 2019). The major concept in these processes is self-efficacy, which refers to an individual’s beliefs in their own capabilities to successfully perform a specific task or achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Behavioral processes encompass various factors, including the choice of activities, level of effort exerted, persistence in the face of challenges, achievement outcomes, and environmental regulation (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Environmental processes refer to the social and cultural factors that surround individuals including the influence of teachers, parents, or peers.

The language learning process is characterized by the complex interplay of these personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, with the processes being closely interconnected and exerting

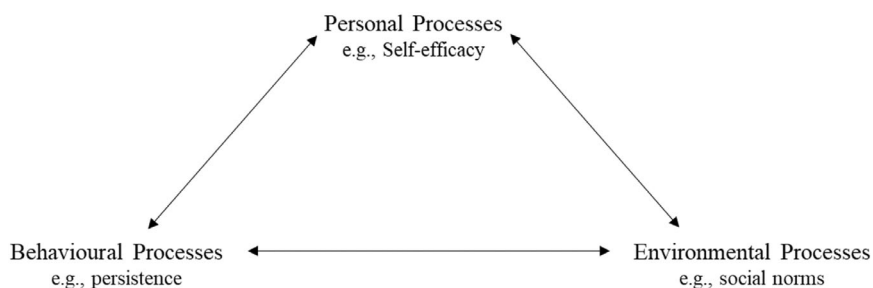


FIGURE 1. Model of reciprocal interactions.

reciprocal influence in diverse ways. For instance, students with high self-efficacy beliefs (personal) are more likely to actively participate in language learning activities, such as paying attention to instruction, exerting effort, and persisting in their learning efforts (behavioral). If a language teacher were to offer positive feedback on students' progress (environmental), this feedback can strengthen their perception of learning achievement and enhance their self-efficacy, thereby motivating them to sustain effective language learning behaviors (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Schunk & Usher, 2019).

Accordingly, gender stereotypes in FL learning can both influence and be influenced by various factors, leading to diverse learning experiences for female and male learners. Male learners may encounter prevailing stereotypes suggesting that they are not proficient language learners, which can potentially result in reduced participation and academic performance. However, some male learners may actively challenge these stereotypes by engaging in class activities and achieving higher grades. It is possible that even among those who challenge the stereotypes, some alignment with certain masculine behaviors, such as making jokes, may still be observed (see Pomerantz, 2008). This highlights the process of internalizing and negotiating gendered expectations and assumptions in language learning as learners navigate gender stereotypes in various ways. Likewise, female learners may also face different gender stereotypes that shape their experiences in language classrooms. For instance, across cultures and societies, societal norms often pressure women to show deference, obedience and modesty, which can influence their participation and engagement in classroom and social interactions (Song, 2019). While some female learners may conform to these norms by being less likely to assert themselves or actively contribute to class activities, others may prefer to challenge or resist them. The latter learners may exercise agency by actively participating in classroom discussions, expressing their opinions openly, and seeking opportunities for social and academic development.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a social cognitive theory (SCT) perspective to examine the relationships between personal, environmental, and behavioral processes that influence and are influenced by gender stereotypes in FL learning. It investigates the perceptions of language teachers and learners regarding gender stereotypes in FL learning, the role of societal norms in shaping and sustaining these stereotypes, and how female and male learners navigate gender expectations and

pressures during FL learning. More specifically, the following research questions (RQs) guided the investigation:

1. What are the specific gender stereotypes associated with female and male learners in EFL learning environments within the Turkish tertiary context?
2. How do societal norms and cultural expectations shape and sustain the development of gender stereotypes among EFL teachers and learners?
3. How do female and male learners in EFL learning environments negotiate and respond to the gendered expectations and pressures they encounter?

The present study makes at least three important contributions to the existing literature. First, it establishes a sound foundation by adopting SCT as a theoretical framework. This theoretical lens enhances the study's explanatory power, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between gender stereotypes and FL learning. Second, the study enriches its findings by qualitatively exploring the perspectives of both language teachers and learners. This dual approach offers valuable insights into the key dynamics that play a role in shaping and sustaining gender stereotypes in FL learning. Third, the study's focus on the Turkish context, which is characterized by clear-cut gender norms and expectations (see below for further discussion), adds particular significance to the research. This contextual focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how gender stereotypes in FL learning manifest and operate within the specific sociocultural framework.

