


Exploring Gender in the African Classroom

English Connects Action Research

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Introduction

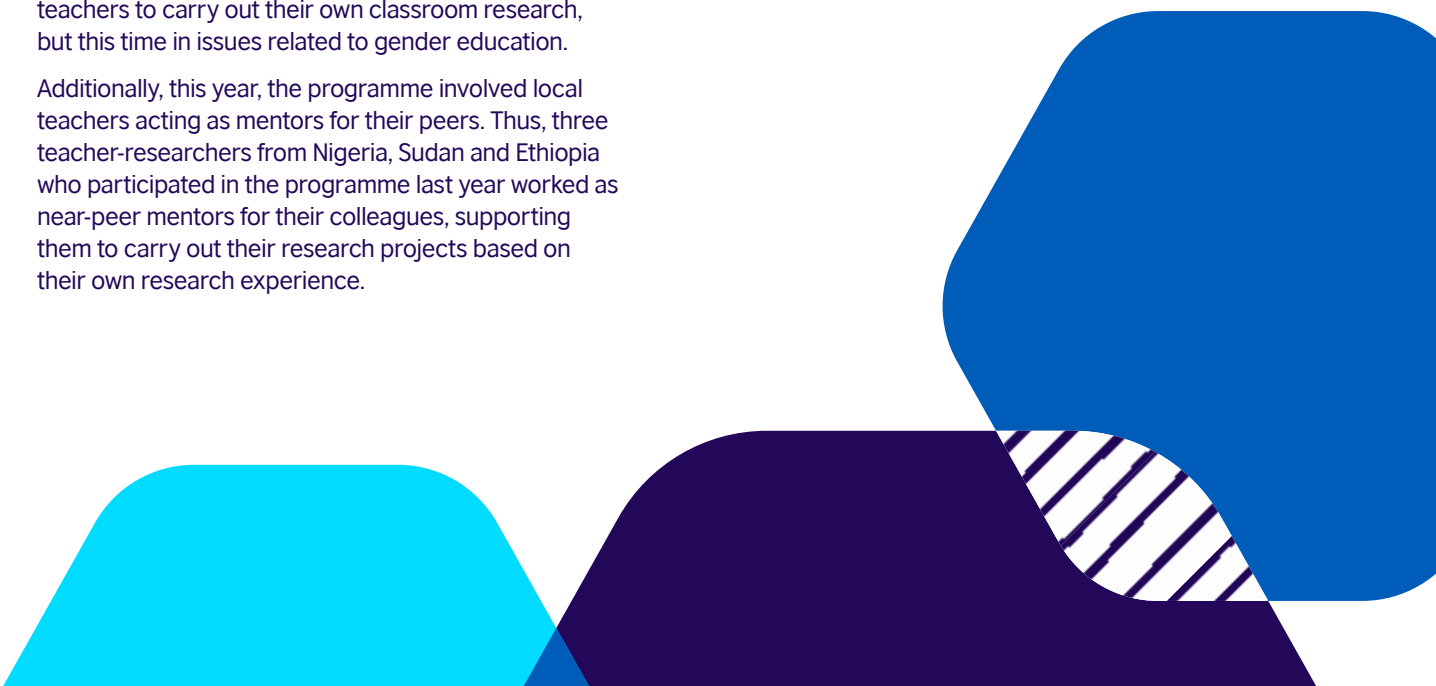
Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education sets a powerful framework for ensuring that educational policies and processes are responsive to the diverse learning needs of girls and boys. This is in recognition of the pivotal role that educational institutions and processes play in setting and enhancing the expectations, opportunities and choices open to girls and boys. In addition, education has the potential to be a space where restrictive gender norms can be challenged and where it is possible to create an enabling environment for girls and boys to achieve their full potential. However, without an intentional focus to understand and address barriers to quality teaching and learning, educational institutions and processes can recreate and replicate inequalities, especially those based on gender differences.

The British Council is committed to collaborating with policymakers, school leaders and teachers in developing curricula, methodologies and educational materials that address gender in education issues. Our approach to gender equality and empowerment of women and girls is informed by a contextual understanding of the different, but equally important, experiences of male and female teachers, educators and learners. As part of the English Connects Action Research (ECAR) programme, the British Council designed a training and mentoring programme for teachers to carry out their own classroom research, but this time in issues related to gender education.

Additionally, this year, the programme involved local teachers acting as mentors for their peers. Thus, three teacher-researchers from Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia who participated in the programme last year worked as near-peer mentors for their colleagues, supporting them to carry out their research projects based on their own research experience.

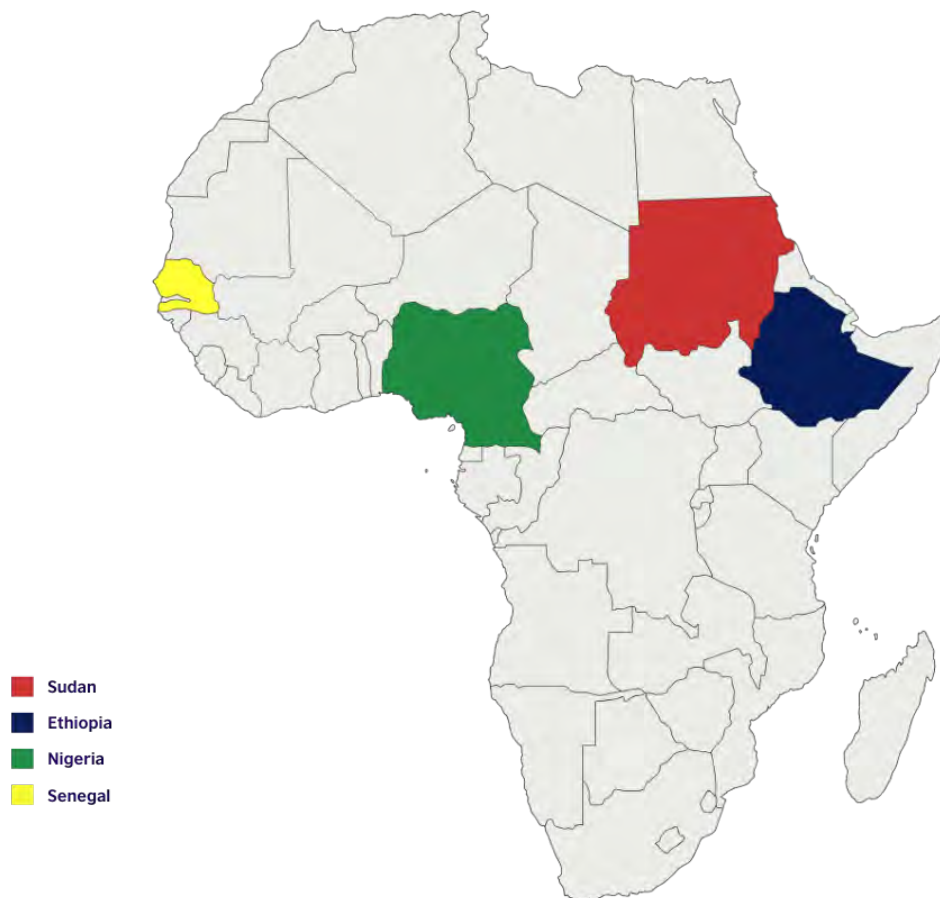
The ECAR programme had a duration of five months. Its third cohort began with an initial three-day online workshop focused on **exploratory action research**. Then teachers were mentored online to come up with a research topic, their research questions and design methods to collect initial data. Later, they had a two-day training session on data analysis and gender equality in education. This session guided them in the process of data analysis and the design of action plans to address some of the issues identified in their findings. Finally, participants had a last online webinar, where they presented their research and discussed their findings.

The English Connects Action Research programme in Gender Education supported four selected English language teachers in each of the participating countries, namely **Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria and Senegal**, to gather insights into the gender issues impacting on teaching and learning in their classrooms. The research findings published in this report show the nuanced and multidimensional issues that selected teachers grapple with as they work to build gender-responsive and inclusive teaching and learning environments.



The 12 research narratives included in this publication were written by teacher-researchers themselves and only edited to ensure greater clarity. In each narrative, author-researchers describe their research journeys from the situation that motivated the study to the results obtained from their action plans.

A summary of the narratives is provided below to assist readers in getting a gist of the different projects carried out, before reading them in further detail.



Above Participating countries of the English Connects Action Research programme in Gender Education

The research narratives

Dr Christiana Ijeoma Ajaps would love to give equal opportunities to her female and male learners to voice their opinions and participate in class. However, she noticed that most of her female students in the drama class were usually reluctant to respond to questions. In this research, she explores the effects of gender on class participation in drama lessons with young adults (aged 16–25 years) as she aspires for inclusive participation in her classes.

Hammed Olalekan Lawal, a teacher at Almond College in Nigeria, came across a British Council course titled 'Exploring gender equality in education'. This eye-opening course helps teachers to be gender-responsive and provides them with practical approaches to supporting every child without bias. Due to his interest in inclusiveness, he took the gender education course and got certified. He learned about how to inculcate equality in the classroom and the school system as a whole, becoming gender-sensitive in all he did. Since he became more sensitive to gender biases and stereotypes, he began to spot several places of gender bias in the resources, heard stereotypic statements from both teachers and students and saw biases in methods of teaching. He felt that his students were significantly influenced by the texts they use in class after he asked them to write about their career choices, and the career choices were based on what they saw in the pictures used in the textbook. They were stereotypical! This research journey explores aspects of gender differences in Year 9 learners' selected English textbook.

Dorcas Amayo Barnabas noticed that her students in the age group of 17 to 22 years had difficulty speaking well in the classroom. She acknowledges that most of the students have a weak background in English since they speak English only in college and their mother tongue elsewhere. Her greatest concern, however, was the differences in speaking ability between male and

female students. Her exploration is focused on the differences in speaking ability among boys and girls. Her exploratory action research is thus dubbed 'Differences in speaking ability among boys and girls in the classroom'.

With the Covid-19 lockdown of schools in 2020, **Olatunde Ojerinde's** college explored online resources to ensure teaching and learning continued, using popular learning applications like Google Meet, Zoom and WhatsApp. When he resumed physical classes in 2021, he made use of a blended teaching approach to ensure teacher-trainees remain familiar with online learning modes so that they can also improve their competence with online pedagogy. For the online classes, they agreed to use WhatsApp due to its easy accessibility on smartphones and low data consumption. However, in using WhatsApp to teach English, he noticed that his male and female students were not equally enthusiastic during lessons. This research explored learning about gender biases through online discussions on WhatsApp.

Babacar Gueye Diouf, a teacher from Senegal, noticed that his female students were active in first grade, raising their hands and participating in all activities. They liked speaking and listening activities a lot, competing with male students and leading during certain games. However, when they reached Grade 4, he noticed that they were no longer involved. This was a serious concern to him, given that most female students end up quitting school at Grade 4. He felt that solving this problem could help the female students be motivated again. He conducted his research at a rural junior high school with learners aged 15–16 years old on the topic 'Improving female students' performance in Grade 4'.

Aside from writing, do boys and girls read differently? **Rasheedat Sadiq** noticed in her almost decade-long experience as an English language teacher that girls read more fluently than boys and were often more eager to volunteer to read aloud than boys. She was eager to understand what the issues and causes were, so her research sought to find out what the male and female learners' attitudes to reading were. This research explored differences in reading between boys and girls.

Are gender roles stereotypes? **Ibrahim Ishaya** began his research from the notion that in most of their homes, gender roles are indeed stereotyped. Boys are into farming, football and racing, while females are mostly known to perform domestic chores. Furthermore, he observed that most of the learning resources have specific gender roles assigned to boys and girls. For example, girls are assigned roles in domestic chores, while boys are assigned professional duties such as engineering and medicine, among others. These gender stereotypes as they are found in the home are also reflected in the learning resources used in class. In most of the resources he had gone through, the focus is more on males than on their female counterparts. For example, in most of the textbooks in his area, the stories used to centre around males, with females playing minor roles. He became so inquisitive to establish what impact these learning resources have on the learners, as they see the 'reality' of the outside world through them. In this research, he explores the choice of learning resources and its influence on inclusive gender education.

