ID https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3898-9872

PASHAYEV Elnur

postgraduate student of the School of Pedagogy,
Khazar University, Republic of Azerbaijan
e-mail: elnur.pashayev@khazar.org

ID https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1891-9121

SALIMOVA Fidan

Ph.D in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of European Languages,
Azerbaijan University of Languages, Republic of Azerbaijan
e-mail: fidan_adu@mail.ru

УДК 373.3/.5.014.511.3:811.111(479.24)(045)

NAVIGATING GENDER AND FAITH-BASED NORMS IN HOLISTIC ENGLISH INSTRUCTION: AZERBAIJANI TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

This study explores how English language teachers in Azerbaijani private schools interpret and implement holistic pedagogy amid gender and religious sensitivities. The article employed a convergent mixed-methods approach involving 35 teachers through surveys, interviews, as well as 40 classroom observations across seven urban schools. Quantitative data showed that 71% adjusted lesson content due to gender norms, while 60% avoided religious topics. Thematic analysis revealed three key issues: superficial gender responsiveness, symbolic treatment of religion, and

institutional constraints shaped by cultural conservatism and policy ambiguity. It is maintained that although holistic education is formally supported, classroom practice tends to emphasize motivation and harmony over critical thinking, ethical reasoning, or identity formation. Teachers often avoided sensitive subjects due to fear of backlash, though some expressed interest in addressing them with clearer guidance and support. The study concludes with ten actionable recommendations to better align holistic educa-?ional ideals with inclusive teaching practices in culturally conservative and post-Soviet contexts.

Keywords: *holistic education; English language teaching; Gender norms; Religious sensitivity; Inclusive pedagogy; Azerbaijan.*

Introduction. Holistic education is widely recognized as a student-centered approach that nurtures the development of the versatile individual – intellectually, emotionally, socially, morally, and spiritually. Rather than focusing solely on academic achievement or linguistic competence, this philosophy emphasizes personal growth and integration of live experiences into the learning process (Miller, 2007; Palmer, 1998). In the context of English language teaching (ELT), holistic pedagogy promotes methods that cultivate critical thinking, cultural awareness, creativity, and identity explo-?ation. Through this lens, language learning transforms from a purely technical endeavour into a journey of self-discovery and meaningful social engagement (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Krishnamurti, 2000).

It appears that in practice, holistic ELT encourages learners to explore global perspectives and grapple with complex social themes by analysing literature, engaging in dialogue, and reflecting on their personal experiences. However, this kind of engagement can be constrained by dominant social and institutional norms – particularly in educational environments shaped by specific religious beliefs and gender expectations (Sunderland, 2000; Norton, 2013). Such societal frameworks can heavily influence teaching choices, classroom dynamics, and curriculum design.

Gender is thought to be a particularly salient issue in ELT, especially in communities where traditional gender roles are upheld by cultural or religious doctrines. These roles often dictate which topics are permissible for classroom discussion, limiting opportunities to address gender equality, feminism, or LGBTQ+ identities – topics integral to inclusive and critical pedagogy (Pavlenko et al., 2001; Litosseliti, 2006). As a result, educators frequently find themselves navigating a delicate balance between upholding inclusive educational values and adhering to institutional expectations.

Religion adds another layer of complexity. In faith-based schools, spiritual principles often shape not only moral education but also the broader educational philosophy (Jackson, 2004; Gearon, 2013). English instructors working in such environments may be discouraged from introducing content that runs counter to religious teachings, particularly when it challenges traditional gender norms or promotes secular worldviews. At the same time, English as a subject often exposes students to diverse cultural narratives and modern ideas that may conflict with their school's religious ethos (Ali, 2009; Watson, 2004).

The aforementioned tensions present both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, faith-based settings can set a rich ground for exploring personal values and individual identity. On the other hand, they may restrict open inquiry and limit the full expression of holistic pedagogy. Teachers are frequently compelled to modify their approaches – reshaping lessons or reframing sensitive topics – to remain both effective and culturally respectful (Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2015).

The pedagogical experience exposes that when gender and religion intersect, the challenges become even more pronounced. In multiple contexts, religious beliefs are deeply intertwined with gender expectations, making open conversations about gender roles potentially controversial (Crenshaw, 1991; Niyozov & Memon, 2011). To implement holistic pedagogy meaningfully in such settings, educators are supposed to adopt context-sensitive strategies that honour students' cultural and religious identities while still fostering critical and reflective thinking.