CONTEXT

This study took place in Turkey where there are distinct social and cultural factors contributing to gender differences between women and men. In Turkey, traditional gender roles and expectations strongly influence the construction of femininities and masculinities (Eslen-Ziya & Koc, 2016), making it an ideal context to explore gender stereotypes in FL learning. Furthermore, these roles and expectations are further legitimized and sustained through the religious discourse within Islam, which promotes a patriarchal structure prevalent among the majority of the Muslim population (Bolak-Boratav, Fişek, & Ziya, 2014). The traditional patriarchal Turkish family structure suggests that men are the primary or sole providers for their families. They typically hold central power and authority within the household

and are often responsible for making decisions regarding significant family matters (Bolak-Boratav et al., 2014; Eslen-Ziya & Koc, 2016). Women are stereotypically seen as homemakers and caregivers and they are expected to be loyal and obedient (Bolak-Boratav et al., 2014). Given these differences, it is crucial to investigate how these prevailing gender roles and expectations are negotiated in FL learning, particularly when the FL itself is traditionally labeled as a female domain.

Participants

Convenience sampling was employed to recruit a total of 32 participants from the English preparatory programs at six different universities in Turkey. These English preparatory programs typically last for a full academic year, approximately 8–9 months, and are mandatory for undergraduate students enrolled in courses that adopt English as a medium of instruction (EMI) or mixed Turkish-English as a medium of instruction (-TEMI). These courses are widespread in Turkish universities, with approximately 110 out of 178 Higher Education institutions in Turkey offering such courses to varying degrees in some or all departments. These programs include, but not limited to fields like medicine, economics, and engineering (Dearden, Akincioglu, & Macaro, 2016; West, Güven, & Ergenekon, 2015). EMI's primary focus is on the subject content itself and enhancing students' understanding of the target subject, rather than specifically aiming to teach the language used as the medium of instruction (Dearden et al., 2016). As such, in many universities, students are required to complete an additional English preparatory course and pass a proficiency test at the end in order to commence their studies in their chosen field. The participants selected for this study were drawn from the pool of EFL learners and teachers involved in teaching EFL within these preparatory programs.

More specifically, the participants were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 15 Turkish EFL learners (8 men and 7 women), who were enrolled in an English preparatory program. At the time of data collection, they had been studying EFL for a minimum of 3 months in their respective programs. The learner participants' ages ranged from 18 to 21 years, a typical age range among students attending the English preparatory programs described above. This group was diverse in terms of their intended fields of study which included disciplines such as interior design, architecture, engineering, economics, and physics. The second group comprised 17 Turkish EFL teachers (10 women and 7 men) teaching in an English preparatory

program. The teacher participants' ages ranged from 26 to 39 years, and they brought with them a diverse range of teaching experience which contributed to the richness and depth of insights gained during the study. 15 participants had teaching experience ranging from 3 to 7 years while two participants had more extensive experience, with 9 and 15 years of teaching, respectively.

Data Collection Procedure

The study employed a qualitative research design, which included in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners as the primary method for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their suitability in exploring topics involving diverse participant groups as they not only offer flexibility but also ensure comparability (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The topics for the interview schedule were carefully developed drawing upon existing research, theoretical frameworks, and the author's own experiences as a language teacher and learner within the study's setting. The questions were designed to explore three main areas: gender stereotypes in FL learning, their sources, and their impact on FL learning. To account for the perceptions of both teachers and learners, the wording of the questions was adapted for each group while preserving the original content (see Appendix S1 and S2 for example interview questions). The finalized interview questions were pilot-tested with two teachers and two learners which guided subsequent revisions aimed at achieving clarity and conciseness. This iterative process ensured that the interview questions effectively captured the insights from both teachers and learners in a nuanced manner. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was conducted face-to-face. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the author's previous institution, and consent was sought from each participant before the study.

The author's multiple identities as both a female researcher and a Turkish individual with personal connections to the context played a crucial role in shaping the data collection process. As a Turkish native speaker, the author had an advantage in establishing a strong rapport with the participants. This enabled a more natural and effective communication which not only created a relaxed atmosphere for the participants to express their ideas freely but also built trust, ensuring the authenticity of their responses. The author's extensive immersion in the community for 25 years and familiarity with the participants' culture also provided a better understanding of their lived experiences.