Moussa Ngom's school, like Issa's, has more girls than boys. Over the years, he noticed that girls in his classroom were rather passive and barely participated in classroom activities. A discussion with a few colleagues attributed this to religious beliefs that require females to 'stay at their place and observe'. However, he needed empirical evidence to make a conclusion. The lack of participation in class has led to a situation where he has to prompt female students to speak and/or respond to questions in class. This exploratory action research journey addresses girls' passivity in the classroom.

Do boys and girls write differently? **Kikelomo Adeniyi** observed that, more often than not, there existed differences in the written essays of her male and female students. She also observed that male students tend to write with more flair than female ones, using words more expressively. A discussion with a colleague made her realise that her observations were not unique. In this research, she explores gender differences in the choice of words in a writing task.

Issa Tidiane Tounkara's research context is particularly peculiar in the sense that they have a large number of female students compared to many schools around the country of Senegal. This is a result of the government policy of enrolling the maximum number of girls in school over the past ten years. Despite their high numbers, female students rarely participate in classroom activities. This piqued Issa's interest, and thus his research explores female students' participation in classroom activities.

Benyam Getu has been a teacher for the past 16 years. During this period, he noticed that his learners, especially the female ones, despite their good scores, are afraid to speak in class. They seem to be particularly afraid during speaking lessons, yet speaking is an important language skill. As foreign speakers of English, mastery of English language skills is enhanced when they speak the language more, yet female students are afraid to speak, thus presenting a problem. In this research, he explores the poor participation of his female students in the speaking class. He seeks to understand the reasons for this behaviour to enable him to get to the root cause and solve the speaking problem of his female learners.

Tenaw Serie's research was precipitated by obvious levels of gender inequality. He noticed that his male learners assume themselves to be superior to their female classmates. Due to such perceptions, female learners do not participate in classroom activities and seem uncomfortable sitting next to people of the opposite gender. He also observed that female and male students lacked the interest to share ideas or participate in classroom activities freely. This created a big problem in the classroom. This research delves deeper into reasons for the lack of participation of female students in classroom activities and the remedial actions he took to address this.



[This page](#) A teacher from Kenya.
Photograph by Mat Wright.

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Most importantly, we would like to thank the 12 author-researchers and main contributors to this publication: Dr Christiana Ijeoma Ajaps, Hammed Olalekan Lawal, Dorcas Amayo Barnabas, Olatunde Ojerinde, Babacar Diouf, Rasheedat Sadiq, Ibrahim Ishaya, Moussa Ngom, Kikelomo Adeniyi, Issa Tidiane Tounkara, Benyam Getu, Tenaw Serie.

Note on permissions

All photographs included here have been provided by the teacher-researchers. Following British Council protocols, in cases where permission could not be gained, photographs have not been included and/or learners' faces have not been shown or have been blurred out.

“

**I have learned the need
to be observant and
reflective of happenings
in class.**

Christiana Ajaps (Nigeria)





Dr Christiana Ijeoma Ajaps

Christiana Ajaps is a Nigerian educationist of English language/literature. Her teaching experience spans over a period of 30 years, covering the various levels of education from pre-primary, primary, post-primary and tertiary. Christiana holds a bachelor's degree – BA (Ed) English; a master's degree – MA in English (Literature) and a doctoral degree (PhD) in English – African Literature. Her major research interests lie in the areas of gender studies and African and English literature.

Effects of gender on class participation in drama lessons



I lecture at the Federal College of Education (Technical), Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria. I teach General English and English for Academic Purposes to a group of students who take it as a compulsory course. They are two hundred science students in a tertiary institution, who are young adults (16–25 years). Some of them are learning in a mixed-gender class for the second time in their lives (first being in their Year 1), having attended single-gender primary and secondary schools. Such groups of students still need some more time to acclimatise to their new learning environment.

My primary focus in this research is to find out why most of the female students in my drama class were usually reluctant to respond to questions. Since I wanted to see inclusive participation in my class irrespective of gender, this topic was relevant to my teaching because inclusive participation fosters a conducive atmosphere for active participation and learning by all. It also helps to make learning more meaningful and impactful.

In order to explore the problem, I came up with the following exploratory research questions:

- What do I want to see happening in my drama class as regards male and female participation?
- Why is inclusive class participation important to me?
- What do my students think/feel about gender disparity in class participation?
- What do my colleagues think/feel about gender disparity in class participation?

To collect data, I used a questionnaire, interviews and a reflective journal. The questionnaire administered to 50 students aimed to collect data on opinions about gender disparity in class participation/inclusive participation. Interviews were carried out with 20 of my colleagues to establish the effect or otherwise of gender in-class participation in their own lessons. Finally, I kept notes in a reflective journal for a period of six weeks to gather information about the happenings in my class as regards activities and participation.

From the data collected from the exploratory tools, I established the following.

On the issue of what I want to see happening in my class as regards male and female participation, my reflections showed that I expect to see a situation where every student, irrespective of gender, takes an interest and participates actively in class activities. I also want to see my students collaborate to learn by leveraging one another's strengths to achieve collective success, while playing down on their weaknesses to ensure that the best of everyone is harnessed for the greater good of all as a community of learners/achievers. This is possible and achievable by employing the right strategies.

Data from my reflective journals showed that my students (male/female) have preferences for certain topics and class activities. For example, females prefer topics such as cooking, baking and fashion, while males like sports, especially soccer – matches, players and their clubs.

This suggests that inclusive active participation without fear or favour and devoid of bias is possible in my lessons, especially when non-gender-specific topics/activities are being treated. Secondly, expanding a topic on football, for instance, to include female soccer players could stimulate the interest of female students to participate. Also, focusing on male chefs while discussing cooking activities should encourage male students' interest and participation. This may suggest that the disparity in class participation by my students was due to preconceived gender biases/stereotypes that certain topics/activities were for boys, while others were for girls.

On the second research question – why inclusive participation is important to me – it is because it creates a sense of belonging for all, eliminates inferiority complexes and boosts self-esteem, while, on the contrary, the disparity in class participation discourages effective learning by hindering girls from performing optimally.

Thirdly, on the issue of what my students think/feel about gender disparity in class participation, the questionnaire revealed the following data: 72 per cent (36) responded that they are aware of gender disparity in class participation and would want it corrected, while 28 per cent (14) said they are not aware of it and are not bothered about it. The majority (43) thought that female students were shy and so participated less while the males dominated the class; 85 per cent (43) thought that it is useful to encourage gender equality in class participation because it provides a level playing ground for all students to learn, while 15 per cent (17) disagreed. The majority (43) believed that gender disparity affects learning in class because, according to them, some female students may not be able to contribute and learn since they felt that it is only the male students that should ask and answer all questions in class. So even when they did not understand a topic, they would be shy to let the teacher know. Overall, 85 per cent (43) of students agreed that their gender affects their participation in class – seeing other male students participate actively spurred them on to follow suit and make their own contributions or sit still if other females were not taking part in class activities – while 15 per cent (17) claimed that gender does not affect their class participation.

In relation to research question four, which is 'What do my colleagues think/feel about gender disparity in class participation?', I was able to establish that 45 per cent of my colleagues thought/felt that gender disparity exists in their own classes and that it should be done away with, while five students said they were not aware of it and not bothered about it at all. Some of my colleagues claimed that they supported their students by providing a level playing ground for all, irrespective of gender. However, they also said that some teachers encouraged gender disparity by praising boys more than girls, favouritism and being impatient with boys/girls based on gender stereotypes. This showed that disparity in class participation was not my students' fault, rather it was due to gender bias/stereotypes they came to class with; disparity in class participation was not peculiar to my students but also happened in my colleagues' classes too.

Based on my findings, I designed and implemented the following actions for a period of four weeks:

I mixed the seating arrangement and working in smaller groups; provided tips on effective communication skills; and provided reading comprehension passages about female role models, which were discussed before each lesson.

The essence of the mixed seating arrangement and working in groups was to provide an avenue for closer interactions and collaborations between males and females as against the former seating arrangement where females sit in the front rows while males are seated at the back rows, where all the jeering, mocking and laughing emanated from. Providing tips for effective communication skills was to assist/acquaint students with the rules of taking turns to speak, maintaining eye contact, listening effectively, respecting other people's opinions even if you are in disagreement and contributing rather than looking for faults, responding appropriately to topics/issues under discussion as well as boosting their self-esteem. Then, providing reading comprehension passages about female role models which they read and discussed before each lesson was to disabuse their minds of some erroneous beliefs they hold on to about gender biases and stereotypes, such as 'boys are more intelligent than girls', 'boys are bold, girls are shy and reserved', 'boys are better in most subjects/activities/professions'. It also provided evidence of females from different walks of life who are making tremendous contributions to the development of the country in diverse ways nationally and internationally, such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Moremi of Ife, The Aba Women Riot in 1929, Ngozi Okonjo Iwuala, Dora Akinyili, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tosin Amusan, among others.

I evaluated the effects of the action plan using a questionnaire administered to my students to elicit their opinion about our new teaching/learning strategies in class. I also used a peer observation tool by inviting eight of my colleagues to observe my lessons and give me feedback. I was observed four times by two teachers (one male and one female) each week for the four week-implementation period.

After implementing the intervention, I discovered that participation improved greatly. Most of my students – 80 per cent (40) from the questionnaire – were able to participate fully while working in small groups collaboratively. Also, from the peer observation my colleagues reported that almost all of my students were able to take part actively in class activities unhindered. When I introduced groupings, I gave them a pep talk about the importance of gender inclusiveness, as well as the beauty of respecting everyone's opinion even when you disagree with it. Some of the quotes from my students were 'I like the way we worked together' and 'Working together is more interesting and it enabled me to participate fully in all class activities'. One of my colleagues said, 'Grouping ensured collaboration rather than competition among students ... I could see real enthusiasm in action as each student participated actively'.

My students were able to learn effectively and joyously as partners, not as competitors. This enhanced performance in class and, according to the questionnaire, most of them loved it – 80 per cent (40). This zeal could be seen in their responses, such as: 'I feel very happy and encouraged to participate in class activities in the last four weeks because of the new methods being used by our lecturer' and 'I'm so excited by our new seating arrangement, and my classmates helped me by being supportive instead of mocking me like before'.

However, a few of them (10) still do not feel comfortable with the new seating arrangement and that equality of all genders is ideal/good. Their reason based on the questionnaire is that the holy books (the Bible and the Quran) are against the equality of males and females – males are superior. From a female student: 'I feel very uncomfortable sitting with a male student; it is a sin'. While a male student said, 'I don't like the idea of girls claiming equality with men, they can never be equal with men, even the Bible says that "man is the head, women are supposed to listen to men in silence". The Quran says that men and women should never sit together, it is wrong. I don't like it'. So, I still have to work more on this group to incorporate new strategies to see if I can convince them to accept the new reality. It was very encouraging that most of my students, 40 of them, even the very shy ones, began to take active participation in class activities in their small groups/mixed seating arrangement and worked collaboratively for collective success. My students were able to enjoy inclusive class participation as they worked in small groups as team members of the group, providing leadership and collaborating with other members of the group to achieve collective success. This claim is supported by the data collected from students' questionnaires. Some students said, 'Working in groups provides a level of participation ground for all genders'. Another student said, 'Inclusive class participation is the way to go'.

Another positive feedback from my students was that 'Inclusive class participation provides a conducive learning environment and increases learning outcome' (questionnaire).

After implementing the reading comprehension passages about female role models before every lesson, I was able to deconstruct some age-long gender stereotypes hitherto held by my students, as they were able to appreciate the contributions of Nigerian women in sports, the military, commerce, etc.

In this regard, one of them said: 'I'm glad to learn that Nigerian women did and are doing great exploits just like men; we need to respect them'. Another student commented: 'Henceforth, I will encourage my female classmates to excel so that in future they will become great like some of our heroes'. Most of them were able to contribute meaningfully to discussions and answered questions very clearly because they have come to realise that everyone (male and female) is important in any society. This claim is supported by comments such as: 'I never knew that mocking female students in class discourages them from participating actively and making us proud in future'; 'I can now see that women are as important and useful as men in society'; 'Respecting women is the way to go towards creating a better society'; 'I'm greatly motivated by these female heroes. It shows that women too can be great heroes of our nation'; 'I'm inspired by the contributions of women to the development of Nigeria and I feel they should be given a chance, even in class'; 'I will love to be like one of these women – making my country proud when I grow up' (questionnaire).