Ultimately, the success of holistic English teaching is closely tied to the cultural and institutional context in which it is practiced. Teachers working in religious or socially conservative schools are often required to strike a difficult balance between promoting inclusive, learner-centered pedagogy and respecting the prevailing values of their communities (Kubota & Lin, 2009). That given, this study investigates how English teachers respond to these tensions, focusing on the strategies they utilize to navigate gender- and faith-based norms while striving to uphold the principles of holistic education.

Despite an increasing interest in holistic education in ELT, its implementation in faith-based schools – especially Islamic secondary schools – has received limited scholarly attention. The influence of gender roles and religious values on English

teaching remains not sufficiently explored, particularly in contexts where cultural or institutional frameworks restrict open dialogue. Existing research has largely emphasized theoretical models, policy analysis, or curriculum design, leaving a significant gap in understanding how educators themselves manage these sensitive issues in practice. This study is aimed at addressing that gap by exploring how teachers in conservative religious settings approach complex topics – such as gender dynamics and secular themes – while remaining committed to delivering holistic, student-centered learning experiences.

Methodology.

Research Design. This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a holistic understanding of how English teachers in Azerbaijan navigate gender and faith-based norms within holistic education. Such a design allowed for both breadth and depth – with the quantitative component capturing broad trends and frequencies, and the qualitative component offering rich, contextualized insights into pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices.

The integration of methods provided an opportunity for triangulation, enhancing the validity of findings by comparing teacher-reported perceptions (via surveys), observed both behaviours (in classrooms) and reflective narratives (from interviews).

Participants and Context. This study involved 35 English language teachers from seven private, urban secondary schools across Azerbaijan. These schools were purposively selected based on their formal commitment to holistic education principles and their culturally diverse student populations. Teachers varied in terms of gender identity, teaching experience, and religious background, supporting a diverse range of perspectives. All participating schools were identified as secular but functioned within cultural environments shaped by traditional gender norms and Islamic heritage. This made them ideal contexts for exploring the tensions between holistic pedagogical ideals and local sociocultural constraints.

Data Collection Methods. Data were collected through three main instruments.

1. Semi-Structured Interviews: each teacher participated in a 45–60-minute interview focused on lesson planning, topic selection, and strategies for managing gender and religious themes. These interviews allowed for deep exploration of personal beliefs and institutional pressures.

2. Classroom Observations: a total of 40 English lessons (A2–B2 CEFR levels) were observed across the schools. Observations examined teacher-student interaction patterns, inclusion of sensitive topics, and responses to gendered or faith-based dynamics.

3. Structured Questionnaire: all 35 teachers completed a 20-item Likert-scale survey assessing attitudes toward gender inclusivity, pedagogical freedom, institutional support, and religious accommodation. The survey quantified patterns that were later contextualized through qualitative findings.

Data Integration and Analysis. Qualitative Data Analysis: Interview transcripts and field notes were coded thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) *six-phase framework*: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up. This process identified three dominant interrelated themes:

1. Superficial gender responsiveness.

2. Symbolic incorporation of religious content.

3. Systemic constraints on holistic pedagogy.

Quantitative Data Analysis: descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were generated to identify trends in teacher attitudes and behaviours. For example, 71% reported adapting content based on gender, while 60% felt restricted in addressing religious content.

Mixed-Methods Integration: the obtained results were interpreted in an integrative manner. Quantitative data identified the scale and frequency of key issues (e.g., lack of training, policy ambiguity), while quali-?ative data explained the underlying causes, institutional logic, and emotional labour involved in navigating those issues. The convergence of findings across methods ensured the credibility and depth of the analysis (see Tables 1, 2).

Results

This section presents the key findings of the study and addresses the two guiding research questions:

1. RQ1: How do English teachers in Azerbaijani private schools navigate gender and faith-based norms in implementing holistic education?

2. RQ2: What institutional, cultural, or pedagogical constraints shape their ability to deliver holistic, inclusive English language instruction?

Table 1

Pedagogical Focus	Number of Teachers (n=35)	%
Considers gender only	25	71%
Considers both gender and religion	10	29%
Considers neither	0	0%
Class Gender Composition	Predominant Lesson Themes	Frequency of occurrence
Female-majority	Women's roles, family life, emotional well-being	High
Balanced	Technology, education, career aspirations	Moderate
Male-majority	Sports, leadership, global politics	Low

Table 2

Barrier Category	Description
Policy ambiguity	Lack of clarity on what holistic pedagogy permits in conservative contexts.
Inadequate teacher training	Absence of formal preparation on inclusive, identity-aware practices.
Curricular limitations	Textbooks do not include content on gender or religious perspectives.
Cultural sensitivity fears	Teachers avoid controversial topics due to risk of backlash
Lack of peer collaboration	No structured mechanisms for sharing or co-developing holistic practices.