This insider perspective helped the author empathize with the participants and connect with their narratives. As a crucial aspect in qualitative interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), the author's empathetic approach also led to relevant and insightful follow-up questions and this further expanded the breadth and depth of the information collected.

Furthermore, the author was aware of the potential impact of her own biases as a woman on the data collection process. This awareness helped her maintain objectivity by critically reflecting on her stance throughout the research process. Arguably, being a woman may have fostered a positive environment, enabling an open and supportive atmosphere for the participants. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that both female and male participants were eager to share their gender-related experiences in FL learning. It is plausible that female participants may have perceived a sense of comfort and understanding, assuming the author shared similar experiences. Male participants, on the other hand, might have also felt at ease knowing they would not be judged by a male peer from the same cultural background and this may have encouraged them to express themselves more freely. Since participants did not require significant guidance during the interviews, this may have helped mitigate any potential biases arising from the author's gender.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Throughout the analysis, the six fundamental phases of thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), were followed to ensure a robust and reliable analysis (see Appendix S3 for the detailed thematic analysis data chart). First, familiarity with the data was achieved by reading the transcripts line by line multiple times and taking notes on relevant points. This process laid the groundwork for a better understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. Next, the transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring semantic similarities across the interviews. The coding process focused on the three predetermined issues while also allowing for the inclusion of any additional information. This approach enabled a thorough and systematic analysis of the data. Following the initial coding, the codes were organized into broader themes and sub-themes. Through an iterative refinement process, the relationships and patterns within the codes were examined to identify overarching themes that effectively captured the essence of the data. Revisiting the data further ensured a robust analysis. The

identified themes were critically reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency (see Appendix S4 for a detailed example of the data analysis process).

Next, the relationships between themes were examined, considering their interconnections and identifying areas of overlap. Overlapping themes were merged to eliminate any redundancies. As a result, a more refined representation of the data was achieved. To validate the themes and gain a better understanding of the data, the transcripts were read once again. This step ensured that the identified themes accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences. Once the identification and naming of themes were finalized, a data analysis report was produced. This report presents the themes and sub-themes in detail, supported by illustrative quotes extracted from the transcripts. The report provides a rich and nuanced account of the findings, offering insights into the key patterns and perspectives identified in the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the SCT framework, this study revealed several significant themes within the behavioral, personal, and environmental processes. Specifically, The behavioral processes theme included perseverance and sense of responsibility. The personal processes theme involved attributions and emotions. The environmental processes theme focused on significant others' expectations. (Figure 2).

Behavioral Processes

Perseverance. Perseverance was a prominent theme, particularly in relation to the contrasting behaviors of female and male learners.

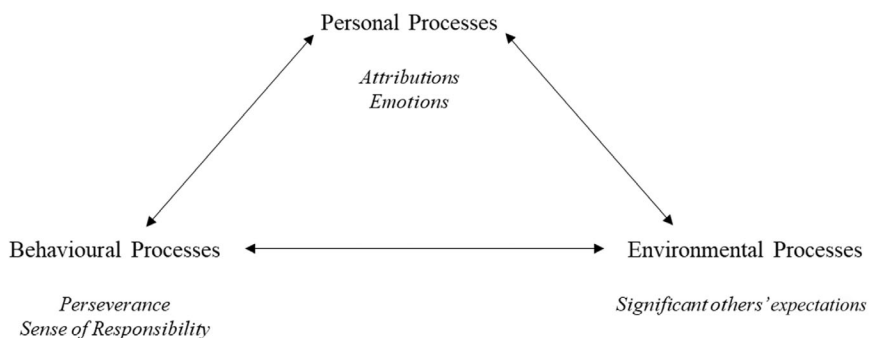


FIGURE 2. Main themes identified through data analysis using SCT.

Notably, both learner and teacher participants acknowledged that women tended to show greater perseverance and attain higher levels of FL proficiency compared to men. As supported by the following quotation, men were perceived as more inclined to avoid tasks that they may fail at or to give up easily when faced with challenges. In contrast, women were perceived as more inclined to critically assess their weaknesses and be proactive in addressing them to achieve superior outcomes in FL learning.