The teaching of communication skills before the drama lessons properly helped to boost self-esteem and ensure that even the very shy female students were able to participate in discussions and dramatisation activities, maintaining eye contact with their listeners. Evidence of this can be found in some of the comments from students: 'The pep talk about respecting other people's opinion, taking turns to speak made me feel good, bold and encouraged (unlike before) to participate in all class activities especially the question/answer as well as the dramatisation sessions (I'm already feeling like a Hollywood star)'; 'I did not know that I have talents in acting ... thank God for the new teachings/methods'; 'Did not know that I can look others in the face while talking without being shy'. However, one of them said, 'I like the new teaching strategies but I still feel uncomfortable sitting and working very closely with boys' (questionnaire). And from my colleagues, I got the following feedback: 'I see some of the very shy female students participating actively as a result of the pep talks and communications skills, and even maintaining eye-contacts with the listeners'; 'It's good to know that something could be done to bring out shy students from their shells to participate in class boldly' (peer observations).

My action plan addressed the issue of low participation of female students in my drama class. Even the shy ones were able to participate actively following mixed seating arrangements, the novel method of teaching comprehension passages about heroines/tips on communication skills. Male students found it interesting that females equally contribute to societal development, leading to respect for their female classmates. Eventually, most of my students were able to embrace inclusive participation for effective learning experiences.

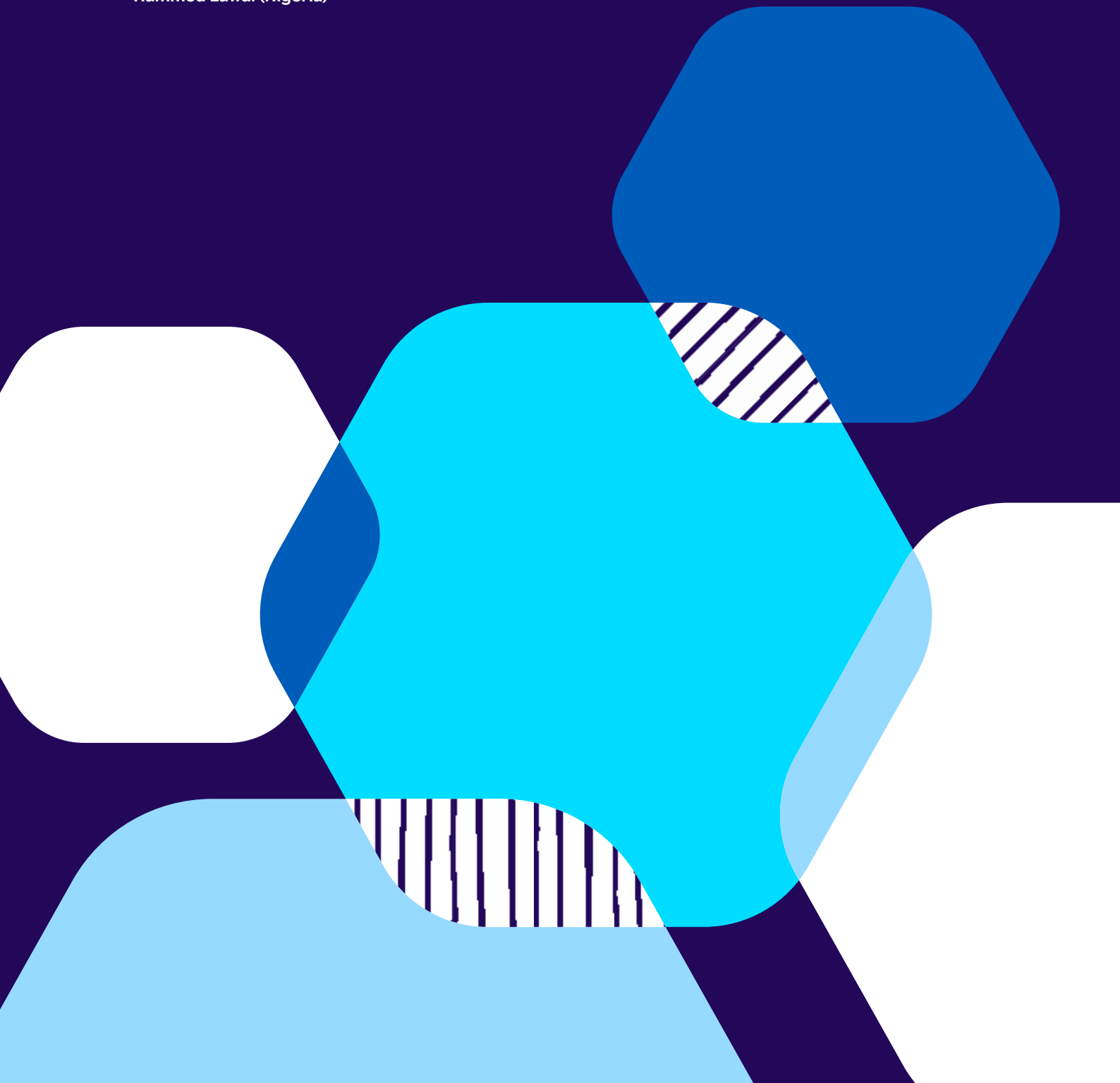
This research has taught me never to blame people ignorantly. Gender disparity in the classroom is not the fault of students, rather teachers and society are culpable. The major challenge I encountered was the initial resistance my students exhibited, but after some persuasion and information, the majority soft-pedalled. To achieve this great feat within four weeks of implementation is laudable, although a few of them are still reluctant. Based on the outcome of this research I will endeavour to promote inclusive participation, continuing with the strategies of my action plan.

Secondly, I have learned the need to be observant and reflective of happenings in class, exercise patience with students, especially when they fail to follow instructions strictly, interrogate actions/inactions and proffer solutions rather than complain/apportion blame.

“

**Let us teach the boys
how to cook, sweep, skip
and do shopping.**

Hammed Lawal (Nigeria)

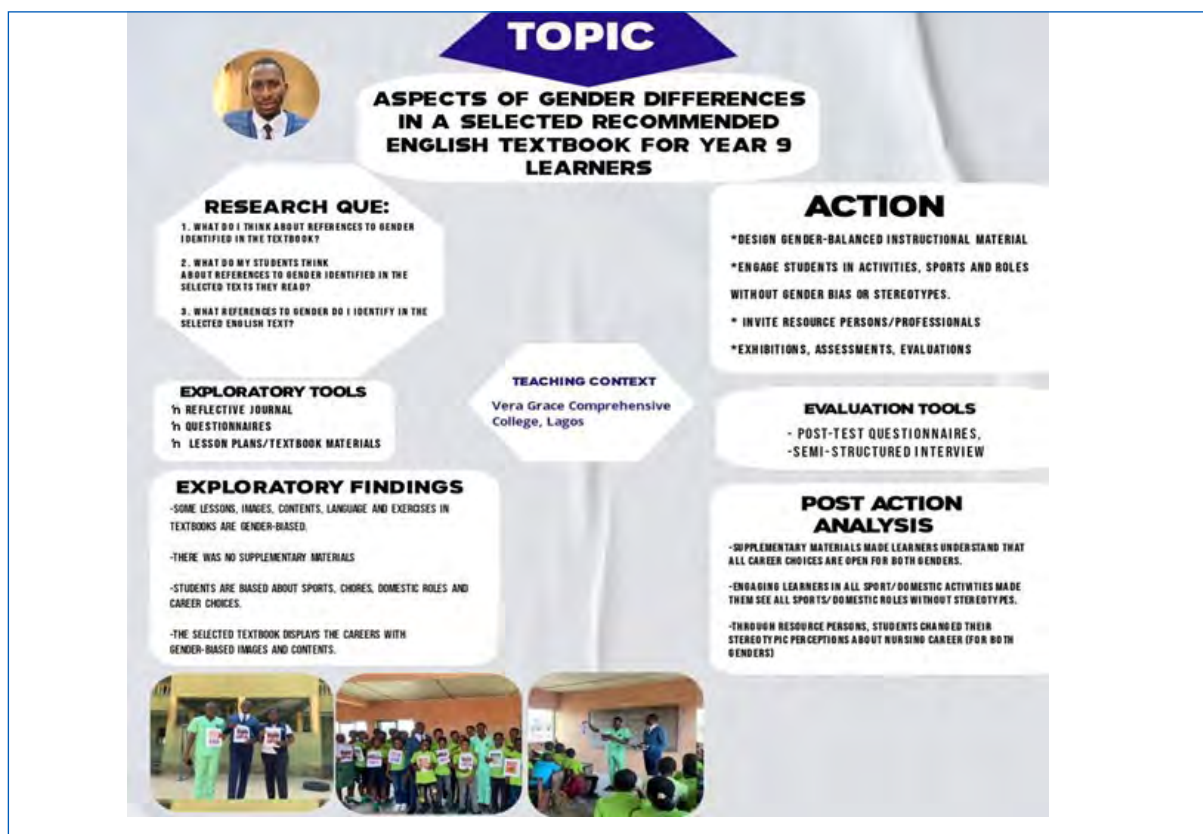




Hammed Olalekan Lawal

Hammed Olalekan Lawal is a secondary school English and literature teacher. He is currently working as an English language teacher at Almond College, Lagos. He is the author of the popular student handbook 'How to Study & Boost Your GP'. He is an ELT blog owner: [ELT-Reflections.com](https://www.elt-reflections.com). He has a strong passion for designing lesson plans and materials for teachers through his blog. He has presented as a panellist speaker at the British Council 2022 World Teachers' Day and also won the British Council Best Teacher Award for sub-Saharan Africa. He is passionate about supporting teachers and students with resources within his context.

Gender differences in a selected Year 9 recommended English textbook



I am an English and literature teacher. I currently work with Almond College, Lekki, in Lagos state, Nigeria. During this exploratory research, I worked with Vera Grace College, a private school in Ojo, Lagos, Southwestern Nigeria. I taught students at their secondary school levels aged between 12 and 14 years. My class comprised learners from across the major tribes in Nigeria and from different social-cultural and religious backgrounds. This means that I had both Christians and Muslims in my class.



Vera Grace Schools at Era, Ojo, Lagos (Photo credit: [Google Map](#))

In 2022, I came across a British Council course titled 'Exploring gender equality in education' on FutureLearn. This eye-opening course helps teachers to be gender-responsive and provides them with practical approaches to supporting every child without bias. Due to my interest in inclusiveness, I took the gender education course and got a certificate. I learned about how to inculcate equality in the classroom and the school system as a whole. I became gender-sensitive in all I did as a teacher to make sure none of my students were left behind. Hence, I incorporated the gender-transformative methods I garnered into teaching English in my lessons.

Since I became more sensitive to gender biases and stereotypes, I began to spot several places of gender bias in my textbook resources, hearing stereotypical statements from both teachers and students and methods of teaching the learners. I thought my students were significantly influenced by the text they use in class after I asked them to do homework on writing about their career choices as instructed in their textbook. The learners did the homework writing about their career choice based on what they saw in the pictures used in the textbook. They were stereotypical!

As a result of this, I got triggered to research the topic 'Aspects of Gender Differences in the Selected English Textbook for Year 9 Learners' and investigate the perceptions of my students about these differences. I wanted to understand whether their choices of career, domestic roles and games were influenced by the textbook they read.

In order to get the necessary data about what my students and I think about these differences in the textbook, I guided my research with the following exploratory research questions:

- A. What do I think about references to gender differences identified in the selected text?
- B. What do my students think about references to gender differences identified in the selected texts they read?
- C. What references to gender differences do I identify in the selected text?