The quantitative data from the teacher questionnaire allowed mapping common constraints, while the qualitative interviews and observations provided rich insight into how teachers adapt to or resist these pressures. Key findings are summarized below and are directly aligned with the thematic structure explored in the discussion.

The results of the Quantitative Summary provided the following results:

71% of teachers reported that gender norms influence their classroom content decisions.

60% felt restricted in addressing religious themes.

49% had received no formal training on inclusive or value-based pedagogy.

80% admitted modifying topics to avoid potential cultural or religious conflict.

These numbers closely correspond to the themes identified through qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Themes:

Based on interviews with 35 teachers and observation of 40 lessons (CEFR A2–B2), three interrelated themes emerged:

1. Superficial gender responsiveness based on classroom demographics.

2. Limited, symbolic incorporation of religious identity.

3. Systemic barriers rooted in cultural norms and institutional ambiguity.

These themes are discussed in detail in the next section and evaluated against the theoretical framework established in the literature review.

Cultural and Institutional Context: Navigating Ideological Inertia and Local Pluralities

One of the most persistent challenges to implementing holistic education in Azerbaijan stems from its complex cultural and institutional legacy. While Azerbaijan is a post-Soviet, Muslim-majority nation, its schools operate under a secular framework deeply influenced by Soviet educational traditions – emphasizing standardization, depoliticization, and caution in addressing moral or spiritual content.

The teachers in this study frequently described their professional environments as "conservative", "uncertain", or "risk-averse". Many expressed support for holistic ideas but reported avoiding sensitive topics due to perceived institutional constraints or fear of backlash from parents or administrators. As one teacher noted, "We're told to be innovative, but also not to cross any lines – we don't always know where those lines are". This reflects a broader ideological inertia, where innovation is encouraged rhetorically but often discouraged in practice. While school leaders may support holistic discourse on paper, the absence of clear guidelines fosters pedagogical self-censorship. Teachers are left to rely on personal judgment, which often defaults to caution over inclusion.

Concurrently, it is expedient to recognize the plurality within the cultural context itself. While numerous communities adhere to traditional norms, there are also progressive educators, students, and families advocating for more inclusive practices. For instance, some younger teachers described their personal willingness to address social justice topics or introduce ethically grounded themes – if only they had administrative support.

Furthermore, religious identity is not monolithic in Azerbaijan. While Islamic traditions are dominant, there are also secular, agnostic, and Christian communities whose values affect classroom dynamics in nuanced ways. This diversity adds

complexity to how moral education and religious sensitivity are negotiated in schools. Teachers are expected not only to navigate ideological residues from the Soviet era but also contend with varied expectations from families and local communities.

Therefore, any discussion of cultural and institutional barriers must consider these internal variances. Teachers are not uniformly conservative nor is the system uniformly rigid – rather, they are embedded in a dynamic and evolving cultural landscape, where inclusivity is both desired and contested. For holistic education to thrive in such a context, educators need culturally grounded professional autonomy: the freedom to respond sensitively to student needs while honouring local values. This requires not only policy clarity but also space for ethical dialogue, pedagogical experimentation, and institutional trust.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has explored how English language teachers in Azerbaijani private schools interpret and implement holistic pedagogy, particularly in relation to gender and faith-based norms. Drawing from qualitative data – including interviews with 35 teachers and 40 classroom observations – it has revealed that while holistic education is widely referenced in institutional discourse, its practical application remains constrained and fragmented.

The teachers often interpreted holistic education as promoting motivation, classroom harmony, and emotional support, but rarely extended this vision to include identity development, ethical reasoning, or spiritual engagement. Gender considerations were limited to pragmatic adjustments based on class composition, often reinforcing stereotypes. Faith-based themes, when present, were symbolic and confined to culturally safe events like Ramadan or Novruz. Structural limitations – including ideological residues, policy ambiguity, and the lack of training – continue to inhibit the full realization of holistic ideals.

Policy Recommendations.
For Policymakers:

1. Establish a National Definition of Holistic Education: provide a clear, culturally grounded definition that encompasses emotional, ethical, spiritual, and identity-based dimensions of learning.

2. Ensure Protection for Inclusive Practices: introduce policies that safeguard teachers who responsibly engage with sensitive topics, shielding them from institutional or community backlash.

3. Revise ELT Curricula for Relevance and Inclusion: mandate curriculum reforms that incorporate locally relevant content addressing gender, faith, and identity with cultural sensitivity.

For School Leaders and Administrators:

1. Cultivate a Reflective School Culture: Create spaces where educators can openly discuss pedagogical challenges, reflect on identity-sensitive issues, and share inclusive teaching practices.