I think women are better at dealing with failures. At the beginning of the year, even if women are unsuccessful, they keep up the hard work. They do not lose their motivation. They believe that they can achieve. However, men, if they are unsuccessful at the beginning, don't show any progress. While women put more effort and do their best to succeed, men accept their situation easily. (Female Teacher)

Such behaviors align well with the concepts of gendered tendencies where men are motivated to “prove and protect” favorable perceptions of their abilities while women tend to doubt their abilities and consequently “try and improve” them (Butler & Hasenfratz, 2017). These gendered tendencies parallel motivational frameworks underpinned by entity (i.e., language ability is fixed) and incremental (i.e., language ability can be improved) mindsets in language learning, (see Lou & Noels, 2016). Since success and achievement in FL learning is highly dependent on learners' sustained effort, the study's findings suggesting potential gender differences in perseverance are noteworthy. Arguably, in the context of comparable initial levels of language proficiency, women with an incremental mindset may have an advantage over men due to their heightened levels of perseverance, which warrants further exploration.

These results appear to contradict the normative gender roles associated with men in Turkish society. Traditional notions of masculinity in Turkey are linked to attributes such as hard work, endurance, and determination (Bolak-Boratav et al., 2014). However, in FL learning, men were believed to demonstrate less resilience than women in the face of challenges. A possible explanation for this discrepancy lies in Turkish men's tendency to protect their self-image as strong and confident individuals within the social dynamics. Specifically, when men perceive a risk of failure in FL learning, they are more likely to avoid tasks in which they may not be as successful as they desire. By avoiding such tasks, they may aim at protecting their self-image as competent and capable individuals. As one of the teacher participants explained:

There is a competition for leadership among men. They would like to be the leader of the whole group, so they don't want to show their weaknesses. When they don't succeed enough, they say that 'I don't need to learn English'. Therefore, they believe nobody can say that they are unsuccessful. They want people to think that it is their choice not to continue learning a new language. (Female Teacher)

These findings have significant implications for building resilience in FL learning. According to SCT, achieving success too easily can create unrealistic expectations, potentially leading to discouragement when faced with failure. Conversely, when individuals succeed by overcoming challenges, they tend to develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy and acquire effective coping strategies (Bandura, 1997). It is conceivable that men who demonstrate less perseverance and resilience when faced with difficulties are likely to have lower self-efficacy in FL learning compared with more perseverant women. This reduced sense of self-efficacy could, in turn, result in poorer learning outcomes and lead to an achievement gap between genders (Kutuk, Putwain, Kaye, & Garrett, 2022a). Given the crucial role of perseverance, teachers should seek to promote it in various ways. For instance, they can foster learners' incremental beliefs by assigning challenging yet manageable tasks and emphasizing progress and effort over fixed attributes or intelligence during task completion. These approaches support continuous improvement and encourage perseverance (Lou & Noels, 2016).

Sense of responsibility. Consistent with previous research (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Lu & Luk, 2014), both learner and teacher participants highlighted a significant difference in the sense of responsibility between women and men during the FL learning process. Women were described as having a greater sense of organization and a more systematic approach to their language learning compared to men. They were reported to be more engaged in additional work, such as completing homework in a timely manner, attending classes regularly, and actively taking notes. In contrast, men were perceived to demonstrate less eagerness and responsibility in performing these additional tasks, particularly outside the classroom. This difference in engagement and responsibility was believed to contribute to an achievement gap in final exam scores between women and men.

Furthermore, during the interviews with both groups, women were often described as being more focused on the learning process itself while men were portrayed as being more outcome-oriented. Notably, men were observed to pursue success without investing substantial time and effort and showing lower levels of patience compared to

women in FL learning. These findings indicate that women are more likely to embrace the learning process itself and adopt appropriate strategies that result in higher levels of motivation and diligence. The following quotation from a male teacher participant's interview further supports these observations:

Women always work more diligently compared to men. They are more motivated and work using appropriate strategies. They are more learning oriented. For example, I have recently had a group of female students. They were all motivated and they were always well-prepared for the lessons. In general, those who are less motivated and skip the classes are men. It is very rare among women. This is evidenced by their exam scores. When I look at the statistics, women are always more successful than men. (Male Teacher)