The first question guided my thoughts and assumptions about gender biases and stereotypes in textbooks used in teaching my students. To answer the first research question, I used my reflective journal from the course I took and class lessons in order to evaluate my perception of aspects of gender differences in English textbooks. This research question guided me through my students' perceptions about various aspects of gender biases and stereotypes. I used a close-ended questionnaire and an essay test to determine what my students think about references to gender differences as identified in the selected textbook. And for the third research question, I carried out an analysis of the selected English textbook, identifying aspects of gender differences in the passage contents, images and exercises in it.

After all of these explorations, I found out from the outcome of the classwork given to my students on essay writing that all their responses were based on the gender-biased pictures provided in the textbook exercises. The males preferred careers that were presented as male and vice versa. As a result, male learners picked careers in engineering, medicine and law among others, while females selected nursing and careers that were more nurturing-related, like nursing and catering among others. I deemed it necessary to enlighten my students on their chosen careers. The selected textbook for my Year 9 learners contains images that misrepresent the female and male genders in topics like chosen careers, roles and games, and also there was no supplementary material to balance the gender-based differences while I was teaching the topic.

As indicated in the extracts from the English textbook, out of the illustrated careers, only nursing is represented as a female career. Others (lawyers, police officers and bankers) are all represented as male careers. As a result of these stereotypes in the text, the majority of my students were gender-biased in their career selection. For instance, none of the boys except one chose to be a nurse. Others felt such a career (nursing) is for females and could be stereotyped for choosing it. In terms of domestic roles and games activities, the activities in the pictures presented in the selected English textbook were based on domestic chores and games and sports activities boys and girls regularly do.

The outcome of the first part of the questionnaires was presented to a total of 20 Year 9 students of equal gender proportion (ten boys and ten girls). Only three girls and nine boys responded that they engage in outdoor games and sports such as racing, riding a bicycle and hiking on a regular basis. There were no significant differences in the participation of boys and girls in domestic activities. However, eight of the responses from the girls and six from the boys indicated that girls' participation in domestic chores such as fetching water and going to the market outnumbered the boys'. In short, only one male student out of ten responded that he would regularly go to the market, while others would not.

In summary, the responses from the students indicated that male students engage more in sports and games, while female students do more domestic chores and activities. The selected English textbook did not change these wrong perceptions of the learners, as they are illustrated in the images in it.

In order to moderate these findings, I carried out the following action plans for a period of four weeks. In the first week, the first action plan was on designing gender-neutral instructional materials. I printed pictures showing gender-balanced domestic activities, games, sports and career choices. The copies of the supplementary materials illustrated male and female police officers fully kitted, male and female lawyers in their robes, male and female bankers in suits, male and female nurses and doctors in scrubs and stethoscopes, Nigerian male and female footballers in their jerseys and a picture of a man and woman riding their bicycles.

Sample gender-neutral supplementary materials



Images by [Canva](#)

In the second week, the action plan was to engage students in gender-balance activities and roles, such as girls racing and riding a bicycle and males skipping and singing, among others. These activities were to balance the biased activities in the textbook. In the third week, the action plan was to invite resource persons such as male nurses and female lawyers to address the students on why these professions are gender-neutral. I invited a nurse to give a talk on the topic 'Nursing: A career for both male and female'. I also sensitised the students about other jobs they can do irrespective of their gender, using supplementary resources.

Finally, in week four we had revisions, exhibitions, interviews and assessments. I distributed the questionnaires and printed instructional resources to the students for evaluation purposes. I asked my learners some interview questions in order to know whether my actions in weeks one to three influenced the perceptions of my learners about gender differences as illustrated in their textbook.

In order to measure the impact of the action plans on my research findings, I re-administered the questionnaire (as a post-test) and conducted some semi-structured interview questions and asked students to answer some close-ended essay questions from the selected English textbook. The evaluations assessed the effectiveness of the use of instructional strategies such as the application of supplementary materials, invitation of a resource person and engaging the learners in some gender-neutral activities.



The nurse and I sensitised the students on 'Nursing: A career choice for both males and females'.



The invited nurse (in his scrubs) and I in the midst of all the Year 9 students.

The interview with my students would evoke the answers to these questions and reveal their perceptions about career choice:

1. Do you agree that some professions are meant for men, while some are for women?
2. Do you think Nurse Olalekan Azeez, the resource person, is fit for a nursing job even though he is a male? Tell me why.

At the end of the evaluation, I discovered that the supplementary instructional materials made the learners understand the domestic roles, sports activities and career choices without bias. The colour-printed materials gave a better representation of both genders without bias, which subsequently helped to correct the misconceptions of my students about what career field they can choose from without looking at their gender as a significant factor. In an interview, a student commented, 'I am able to see that anyone can do anything', in reference to gender roles. Furthermore, the responses from the 20 interviewed students indicated that all of them agreed that nursing is a profession for both males and females. Inviting a male nurse not only wowed my students but also ignited the male students' passion for this career. They have been culturally disoriented that the job is for females only. I recall that only one male student initially chose to be a nurse in my class, but by the end of this intervention, after meeting with Nurse Olalekan Azeez, all the ten male students became passionate about the profession.

The outcome of the evaluation tools showed that the action plans had a positive effect on the perception of the students about their genders and gender roles.

The role-play-based teaching strategy I used while exposing the females to outdoor sports and games such as racing and riding bicycles increased the motivation of the students to do outdoor sports. A student said, 'I feel encouraged to participate in the sports' (interview). During the evaluation, both the male and female students responded that sports, games and domestic activities were not gender-specific. More so, all the students ticked all the listed career choices to mean they are for both genders.

This research journey has enormously influenced my understanding of gender issues related to my classroom, textbook resources and students. This process has exposed me to apply my knowledge about gender bias and stereotypes in my practical classroom. The British Council courses and workshops on exploring gender equality in education were eye-opening. I found it very resourceful during this exploratory action research.

Having properly analysed the selected English textbook and used instructional materials, I understand that textbook resources play a significant role in addressing gender-related issues. This is why teachers should be mindful of the texts learners are exposed to in the classroom. Moreover, I have learned that gender roles and activities are determined through erroneous beliefs and cultural practices exposed through textbooks. The images and texts must be scrutinised thoroughly against any gender misrepresentations.

Notwithstanding, gender bias can manifest from every stakeholder in education, such as schools, parents, teachers, publishers and even students through their sociocultural beliefs and sentiments. The kinds of duties and chores assigned by schools and parents to every child should not be gender-based, as this can leave a misconception in the mind of the child. Every child must be exposed to gender-neutral activities both at home and at school. More so, publishers need to deploy a more gender-transformative method in order to use the textbook as a tool in addressing the societal norms that are gender-biased. For instance, images and language use should not be stereotypic. Nigerian publishers need to be exposed to courses and practical workshops on gender and publishing in education. Meanwhile, the education ministry should play its role in overseeing published educational materials.

I have also learned that inviting professionals as resource persons from different fields (both male and female) can positively influence the career choices of the students. Resource persons are useful sources of information, because my learners got first-hand experience of these careers through them. My learners got inspired during a session with the invited resource persons after talking about their jobs and professions.

Finally, all students, both males and females, should be exposed to various activities, roles, games and sports that used to be traditionally gender-specific in order to give equal learning opportunities to the students. Let us teach the boys how to cook, sweep, skip and do shopping. Schools should provide extra support for teachers to inculcate these in their scheme of work.

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My approach and mentality towards the speaking activities in the class have totally changed.

Dorcas Barnabas (Nigeria)






Dorcas Amayo Barnabas

Dorcas Amayo Barnabas is an experienced educator and researcher in the English language. She holds a Bachelor of Art education in English language. She has more than five years of teaching experience in secondary schools and post-secondary education, working in both private and government-owned schools.

Differences in speaking ability among boys and girls in the classroom



TOPIC

DIFFERENCES IN SPEAKING ABILITY AMONG BOYS AND GIRLS IN THE CLASSROOM

TEACHING CONTEXT:
Kaduna State College of Education
Gidan Waya, Kaduna State.

Action

- 1: Class discussion.
- 2: Audio materials for pronunciation and pairs conversations.
- 3: Work in pairs' speaking activities.
- 4: Debate.

Research Questions:

1. What do I think about the differences in speaking ability among female and male learners?
2. What do my colleagues think are the causes of deficiency speaking among female and male learners?
3. How do boys and girls participate in speaking activities?
4. What strategies/activities do you do in the class in relation to speaking ability among boys and girls?

Evaluation Tools:

- 1: Focus group
- 2: Questionnaire

Exploration Instrument:

- 1: Reflective Journal
- 2: Interview
- 3: Classroom Observation

FINDINGS:

- 1: The girls tend to speak better than the boys because the boys are distracted and lacked confidence for the fear of being laughed at.
- 2: Poor background, environmental influence, and lack of exposure leads to deficiency in the speaking ability of the boys than the girls.
- 3: The boys find pronunciation and grammar as the most problematic areas.
- 4: My students, especially the boys like conversations in pairs, debates, and role play during the class activities.

POST ACTION ANALYSIS:

- 1: Built confidence to speak after the class' discussion.
- 2: The conversations in the audio motivated them to speak in pairs and during the debate.
- 3: The audio with pronunciations helped in pronouncing words correctly.

I work with Kaduna State College of Education Gidan Waya, Kafanchan, Kaduna state of Nigeria. I teach English Language NCE (Nigeria Certificate in Education) for students in the age group of 17 to 22 years. A college of education in Nigeria is a teacher-training institution where teachers-to-be get their minimum teaching certificates before they can become qualified teachers. The students I teach found it difficult to speak well in the classroom.



Kaduna State College of Education Gidan Waya, Kafanchan Campus

My students' poor participation in speaking activities in class has been a major concern to me for about three years now. Most of the students' background in the English language is poor because they live in a community where their mother tongue is the language of communication. Because of that, they can only speak the little English they managed to learn from primary and secondary school before coming to college. Hence, my exploration is focused on the differences in speaking ability among boys and girls after noticing their inability to speak well in the classroom. As important as speaking is, its relevance cannot be overemphasised. Without speaking, the students cannot confidently express themselves correctly. I felt I should find out the reason why they do not participate well during the speaking activities, and know the best way or activities they can participate well.

Through this research, I expect to help and motivate the students to develop the habit of speaking boldly and confidently in class and improve their pronunciation of words, vocabulary and grammar.

The situation described above prompted the following questions for my exploration:

- A. What do I think about the differences in speaking ability among female and male learners?
- B. What do my colleagues think are the causes of deficiency in speaking among female and male learners?
- C. How do boys and girls participate in speaking activities?
- D. What strategies/activities do you do in the class in relation to speaking ability among boys and girls?
- E. How do boys and girls participate in speaking activities?

In order to get answers to these questions, I used the following methods over three weeks. First, I kept a journal. This would enable me to pen down, from my own perspective as the teacher, the speaking activities of my students in the class whenever I was teaching them. This would also enable me to get to the real problem and compare it with the differences in speaking ability among female and male learners. By identifying the problem, it would be easier for me to find a solution.

The second method was classroom observation. I invited a colleague to come and observe the speaking activities and my students' performance in class. This method would help me compare the information I wrote in the journal.

Next, I carried out a focus group interview. Fifteen (15) students participated in it because I needed to know about their inability to speak directly to them, including how they felt when speaking in English with their male or female classmates. I also involved 13 of my colleagues in a separate focus group; their role was to help in sharing their perspectives on any differences in speaking ability among my male and female learners and to also help with some ideas on how to tackle the differences. They were there to help me understand the causes of deficiency in speaking among male and female learners, and to also know the speaking strategies/activities they use in class.

On the issue of differences in speaking ability, the data revealed that there was a difference in the ability of boys over girls, with boys affected more (observation). According to one of my colleagues, another area the boys found most problematic was 'pronunciation and grammar especially when it has to do with concord, the word itself, and construction, i.e. syntax. Because of the mother tongue influence, they tend to have issues with that' (focus group interview). Finally, what I observed was that my students, especially the boys, liked conversations in pairs, debates, role play during class activities, acting and drama (reflective notes). Another colleague of mine said, 'They seem to want activities that make them laugh' (focus group interview).