2. Institutionalize Peer Collaboration: Develop formal systems such as co-teaching models, peer observation frameworks, and teacher-led workshops to promote continuous professional learning and innovation.

For Teacher Educators and Professional Development Providers:

1. Deliver Practical, Context-Based Training: Design training programs rooted in real classroom scenarios, focusing on inclusive, culturally responsive, and values-driven pedagogy.

2. Enhance Teachers' Ethical Engagement Skills: Equip teachers to navigate sensitive discussions on gender diversity, interfaith understanding, and moral reasoning within the local cultural context.

Implications for Future Research and Practice.

The findings of this study have relevance beyond Azerbaijan. They highlight how even schools that claim to support holistic values may fall short without structural alignment, cultural sensitivity, and pedagogical clarity. Taking into account the mentioned above, future research may:

Include student perspectives to assess how inclusion or exclusion is experienced in holistic classrooms.

Explore how similar constraints play out in other conservative, post-Soviet, or Muslim-majority societies.

Evaluate the long-term impact of inclusive pedagogy training on teacher confidence and classroom innovation.

With intentional investment, Azerbaijan has the potential to develop a model of holistic English education that is not only locally grounded but globally informed – one that empowers students to thrive linguistically, ethically, and personally.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed established ethical protocols to ensure participant safety, voluntary participation, and data integrity. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant academic institution prior to data collection. All participants were provided with a plain language statement explaining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and how their data would be used.

Informed consent was acquired in writing from each participant prior to conducting

interviews or observations. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all individuals retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and observation records. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants in all written documentation, and schools were referred to in general terms without naming specific institutions.

Audio recordings of interviews were stored securely in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the primary researcher. Observation notes and consent forms were similarly protected.

Finally, peer debriefing and member checking were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. A subset of participants was invited to review their interview transcripts and offer corrections or clarifications. These processes helped ensure that interpretations accurately reflected participants' intended meanings.

At a time when global educational systems are being called upon to prioritize identity, equity, and inclusion, the Azerbaijani case illustrates both the challenges and the transformative potential of localized, reflective pedagogical reform.

Table 3

Teacher Practices on Gender and Religion

Pedagogical Focus	Number of Teachers (n=35)	%
Considers gender only	25	71%
Considers both gender and religion	10	29%
Considers neither	0	0%

This table illustrates the self-reported focus areas of 35 English teachers. Values are shown as frequency and percentage.

Table 4

Lesson Themes by Class Gender Composition

Class Gender Composition	Predominant Lesson Themes	Frequency of Occurrence
Female-majority	Women's roles, family life, emotional well-being	High
Balanced	Technology, education, career aspirations	Moderate
Male-majority	Sports, leadership, global politics	Low

Based on 40 observed lessons, this table exposes correlations between class gender makeup and topic selection.

Actionable Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following targeted actions are recommended to bridge the gap between holistic ideals and classroom realities:

Policy Recommendations

1. Define Holistic Education in Policy Frameworks: establish a national definition that explicitly includes emotional, ethical, spiritual, and identity-based development within holistic ELT practice.

2. Develop Safe Practice Guidelines: create clear, state-approved guidance for navigating sensitive themes – gender, faith, identity – ensuring teachers know what is permitted and how to proceed.

3. Implement Teacher Protection Measures: introduce legal and institutional protections for teachers who responsibly engage with inclusive or controversial topics, safeguarding against backlash.

4. Mandate Curriculum Reform: require ELT materials to reflect Azerbaijan's gender, cultural, and religious diversity while aligning with inclusive education goals.

Recommendations for School Leaders

5. Create a Culture of Reflective Practice: encourage school-wide initiatives – monthly discussion forums, peer feedback sessions, and identity-focused lesson planning workshops.

6. Institutionalize Collaboration Structures: establish formal professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers can co-design lessons, share classroom dilemmas, and develop context-sensitive strategies.

7. Empower Innovation Through Leadership: train middle and senior leaders to support and champion holistic education at the classroom level.

For Teacher Educators and Professional Development Providers

8. Integrate Inclusive Pedagogy in Teacher Training: embed modules on gender inclusion, religious literacy, intercultural sensitivity, and critical pedagogy into both pre-service and in-service programs.

9. Use Realistic, Practice-Based Training Methods: go beyond theory – provide case studies, simulation activities, peer coaching, and role-plays that reflect Azerbaijan's classroom realities.

10. Facilitate Resource Sharing and Mentorship: develop open-access platforms for resource sharing, and pair novice teachers with experienced mentors trained in holistic and inclusive methods.