Both groups of participants highlighted societal factors as the underlying reasons for behavioral differences in FL learning. For instance, gender inequality in society was identified as a significant contributor to the differential treatment of women and men. Such treatment often results in men being perceived as superior to women. Hence, women may feel compelled to work diligently to prove their knowledge and abilities whereas men may not face the same level of pressure, allowing them more flexibility to prioritize other commitments or interests over academic tasks. The quoted learner participant below further emphasized that traditional upbringing reinforces gender stereotypes due to the distinct societal norms and cultural expectations associated with women and men. These norms and expectations may impact women's motivation to excel academically and engage more responsibly in FL learning. This is in line with SCT (Bandura, 1986) which emphasizes the role of observational learning and modeling in behavior acquisition:

I think women care everything more than men. This is the way we are brought up in the society. As we are in a patriarchal society, men are always flattered. For example, when we are a child, it is said that 'It is normal for boys to be naughty' or 'You're a girl. You need to be tidy' etc. (Female Learner)

One possible implication of these findings is that teachers should take extra care not to perceive women, or any gender, as the standard for hard work in FL learning. Such perception might inadvertently create undue pressure on women to consistently perform well and maintain that reputation. This could, in turn, lead to increased stress, burnout, or anxiety as they strive to meet unrealistic expectations. This concern aligns with prior literature indicating that women tend to

experience more anxiety compared to men (Park & French, 2013). Conversely, if the perception that men are not as hardworking in FL learning prevails, it could potentially lead to men's efforts being downplayed or dismissed. This unfair treatment can discourage men from actively engaging in the language learning process or seeking help when needed.

Personal Processes

Attributions. The interview analysis revealed that both learner and teacher participants attributed greater success to women compared to men. This finding parallels previous research that has highlighted women tend to outperform men in language arts and foreign languages (Główka, 2014; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). When asked to elaborate on the underlying reasons for their attributions regarding the perceived success of women, participants from both groups emphasized factors such as commitment, dedication, and discipline. These attributions resonate with SCT (Bandura, 1986), which posits that personal attributes, such as interest and dedication, play a significant role in shaping individuals' achievements. Moreover, most participants highlighted the importance of motivation and self-efficacy in driving success, indicating that women's higher interest in FL learning may have contributed to their perceived achievements. For instance, one male learner stated:

I don't think there is a difference between men and women in terms of talent. It is something to do with your interests. You need to have some kind of interest in something so that you might have the opportunity to realise whether you are talented or not... I think women and men are not different from each other in terms of talent. They just don't know whether they are talented at anything until they try it. As for FL learning, women are more interested in this area, and they can easily discover their talent. (Male Learner)

Interestingly, both groups of participants rejected the notion that women are inherently more talented than their male counterparts, which contradicts earlier studies that provided evidence for such associations in perceptions (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Schmenk, 2004). Instead, they suggested that talent in FL learning is not confined to any specific gender; rather, it is an individual difference. They further expressed a shared belief that proficiency in EFL is vital for individuals of all genders. This belief is particularly important in today's global context, where English has become a widely used international language that transcends gender boundaries. These attributions play a critical role in FL learning, especially for men. When learners believe

that positive learning outcomes achieved by women, such as achieving a high grade on a test, are attributable to controllable factors (e.g., high effort in studying) rather than uncontrollable factors like aptitude or innate talent, they may be more motivated to improve their own outcomes, maintain self-efficacy, and attain success (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Similarly, the notion that FL learning is exclusively associated with women was also rejected by both groups of participants, which also contrasts with findings from previous studies (Chaffee et al., 2020; Li & Mclellan, 2021). However, this rejection was more pronounced by specific male participants from both the teacher and learner groups. This outright rejection and a rather contradictory result indicate male learners' tendency to conform to societal expectations and avoid activities that might be perceived as inappropriate for their gender. This was further evidenced by their statements such as "If language learning were a female domain, I would not be doing it." This insight demonstrates the potential for men to disengage from FL learning when they perceive it as a female domain, which needs to be addressed. SCT (1997) emphasizes the influential role that role models play in shaping individuals' behaviors and beliefs. In the context of FL learning, this principle may offer teachers a strategic tool to counteract such stereotypical perceptions. For instance, by incorporating diverse role models into language learning materials and curricula, teachers can challenge any existing stereotypes and biases among learners. They can highlight the achievements of successful male language learners and professionals which can encourage male learners to actively participate in the language learning process. This approach not only addresses gender stereotypes but also fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging, feelings that male learners had previously reported lacking in earlier work.