In summary, my exploration suggested that:

- girls tend to speak better than the boys in the class because while the boys are distracted and lack confidence for fear of being mocked or laughed at, the girls are more coordinated and composed (observation notes)
- poor socio-economic background, environmental influence and lack of exposure cause a higher deficiency in the speaking ability of the boys over the girls (focus group)
- the boys find pronunciation and grammar the most problematic areas, and as a result of that, they are afraid of making errors and scared of being laughed at (focus group)
- my students, especially the boys, like conversations in pairs, debates and role play as class activities (reflective notes).

As a result of my findings, I carried out a series of actions that took me about four weeks to implement as follows. In week one, I planned a class discussion with my students on the importance of speaking well in our contemporary society, by appointing males and females interchangeably to give their points, as well as establishing some rules about respecting others' opinions and avoiding laughing at anyone. This was to prepare them for the upcoming speaking activities.

In the second week, I played audio material that had the pronunciation of words for them to practise and included a conversation between boys and girls to motivate them to speak boldly. Based on the conversation they listened to, some keywords or expressions were provided for the students to support them to do the next activities. After that, they worked in pairs as in the following activity:

In your pair, one of you will be A and the other will decide now who will be A and who will be B. Find out the meaning of the following words, you can use a dictionary if you prefer: communication, look, discuss, compare, increase, listen, divide, mix, affect, pronounce, observe, invitation, accept, reject, partner, pair and start, as used in the audio and conversations you listened to. Then, one of you should invite the other to a birthday party. Your partner should then accept or reject.

In the third week, I engaged them in a debate on the topic 'Girls speak better than boys' in the classes. The debate was between boys and girls in the class. I encouraged the boys to speak in order to prove us wrong.

Week four was devoted to evaluation. For this, I used the following methods: a focus group with 15 students to know if they had improved or not, and a questionnaire with the same students to know what helped them to improve.

The discussion we had with the boys and the girls in the class on the importance of speaking well in our contemporary society helped each male and female learner to voice out some points that were helpful. One of the girls said, 'If you don't speak well, society will look down on you'. A boy said, 'Speaking well builds credibility' (focus group interview).

We all agreed during the class discussion to respect others' opinions and not to laugh at anyone during the speaking activities. This prepared and encouraged them in participating in the rest of the speaking activities. Most of them confessed that the discussion opened their eyes to the reality of speaking well. The majority of the students replied to the focus group question on the ability to express themselves as follows: one of the boys said, 'I am fully ready for it, now I can express my feelings better'. Another boy said, 'I think of having confidence when next I am asked to speak in public'. One of the girls said, 'Speaking is not always that easy, but it is essential to speak in public, it is one big task that one must learn'. Another girl said, 'To have more confidence in everything you are doing', and another boy said, 'Speaking will help us to know how to speak, and it will also give us confidence'. Interestingly, the boys disagreed that the girls can speak better than them.

Playing the audio for pronunciation practice motivated them, especially the boys, to be bold and confident when they were working in pairs. This claim was supported by the questionnaire data. One of the boys said, 'Yes, the conversations did in fact build confidence in me and my ability to speak unlike before' (focus group interview). A girl said, 'Definitely, it encouraged me to develop a good ability to speak', while another girl said, 'Yes, by God's grace I'm improving' (focus group interview). One positive feedback from one of the boys was 'Yes, because you all are challenging each other so it has to give you confidence'.

Additionally, after listening to the pronunciation of some words through the audio, the learners were able to correct themselves by pronouncing those words correctly. Question 5 on the questionnaire indicated that 70 per cent of the boys and girls agreed to this, while 30 per cent of the boys and girls strongly agreed.

Learning the meaning of the words they heard from the audio conversations helped them when practising conversations in pairs, and also improved their vocabulary. In line with that, one boy indicated, 'It is important for all students of the English language to know how to pronounce well in order to speak well; yes, it helped me a lot'. A girl said, 'It helped me to pronounce words the way they are supposed to be pronounced'.

A good number of them said comments along the lines of feeling bold and confident to speak without being shy or afraid of being laughed at. A proof of that is shown in these responses, thus 'During the debate, I felt good and courageous that I'm able to do more than I've done before, and that improved my boldness in speaking' (focus group interview). 'I felt great and normal because I'm with my classmates, I don't need to be shy' (female student). 'I felt great, and I have improved my confidence and boldness in speaking' (focus group interview).

Most of the boys and girls said they have improved in grammar, but still need help in pronunciation, while the rest said they had improved in vocabulary, but still need help in pronunciation. However, one of the boys disagreed by saying that 'the debate was good, but it did not improve my boldness in speaking because I am the shy type'.

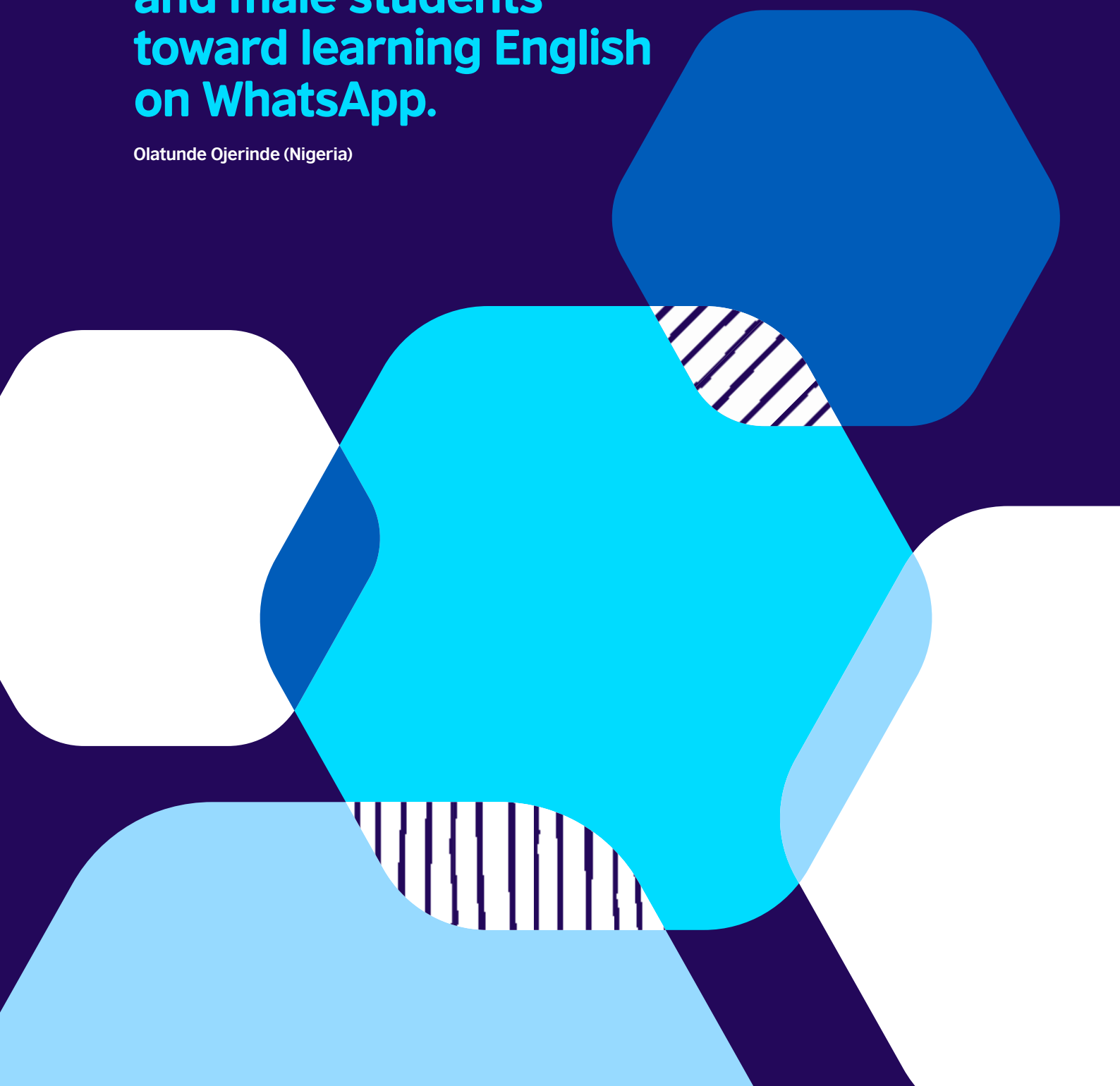
Wow! My students in my class are bolder and more confident to speak now. You need to see them debating with one another, especially the boys this time around trying to prove to us that they can speak better than the girls. But they still need help with grammar and pronunciation. To improve this issue, parents, teachers and school management should concentrate more on teaching these aspects of the English language, because they are very important. Although most of the students admitted that their pronunciation had improved, I need more time to practise pronunciation with them in the classroom.

In conclusion, my approach and mentality towards the speaking activities in the class have totally changed. And so, my action plan has been reshaped in the sense that, henceforth, I need to give more time to speaking activities in the classroom, concentrating more on working in pairs and teaching more vocabulary and grammar.

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I now understand that there is little difference in the attitude of female and male students toward learning English on WhatsApp.

Olatunde Ojerinde (Nigeria)

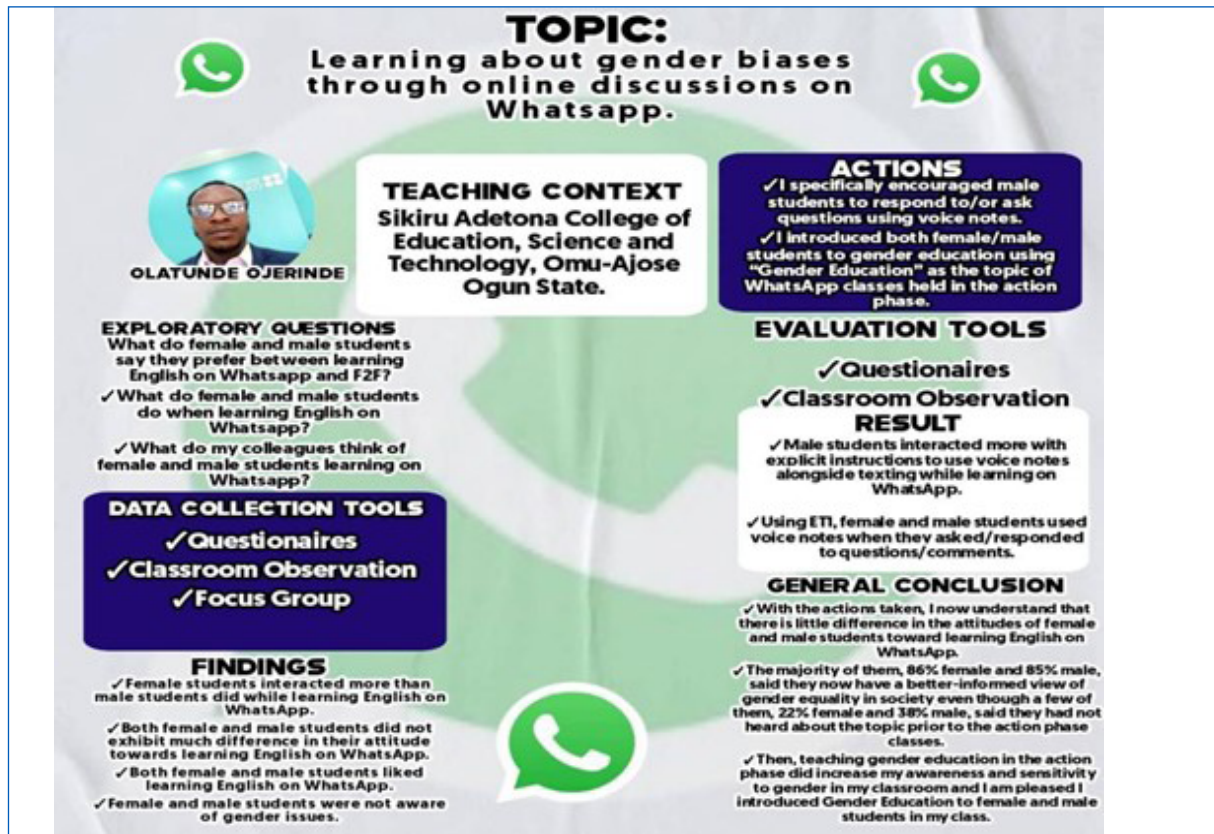




Olatunde Ojerinde

Olatunde is an experienced educator and researcher with a passion for promoting gender equity in online learning and equitable and inclusive learning experiences for all students. He has been a teacher and administrator across all levels of education in Nigeria. He is at present a teacher educator and teaches English as a general course at Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology (formerly Tai Solarin College of Education), Omu-Ajose, in Ogun state, Nigeria.