Final Reflection

These recommendations translate research into practical strategies for schools, training institutions, and ministries. Implemented together, they can create an environment where holistic education is not only advocated, but fully realized – supporting teachers to empower students as linguistically proficient, ethically grounded, and culturally aware individuals.

References

Ali, 2009 – Ali, S. (2009). Teaching English in culturally sensitive contexts. *Journal of Language and Education*, 23(4): 45–60.

Borg, 2006 – Borg, S. (2006). Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice. Bloomsbury Publishing. 314 p.

Crenshaw, 1991 – Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6): 1241–1299.

Farrell, 2013 – Farrell, T.S.C. (2013). Reflective practice in ESL teacher development groups: From practices to principles. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 162 p.

Gearon, 2013 – Gearon, L. (2013). MasterClass in religious education: Transforming teaching and learning. Bloomsbury Publishing. 216 p.

Jackson, 2004 – Jackson, R. (2004). Rethinking religious education and plurality: Issues in diversity and pedagogy. Published Routledge. 232 p.

Krishnamurti, 2000 – Krishnamurti, J. (2000). Education and the significance of life. HarperOne. 128 p.

Kubota & Lin, 2009 – Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (2009). Race, culture, and identities in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice. Published Routledge. 336 p.

Litosseliti, 2006 – Litosseliti, L. (2006). Gender and language: Theory and practice. Published Routledge. 200 p.

Miller, 2007 – Miller, R. (2007). What is holistic education? *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 20(3): 3–6.

Niyozov & Memon, 2011 – Niyozov, S., & Memon, N. (2011). Islamic education and the challenge of democratic citizenship: A critical perspective. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9(1): 41–57.

Norton, 2013 – Norton, B. (2013). Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation. 2nd Edition. Multilingual Matters. 48 p.

Palmer, 1998 – Palmer, P.J. (1998). The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life. Jossey-Bass Inc Pub. 248 p.

Pavlenko et al., 2001 – Pavlenko, A., Blackledge, A., Piller, I., & Teutsch-Dwyer, M. (2001). Multi-?ingualism, second language learning, and gender. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 356 p.

Richards & Rodgers, 2014 – Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T.S. (2014). Approaches and methods in language teaching (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press. 410 p.

Sunderland, 2000 – Sunderland, J. (2000). Issues of language and gender in second and foreign language education. *Language Teaching*, 33(4): 203–223.

Watson, 2004 – Watson, B. (2004). Faith and learning: Teaching religious education in schools. Published Routledge. 256 p.

ПАШАЄВ Ельнур
аспірант Школи педагогіки,
Хазарський університет, Азербайджанська Республіка
САЛІМОВА Фідан
кандидатка філологічних наук, доцентка катедри європейських мов,
Азербайджанський університет мов, Азербайджанська Республіка

УРАХУВАННЯ ҐЕНДЕРНИХ І КОНФЕСІЙНИХ НОРМ У ХОЛІСТИЧНОМУ ВИКЛАДАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ: ПОГЛЯДИ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСЬКИХ УЧИТЕЛІВ

Анотація. У запропонованій статті розглядається як вчителі англійської мови в азербайджанських приватних школах інтерпретують і впроваджують цілісну педагогіку з урахуванням гендерних та релігійних особливостей.

Дослідження передбачало використання конвергентного підходу зі змішаними методами, у якому взяли участь 35 вчителів шляхом проведення опитувань, інтерв'ю та 40 аудиторних спостережень у семи міських школах.

Кількісні дані засвідчили, що 71% учасників скоригували зміст уроку відповідно до гендерних норм, тоді як 60% уникали релігійних тем. Тематичний аналіз виявив три ключові проблеми: поверхове сприйняття ґендерної проблематики, символічне ставлення до релігії та інституційні обмеження, зумовлені культурним консерватизмом та невизначеністю політики.

У результаті дослідження було виявлено, що хоча формально підтримується цілісність освіти, на заняттях, як правило, робиться наголос на мотивації і гармонії, а не на розвитку критичного мислення, етичних міркувань або формуванні ідентичності.

Вчителі часто уникали обговорення делікатних тем через боязкість негативної реакції, хоча деякі висловлювали зацікавленість у тому, щоб звернутися до них з більш чітким керівництвом і підтримкою.

Дослідження завершується практичними рекомендаціями, які допоможуть краще узгодити ідеали холістичної освіти з практикою інклюзивного навчання у культурно-консервативних та пострадянських умовах.

Ключові слова: холістичне утворення; викладання англійської мови; гендерні норми; релігійна сензитивність; інклюзивна педагогіка; Азербайджан.