Emotions. According to the participants, women and men express their feelings and emotions differently during the FL learning process. Both teacher and learner participants believed that women are more open when expressing their emotions such as anxiety while men tend to prefer experiencing such emotions more privately. These results corroborate prior research indicating that men are generally less likely to acknowledge their experiences of anxiety compared to women (Pappamihiel, 2002; Park & French, 2013; Williams, Burden, & Lavers, 2002). They are also in line with societal expectations of women and men in Turkey. For instance, in this context, men are expected to be strong and fearless. Those who conform to these expectations may, therefore, find it difficult to express emotions of feelings such as anxiety or a loss of confidence as such expressions may be perceived as a

sign of weakness or vulnerability. In contrast, women may find more acceptance in society when showing their weakness or vulnerability. Therefore, as highlighted in the provided quotation below, men often navigate anxiety through a range of strategies, such as resorting to humor or maintaining silence within the classroom. These approaches serve as protective mechanisms to uphold their self-image, but simultaneously, they contribute to the noted gender differences in the expression of emotions:

Men are like indestructible castles in our society. People think that they are strong, so we want to conform to their expectations... Actually, we are anxious as well, but we don't prefer sharing it with people. My friends always say that I am very relaxed, but in fact, I feel anxious from time to time as well. However, I try to hide it somehow. When I am anxious, for example, I make a joke or prefer not to attend the class actively. (Male Learner)

This tendency may hinder men's FL learning process in two important ways. First, men's attempt to protect their self-image may inadvertently lead to receiving less essential emotional support from teachers. Throughout the interviews, several learner participants emphasized the crucial role of emotional support from their teachers in managing anxiety. This belief was also echoed by the teacher participants, who mentioned adopting different approaches and strategies to support anxious learners. For instance, the quoted teacher participant below explained that when he identified any anxious students, he supported them by trying to boost their self-confidence.

I specifically guide these students with easy questions and say, 'Look, you did it! Great job!' to help boost their self-confidence. When I assign pair work or similar activities, I go to them, check their work, and if they have done it, I say, 'Well done! Look, you did it!' providing positive feedback and trying to encourage them to succeed. (Male Teacher)

Given that there is a strong correlation with the self-efficacy and anxiety (Bandura, 1986), this would help reduce learners' anxiety, ultimately contributing to positive learning outcomes. However, when men do not openly express their feelings, it becomes more challenging for teachers to identify anxiety in these learners and offer appropriate support to facilitate their FL progress. Second, due to their reluctance to expose their weaknesses or vulnerabilities and avoid being perceived as "less knowledgeable" in the presence of their teachers and peers, men may be less inclined to seek pedagogical support (e.g., seeking clarification). This might limit their potential to

fully benefit from the available learning opportunities, possibly leading to greater discrepancies in knowledge between men and women.

Environmental Processes

Significant others' expectations. Both groups of participants highlighted the potential influence of socialization agents, including parents, peers, and teachers, on learners' FL learning experiences. Some participants talked about their early language learning experiences, where they noticed teachers holding gender stereotypes and favoring female students. These experiences seemed to reinforce learners' gender stereotypical beliefs and behaviors. A few male participants mentioned that they were cautious about the activities they engaged in during language classes. For instance, they explained that since having good pronunciation was mostly associated with successful female learners by their peers, they deliberately avoided certain English language sounds due to concerns over being perceived as feminine. However, such experiences were mostly associated with their early years of language learning and were not directly attributed to their tertiary-level EFL learning experiences.

Interestingly, tertiary-level EFL teachers, despite occasionally holding gender-stereotypical beliefs, did not seem to demonstrate these beliefs in their classes. This suggests their commitment to inclusive and fair teaching practices, which was further supported by the learner participants. One plausible explanation for the variance between early experiences and tertiary-level language learning experiences could be attributed to the fact that tertiary-level language teachers often work with a diverse range of students from various backgrounds. Exposure to different perspectives may have challenged their own stereotypes, contributing to a more inclusive mindset and a conscious effort to treat all students equally, regardless of their gender.