Learning about gender biases through online discussions on WhatsApp



I am a teacher educator and I teach English as a general course at Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology (formerly Tai Solarin College of Education), Omu-Ajose, in Ogun state, Nigeria. My students are teacher-trainees aged between 15 and 22 years, and they are spread across different schools within the college, including the School of Education, School of Sciences, School of Vocational Training, School of Arts and Social and School of Languages.



School of Science at the Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology

Since the pandemic lockdown of schools in 2020, the college explored online resources to ensure teaching and learning continued, using popular learning applications like Google Meet, Zoom and WhatsApp, among others. When I began to teach in 2021, I used a blended teaching approach to ensure teacher-trainees remain familiar with online learning modes so that they can also improve their competence when they have to teach online as qualified teachers in the future. For our online classes, we agreed to use WhatsApp because of its easy accessibility on smartphones and low data consumption. In using WhatsApp to teach English, I noticed that my students were not equally enthusiastic during lessons. Therefore, I decided to explore my students' attitudes towards learning English generally, on WhatsApp. I was particular about differences in the attitude of female and male students. In the process of planning and designing the research, it struck my mind that a group of my students would soon be posted out for their compulsory teaching practice exercise. Then, considering gender was the theme of this exploratory action research, I thought it apposite to introduce them to issues of gender in education. Hence, I chose the topic 'Learning about gender biases through online discussions on WhatsApp'.

I considered this topic relevant to my teaching context because sustaining classes on WhatsApp was a supportive initiative to encourage my students to continue their adaptation to online learning, and it was greatly complementary even though face-to-face classes have resumed fully. In addition, the choice of gender discourse in the sessions was in consideration of my students' future-teacher status in a highly gender-biased society. In spite of the importance of understanding gender biases for every teacher (in-service and in-training), it is a topic that is rarely discussed. This low engagement of gender discourse among teacher-trainees is undesirable, and I considered such a dearth of discussions harmful to society generally.

Additionally, this research was a perfect opportunity to prepare the students who were about to be posted to teach pupils in primary school classrooms across Ogun state, Nigeria. The need to learn about gender biases through discussions on WhatsApp was apt and timely to assess their attitude and to orientate them before they assumed duty at their various places of assignment in different primary schools in Ogun state.

To explore this situation, I asked three questions:

- A. What do female and male students say they prefer between learning English on WhatsApp and face-to-face?
- B. What do female and male students do when learning English on WhatsApp?
- C. What do my colleagues think of female and male students learning on WhatsApp?

To answer the questions, I deployed three tools. First, I used questionnaires to garner my students' thoughts on what they feel about learning English on WhatsApp. One hundred respondents were recorded for the questionnaires designed from the 250 students in the class. Of the respondents, 57 were female students and 43 were male students. The students were selected across the five schools, and there were 15 items on the instrument used. The items were designed to elicit the opinions of the students and their perception of learning English on WhatsApp.

Then, I asked a colleague who also teaches using WhatsApp to observe two of my WhatsApp classes with my students, using guided questions, to record observations on any differences in female and male students' attitudes in class. The observer responded to preset guided questions, which gave valuable insights as feedback from my classes.

My analysis of the questionnaire on the choice of what female and male students preferred revealed that the majority of the female students and male students liked learning English on WhatsApp especially because of the multimodal advantages over face-to-face and quality engagements that could be revisited. Some 74 per cent of female students and 70 per cent of male students said they liked learning English on WhatsApp, and 89 per cent of the female students and 86 per cent of the male students specifically linked their liking to the quality of learning as enhanced by integrated media (graphics, audio and video). This showed that there is much similarity in both genders' attitudes towards learning English on WhatsApp.

The analysis also revealed that female students were more active in learning English on WhatsApp than male students. Data from all six colleagues in the focus group indicated that female students tend to chat with them privately for further engagement on topics discussed in class, while only half (3) said the same about male students. Also, most teachers (5 out of the 8) participating in the focus group said that female students turned in tasks on WhatsApp, but only half said male students did the same.

From classroom observations, it was revealed that only female students contributed to class activities as well as asking questions with text and voice notes, while male students only used text. Meanwhile, both female and male students had very low awareness of gender issues, including biases and impacts (classroom observation notes).

The final analysis of the three tools deployed revealed that female and male students did not exhibit much difference in their attitude towards learning English on WhatsApp, but female students were slightly more active in their use of WhatsApp. However, it was discovered that both female and male students were not aware of gender issues as they affect teaching and learning.

It was clear from the result that male students can do more to be active in WhatsApp classes when the teacher is more deliberate about their activities and interactions. More importantly, it was essential to introduce gender discourse in education to both female and male students so as to raise their awareness about gender issues, including biases and remedies.

In view of the findings, I designed an action plan to respond to the issues discovered.

The action plan was implemented over three weeks in four WhatsApp classes. To get the male students more active in WhatsApp sessions, I specifically instructed male students to respond to or to ask questions and make comments using voice notes, while I used the action phase classes to introduce both female and male students to gender discourse using 'Gender education' as the topic of WhatsApp classes held in the three weeks.

To evaluate the impacts of the remedies deployed in the action plan, I used a questionnaire to obtain the views of the students. The questionnaire was administered to the one hundred students to elicit their thoughts after the implementation of the designed actions. In addition to that, I invited a colleague to observe all four classes held in the period of implementation of the actions. The preset guided questions answered by the observer were to assess how the students participated during gender discussions on WhatsApp to record live class activities.

The analysis of the results indicated the following. Male students became more active and their engagement during WhatsApp classes improved when given explicit instructions to use voice notes alongside texting while on WhatsApp (observation notes). From the observations made by my colleague, 100 per cent of male students in action phases used voice notes, albeit only when explicitly instructed to do so. I, therefore, had to frequently instruct both male and female students to use voice notes to ask/respond to questions/comments.

Both male and female students actively engaged in discussions on the topic in WhatsApp sessions with all of them (100 per cent of female and male students) expressing their desire to learn more about gender education. They acknowledged that the discussions of gender issues in the action phase helped reduce their biases. One student said, 'After the class, I know how to address my students in an excellent way' (by 'excellent way', she meant appropriately without being biased towards them); and another said, 'I learned that both male and female children have great importance'. Many of them – 72 per cent female and 85 per cent male – also agreed that it is better to use gender-neutral words instead of sexist words (questionnaire).

The majority of them (94 per cent and 85 per cent, female and male respectively) now understand the difference between sex and gender, and all of them would like to learn more about the topic of gender in education (questionnaire). Most of them, female (81 per cent) and male (85 per cent), also agreed that they have vital roles to play to curb/stop gender discrimination, particularly in their classrooms, as teacher-trainees, and society in general.

An impressive aspect of the intervention is that most of the students (92 per cent female and 77 per cent male) said they would teach gender education to their pupils in class, while all of them (100 per cent of both) would like to learn more about gender education on WhatsApp, even though just about half of both (64 per cent female and 46 per cent male) agreed that gender stereotypes can be eliminated in society (questionnaire).

With the actions taken, I now understand that there is little difference in the attitude of female and male students toward learning English on WhatsApp. However, the little difference observed was in the level of engagement. Male students engaged less actively than female students, but this was reduced when they were explicitly instructed to use WhatsApp more actively and they began to use voice notes and texts in WhatsApp classes.

The research also helped the majority of my students (86 per cent female and 85 per cent male) to develop a better-informed view of gender equity in society, even though a few of them (22 per cent female and 38 per cent male) said they had not heard about the topic prior to the action phase classes.

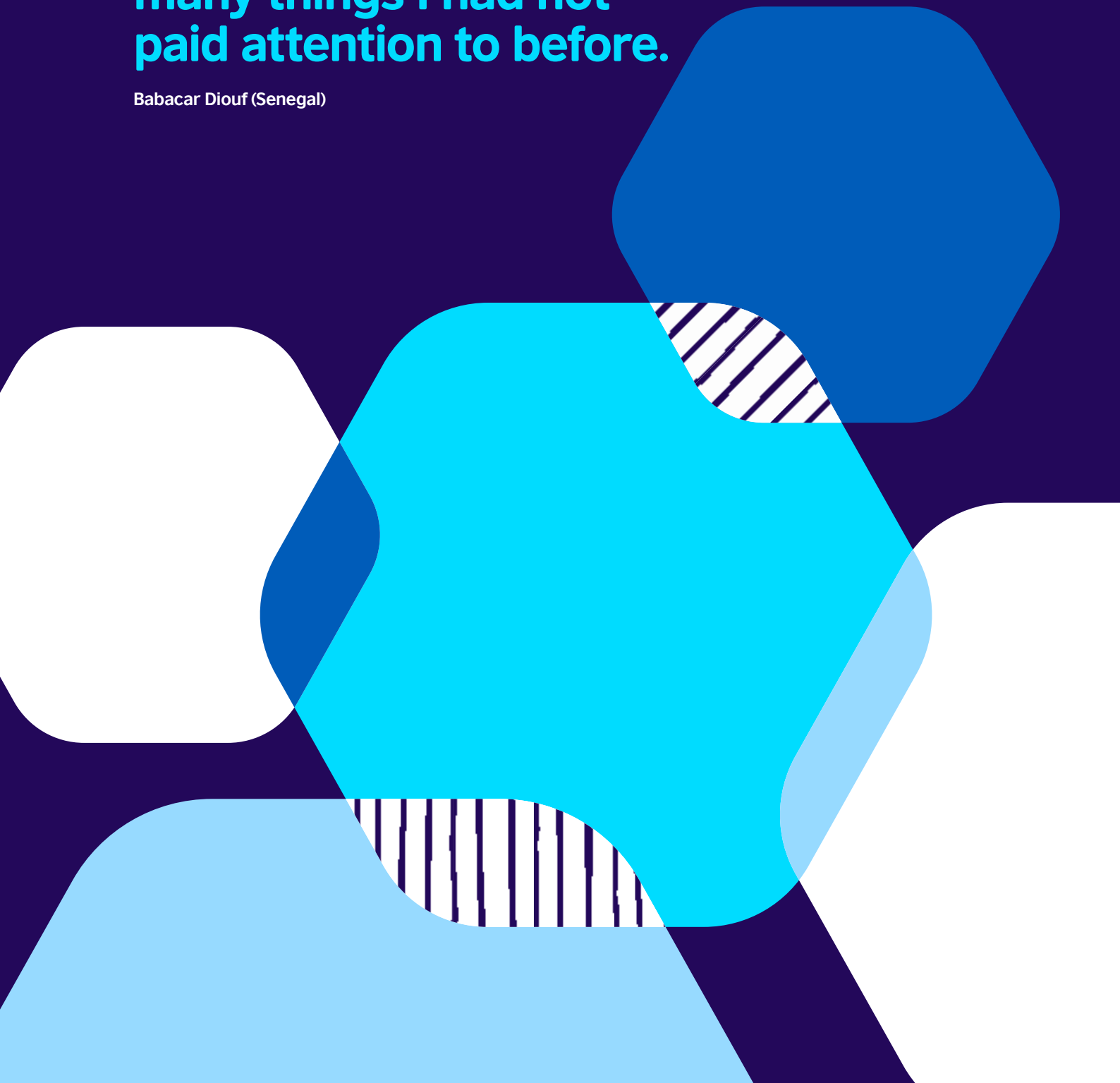
Teaching gender education in the action phase of this research increased my awareness and sensitivity to gender issues in my classroom. Most importantly, I am pleased I introduced my students to gender in education and I hope to conduct more exploratory action research in my class.

Lastly, I have learned that my teaching can be more impactful if I take more intentional steps, as in this exploratory research, to observe context-based challenges, analyse them and act on results to make positive changes. Hence, my desire to carry out more exploratory actions in all my classes in the future remains one of the most important takeaways from this programme.

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The students went beyond my expectation and opened my eyes to many things I had not paid attention to before.

Babacar Diouf (Senegal)



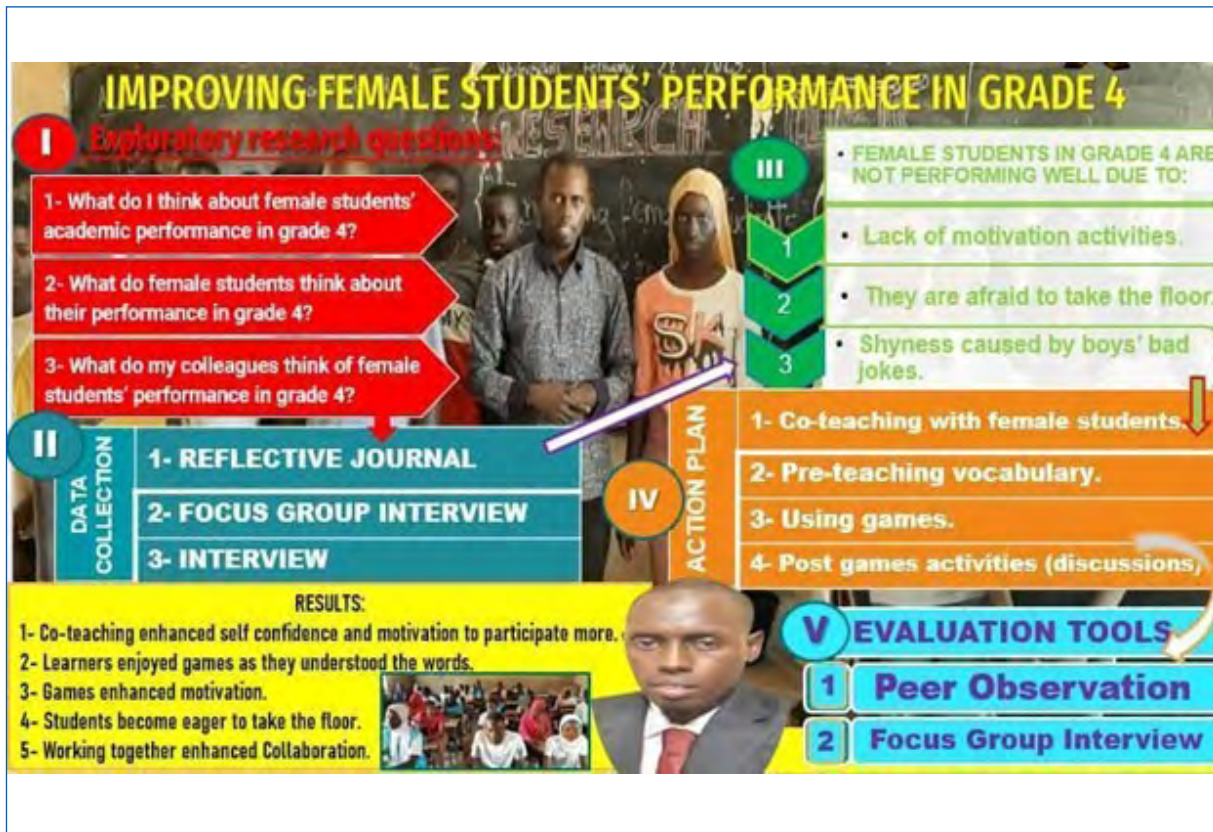


Babacar Gueye Diouf

Babacar Gueye Diouf holds a master's degree in English. He is a teacher of English in Mbam (Fatick Region/ Foundiougne department). After his bachelor's degree, he joined a teachers' training schools' contest (FASTEF), where he spent two years before obtaining his Secondary School Teaching Certificate in 2010. The following year, he was posted to Fouta (in Diongui-Thikité, in the north of Senegal). He spent four years at the school before being posted to Mbam Junior High, where he is currently teaching since 2015. He has been teaching for 12 years.

Babacar loves to play basketball.

Improving female students' performance in fourth grade



I teach in a rural area, specifically in Mbam Junior High School (West of Senegal). My learners are mostly aged 15–16 years old. Mbam is in the Foundiougne department and Fatick region and it is situated near the Sine-Saloum River. My students come from different schools located around the nine villages in my locality. There are even many students who come from the capital city (Dakar) and other regions in Senegal. Most of the people in Mbam are peasants, fishermen, farmers, traders and also soldiers. Women do the most important parts of the domestic chores. They help their husbands or fathers everywhere, depending on the latter's qualifications. They clean, wash and take care of everybody in the family. Mbam is a multicultural area, but the most spoken dialect is Serère.

I noticed that when my female students were in first grade, they were raising their hands and participating in all activities. They liked speaking and listening activities a lot, competing with male students and leading during certain games. The only trouble I had was related to their use of their mother tongues during my courses. However, when they reached Grade 4, I noticed that they were no longer involved. This is a very important issue given that most female students end up quitting school at that very moment – they reach Grade 4 – and solving this problem could help them be motivated again and help many colleagues to solve a puzzle for many of us. The most urgent need for the female learners was to have their secondary school certificates, which will prove that they have been to school or be able to have a decent job. Hence, through this study, I wanted to bring my support and help them enhance their motivation again with the following research topic: 'Improving female students' performance in Grade 4'.

I decided to conduct this project by working through different methods which were very efficient to help me find a response to this demotivation of female students in Grade 4.

I started by choosing three questions thus:

- A. What do I think about female students' academic performances in fourth grade?
- B. What do female students think about their performances in fourth grade?
- C. What do my colleagues think of female students' performance in fourth grade?

To address these questions, I used a reflective journal to record anecdotal happenings. When I taught, I paid attention to the slightest details which might be the reasons for their demotivation and wrote them in my notebook. To know female students' thoughts about their own demotivation, I held three focus group interviews. There were 26 female students I divided into groups of ten, eight and eight and gave them precise questions. I also interviewed my colleagues by asking questions about their thoughts on female students' participation in Grade 4. I took their answers into consideration. These ways of collecting my data allowed me to learn many things which happen to our female students, and most of the time we (teachers) do not give them the opportunity to reveal their real problems.

From the data analysis, I discovered that my female students lacked the motivation to participate in classroom activities. One of them said, 'We do not feel like raising our hands even if sometimes we know the right answers' (focus group interview). Other students considered themselves weak in the English language to the point that they no longer pay attention to the teacher's explanations. Some of them indicated that they need reinforcement classes and presentations or debates in order to enhance their level of English (focus group interview). At a certain moment, it was clear that my female students needed variety as far as the activities were concerned. A student said, 'I find the classes boring and would like to have motivational activities' (focus group interview). In fact, I noticed a total disengagement and passivity when I was teaching grammar compared to games (reflective notes). Some students blamed the lack of teaching material in order to be able to participate in the classroom activities (focus group interview). I however noticed that some of my students enjoyed learning through songs and games (reflective notes). They always felt very excited when we listened to games and songs. During the interview I did with my colleagues, some of them said that female students participate more actively in conversations around films and fashions, among others. Many female students suggested that I should 'do debates in order to be able to use the language efficiently' (focus group interview). 'We acknowledge that we have difficulties interacting with our peers. That may be the reason why we are too shy,' one said (focus group interview).

I also found that my second group of female students were afraid to take the floor in front of their classmates. They were too shy, and the classroom activities did not help them express themselves freely (focus group interview). One female student complained that 'when we made mistakes, it would be the name we would be given automatically by male students with terrible mockery during the whole day' (focus group interview). After that, they end up being afraid to raise their hands or speak in front of their peers. One of them said, 'Each time I raised my hand, I could hear some boys giving me nicknames which sometimes made me feel afraid of taking the floor again' (focus group interview). The same thing happened to my fourth group of female students, who were shy only because of male students' bad jokes. They abandoned all participation in classroom activities because when they made mistakes, male students kept on laughing at them and calling them by those mistakes instead of their real names. A student revealed, 'Sir, each time I wanted to participate, male students started laughing and I felt really ashamed'. Another student also confirmed that 'Male students have very bad habits, when we are raising our hands to participate, they only expect our mistakes to laugh out loud' (focus group interview). My colleagues also mentioned bad jokes as real hindrances to female students' motivation during classroom activities, which confirms what students mentioned during the focus groups.

According to my colleagues, the reason why female students were not self-confident during the classroom activities was due to cultural barriers, especially if coming from a community where ladies are not expected to speak in front of boys (interview). He said, 'In many ethnic groups, there are some realities which encourage female students to lower their voices but also limit their interactions with male students' (interview). One teacher believed that the lack of participation was mainly due to the lack of support at home. 'I think that female students in Grade 4 need supervision from their parents' (interview). Accordingly, the data also revealed that many female students come late to school (disorienting them) because they are facing difficult conditions at home. They are obliged to finish the domestic chores before going to school. Others face a lot of pressure because their parents want to give them in marriage without their consent (focus group interview).

The data obtained informed me that there were things that I could not change due to cultural norms. Some of them are deeply rooted in culture or religion. That is the reason why I tried to address the situation by creating awareness and proposing motivational activities in my lesson. First, I prepared four interactive lessons with four female students who volunteered to present with me. I worked with those volunteers for a few days before we taught the lessons together in front of their classmates as co-teaching. They helped me conduct the activities in the floor distribution, the seating arrangement and also during the games. The preparation helped them a lot because they thought they could not do it and were reluctant at the very beginning. Secondly, I pretaught vocabulary with a guessing game in which I asked my co-teacher to call students to the board (one by one) and tell them to face their classmates while the co-teacher wrote a word they tried to guess. This activity helped us learn many words in relation to 'gender issues', such as the definitions of gender stereotypes, equality, equity and gender bias among others. Thirdly, I did two games (Board race and Dictation race) which helped my female students to express themselves and gave them the confidence to compete against male students. To finish, I did some follow-up activities (such as debates). I proposed a topic in relation to gender such as 'The place of women is at home!' declared a father in a traditional ceremony. Give your opinion.' The purpose of this was to have an insightful discussion to help them get rid of certain norms of stereotypes concerning gender, but also give them the opportunity to speak and exchange with their classmates.

To evaluate the effect of my action plan, I started by using peer observation. For this, I invited my colleagues to come and attend my implementation. When they arrived in my classroom, I let them sit behind in order to be able to see how students were behaving in class. Afterwards, I did a focus group where I divided my female students into three groups of eight, eight and seven students, and I asked them questions about the effect of the actions we took in class on their participation.

I found that my female learners were very excited during the implementation weeks. Some of them expressed their joy when they won during the games like Board race or Dictation race against male students. 'I was delighted we won during many of the games against male students. They were obliged to exchange and stop their jokes' declared one of them during the focus group interview. My colleagues also noticed that the fact of playing and beating male students in games strengthened the female students, and 'even very shy students raised their hands' (observation).

During the co-teaching activity, female students who did not participate said they felt really proud of their classmates who presented. 'My classmates were very courageous to teach with the teacher and it was very good. I personally want to try next time' (focus group interview). After the classes, some male students went to ask questions to those who volunteered to co-teach. One wanted to know how it felt to be a teacher. They felt envious and were asking questions concerning the preparation of the games. One of them said, 'Just after my first co-teaching, two male students come to see me and asked a lot of questions concerning how I managed to do it wishing he could participate too' (focus group interview).

It was a great pleasure to see that they were very motivated again and really engaged till the end of the courses. The guessing game helped them to use the vocabulary related to gender, enabling them to speak freely in class. 'We enjoyed the guessing game because we knew and understood most of the words,' one of them confessed (focus group interview).

I realised the positive results of my research in many of my female students' interventions. For example, one of them who presented affirmed that 'It was a great joy for me to stand in front of male students and explain the instructions about the rules of the games' (focus group interview). As for the other games, they were a real source of motivation. Many female students found their motivation again and they did not miss mentioning that moment when they were shouting to ask for the floor and said 'Miss ... Miss', with a lot of energy (observation).