Furthermore, interviews with both groups of participants revealed the socialization agents' differential expectations of women and men regarding career paths in Turkey. The participants indicated that women are often expected to pursue jobs that they can easily manage alongside their roles as spouses or mothers whereas men are expected to seek careers in the STEM fields as they are commonly perceived as fulfilling the expectations of being primary earners. For instance, being a teacher is considered as an ideal occupation for women due to its accommodating work conditions. As such, many women opt for teaching-related majors such as English Language Teaching, with the expectation of becoming teachers or pursuing other jobs that align well with their social roles. This finding corroborates the ideas of Haas (2007), who argued that language teaching is often perceived as a

“woman’s job”. The quoted male teacher further supports significant others’ prevailing gendered expectations and their potential impact on language learners’ experiences:

Families often steer girls towards traditionally feminine professions like nursing or teaching from a young age. It’s uncommon to hear a mother say, ‘My daughter will be an engineer, hopefully’. This is a result of socialisation. I had to resist this to some extent. While my sister leaned more towards the sciences, I chose languages. I’ve come across many cases where people questioned my choice and asked, ‘Why didn’t you pursue the science track?’ I recall my mother’s surprise when she discovered I had become an English language teacher instead of something she might have expected. Even my elementary school teacher commented, ‘Oh, I expected you to achieve something better’ upon learning about my career choice. (Male Teacher)

Previous research within the STEM fields has consistently highlighted the influence of such gendered expectations and stereotypes held by significant others on students’ attitudes toward various subjects (Gunder-son, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012). The current study contributes to this established line of inquiry by demonstrating the potential expansion of this phenomenon into the FL learning processes. The findings suggest that learners who are influenced by their significant others may feel compelled to make choices in alignment with their expectations or may have to resist them to pursue their own individual aspirations. In both cases, there are various challenges that female and male learners must navigate, which also warrants further exploration.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study is not without limitations. First, the study focused primarily on gender stereotypes without systematically investigating how these stereotypes intersect with learners’ other social identities such as race, ethnicity, or sexuality. Current perspectives on gender highlight the importance of considering the intersections of these identities as they mutually influence each other (Ryle, 2011). Within language learning contexts, language learners’ experiences with gender stereotypes may vary depending on their other social identities. For instance, a bisexual woman may face challenges not only related to her gender but also due to stereotypes related to her sexuality (see Cao, 2021). The challenges she faces in one context (e.g., Turkey) may differ from those in another context (e.g., the UK). Therefore, understanding these complex intersections is crucial for gaining further insights into gender stereotypes and language learning experiences.

Second, the research exclusively focused on compulsory EFL learning at the tertiary level. While this specific selection of participants allows for an in-depth understanding of gender stereotypes within this specific context, it may limit the applicability of these findings to other settings, such as those involving voluntary language learning. The mode of language learning may influence learners' motivations, attitudes, and experiences, thus shaping their perceptions of gender stereotypes and strategies for navigating these stereotypes within the learning environment. Moreover, teachers' perceptions and experiences are likely to be influenced by the diverse motivations, attitudes, and learning backgrounds of their students, adding further complexity to the dynamics of gender stereotypes in this context. It is, therefore, worth exploring learner and teacher perceptions of gender stereotypes in FL learning in diverse language learning settings for a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in the language learning process.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into gender stereotypes in language learning, as perceived by EFL learners and teachers. It contributes to an enhanced understanding of how societal norms and cultural expectations may potentially influence individuals' language learning experiences depending on their gender. An important implication of these findings is the need for teachers to be attentive to how students of different genders navigate gender norms and ensure that these dynamics do not put any student at a disadvantage. Equally crucial is the responsibility of teachers to avoid legitimizing or sustaining these norms in their own teaching practices. These approaches help promote a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that enables all learners to engage in the language learning process without the undue influence of gender stereotypes on this process.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

- Appendix S1.** Example Interview Questions for Learner Participants.
- Appendix S2.** Example Interview Questions for Teacher Participants.
- Appendix S3.** Table 1: Thematic Analysis Data Chart.
- Appendix S4.** Table 2: Example Data Analysis Process for the Personal Processes Theme: Emotions.