Without any doubt, these research programmes will be of paramount importance in my future teaching career, and doing a needs analysis will help me always to know what my female students need in order to bring responses to their problems. Whenever I see something abnormal during my courses, I will conduct research and choose exploratory questions with precise methods (such as questionnaires, interviews and focus groups). In addition, this awesome project allowed me to take into consideration learners' needs, particularly female students in Grade 4. I discovered the importance of games, but also the power of varying our activities to allow female learners to participate in classroom activities. It allowed me to know the importance of planning my course and the risk of using the same teaching methods and trying to improve students' performances.

One of the most efficient methods I learned to appreciate a lot is co-teaching with some female students, since this allows them to build their self-confidence. I am sure that adopting these teaching practices can help my female students be able to compete positively with males and raise their hands freely without any pressure of being mocked by boys. The students went beyond my expectation and opened my eyes to many things I had not paid attention to before.

I had difficulty formulating the exploratory questions until I got the help of my mentor, Dr Teresa, who showed me the way. I learned how to divide the exploratory questions into very insightful sub-questions. The different methods to evaluate my action plan brought clarity about the needs of female students and allowed me to know the strength of sharing with the peer observation, interview and focus group. Thanks to this process, I strongly believe that many female students are willing to learn, but they are not given a lot of opportunities to learn in more efficient ways. I express all my gratitude to the British Council for allowing us to take part in this awesome training to form a 'Dream team'. The training allowed us to form a real community of practice. I discovered in this training very beautiful people such as Khoudia, Moussa, Marjolaine and Issa, but also the 15 other participants from Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sudan (with whom we exchange virtually a lot). A special thanks to Mr Steve Diop, Mrs Michelle Thiongane, Mrs Rokhaya Gaye, Mr Mouhamed Seye and Mr Habib Diouf – real professionals. I will not finish without expressing my heartfelt gratitude to Dr Paula Rebolledo for her flexibility and understanding.

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I have cleared some of my misconceptions about the innate skills of boys and girls regarding literacy.

Rasheedat Sadiq (Nigeria)

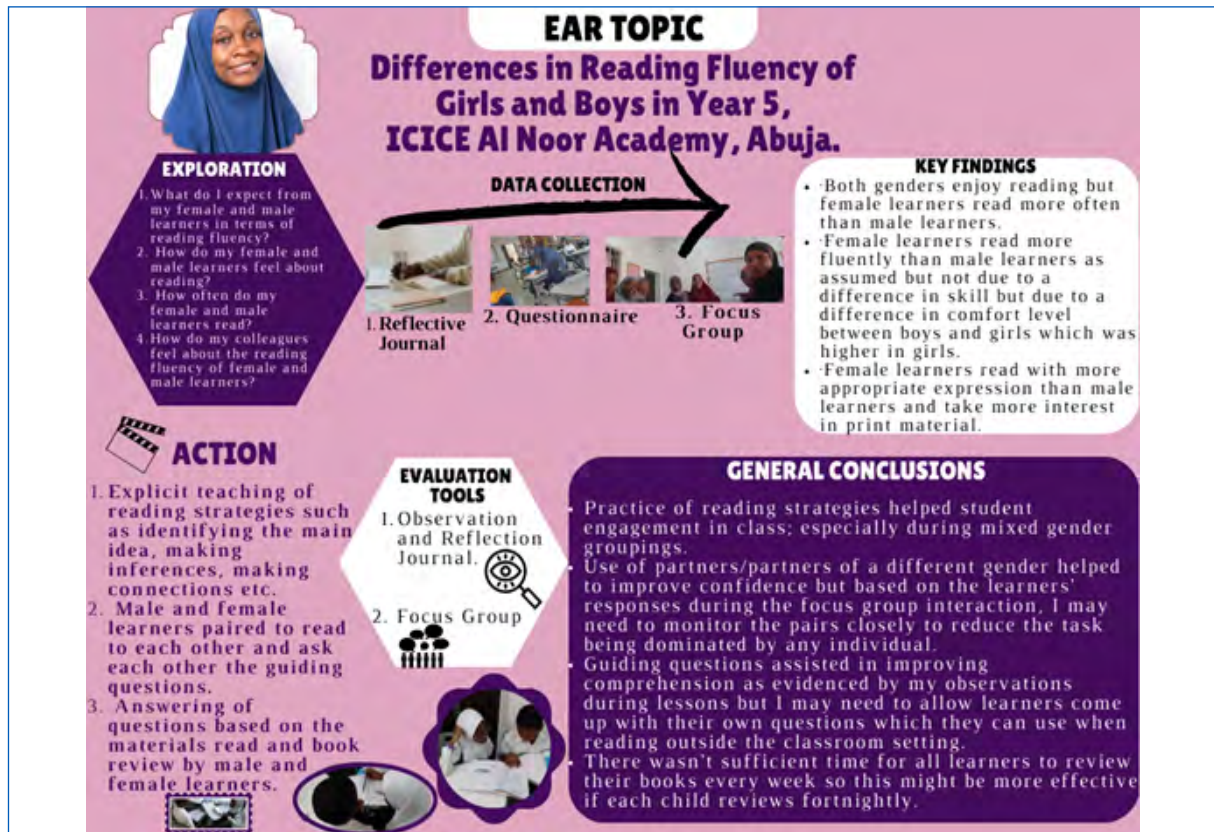




Rasheedat Sadiq

Rasheedat Sadiq is a teacher and academic coordinator in Abuja, Nigeria. She is also involved in the running of a non-profit library called 'The Mobile Reading Room'. She enjoys storytelling and uses it to enhance her teaching of learners and training of other teachers.

Differences in reading fluency of girls and boys in Year 5



I work at ICICE Al Noor Academy, a private co-educational institution with learners ranging from nursery to secondary levels. The school is located in the capital city of Nigeria, Wuse II, Abuja. I teach English to Year 5 pupils who are an average of ten years old. The class size is 19 pupils, with 11 female and 8 male learners. The learners all speak English as a second language due to the fact that English is the lingua franca of the country. English is the medium of instruction for most subjects, and most learners come from an upper-middle-class socio-economic background. Their level of English proficiency can be placed at the intermediate level. They often speak quite well, but their writing, reading and listening skills are not as well developed.

This research explored differences in reading between boys and girls. I noticed in my almost decade-long experience as an English language teacher that girls read more fluently than boys and were often more eager to volunteer to read aloud than boys.

Reading fluency is essential for comprehension of all print material and is a skill that is better developed at an early age. Given its importance, I would not want to leave behind any part of the class, as it seemed was happening with the boys who were more engaged with speaking than reading. Fluency can be split into accuracy and speed and, in fairness, the boys were able to read with a high amount of accuracy but often lacked appropriate expression as they read and tended to sound stilted and unnatural.

I was eager to understand what the issues and causes were, so I decided to find out what the male and female learners' attitudes to reading were, if my colleagues were experiencing a similar dilemma and to look deeper at my expectations and processes as the teacher. I also hoped I would discover ways to make reading more appealing to all learners as a means of relaxation and a tool for lifelong learning.

I had numerous questions, which I grouped under the following exploratory questions:

- A. What do I expect from my female and male learners in terms of reading fluency?
- B. How do my female and male learners feel about reading?
- C. How often do my female and male learners read?
- D. How do my colleagues feel about the reading fluency of female and male learners?

To find answers to these questions, I used three methods of data collection. The first was to keep a reflective journal where I wrote down my thoughts on my expectations for the learners, and in some instances contrasting these with my experiences. I was able to formally document my observations and assure myself that my expectations were not beyond normal. Next, I organised a focus group interview with seven other English teachers within the school to discover their own feelings on differences between the reading fluency of male and female learners. The teachers teach English (reading) at levels from Nursery 3 to Year 12 (SS 3), with learners ranging in age from 5 to 17 years old. This was essential to discover if my observation on reading was peculiar to just my classes or a school-wide phenomenon.

Finally, I created questionnaires which I shared with learners in my class to discover their feelings about reading and ask for their suggestions. The pupils were very open about answering the ten questions in the questionnaire and put forward different suggestions on ways they could improve their reading and ways I could help them.

The data collected showed a lot of interesting discoveries. It is pertinent to note that the questionnaire showed that ten out of 11 female learners stated they were comfortable reading aloud, and of these three felt excited, two felt neutral and four felt shy. On the other hand, most male learners were uncomfortable reading aloud. Of these, two felt neutral, while five felt nervous or shy. Only one boy was eager and comfortable to read aloud in class. Girls also reported reading materials outside school texts more often than boys.

My reflection journal corroborated my earlier assumption as seen in one paragraph from my reflection, which states:

I observe that most female learners are able to read louder and with more inflexion and expression, and even those with a lower reading ability are more expressive than the male learners who are more expressive when responding to what others read than when they read themselves. (journal notes)

The summary of the interview of the English teachers' focus group was also in line with my earlier thoughts, as most of the teachers agreed with my observation that girls were more fluent and more confident than boys, except the Year 8 English teacher in whose class the boys were more expressive and more vocal while reading.

Results from all the data collected were analysed with the following key findings. Regarding the attitude of male and female learners to reading and frequency of reading, female and male learners enjoy reading fiction, but female learners read more frequently than male learners. Findings from exploring my expectations from male and female readers and feelings of colleagues regarding male and female learners showed that female learners read more fluently than male learners as assumed, but not due to a difference in skill but due to a difference in comfort level/confidence between boys and girls, which is higher in girls. This also led to a realisation that female learners read with more appropriate expressions than male learners and take more interest in print material.



English teachers (N3–Y12) focus group



Administering questionnaires to learners

I drafted an action plan to boost the confidence of the boys and motivate them to be more willing to read. This plan included the following steps:

- giving male learners equal access to reading materials as female learners
- modelling fluency and focusing on improving reading strategies through explicit instruction with comprehension strategies
- exposing learners to a wider range of book genres.

This would enable them to have more opportunities to practise reading fluency, approach comprehension from different angles to enhance their ability to read expressively and provide good samples of what is expected of them while reading. A typical reading lesson (which took place twice a week) followed this format.

First, we reviewed the laid-down rules about respecting everyone, then modelled fluent reading with proper expression. Next, I introduced specific reading strategies (one for each week), such as identifying the main idea, making inferences and making connections, which were explicitly taught with the aid of videos, charts and short activities. Then, learners were introduced to guiding questions which would help guide their thinking and improve comprehension, such as 'What is the main idea in this chapter?', 'What do you think will happen next?', 'Why do you think that happened?' etc. After the plenary, male and female learners were paired to read to each other and ask each other the guiding questions. Finally, the whole class answered comprehension questions based on the materials read.

Additionally, male and female pupils were given their choice of short adventure books to take home to read once a week to improve their frequency of reading for pleasure. The books were reviewed individually by the learners for the first ten minutes of class the next day to ensure they were actually read and understood.

The actions were carried out over a period of four weeks, and to evaluate the impact of the actions, I employed a descriptive journal – which I filled in on a weekly basis – and a focus group interview made up of the learners at the end of the four-week period. We had the focus groups in two batches of eight learners each, with mixed gender to get as much input as possible from the learners.

While implementing the actions, I monitored the processes and the learners keenly. I specifically looked out to ensure the comprehension strategies were understood and applied during pair work. I also monitored for changes in attitudes and behaviours of the male and female learners over the four-week period. I filled in my observations in my journal, which had questions to help me stay focused, such as 'How did the learners react to their partners?', 'Was there a difference when they worked with learners of the same sex and learners of the opposite sex?', 'Were the male and female learners able to apply the reading comprehension strategy learned adequately?', among others.

Regarding results, I observed over the weeks that the use of the guiding questions helped male and female learners to relate better to the material read in class, gave a structure to their interaction with the text and improved their answering of the comprehension questions.



Mixed-gender pairs reading the text together.

I noted in my journal that during the first week, there was a lot of grumbling, and the learners were disgruntled about the mixed-gender pairings. I had to do a great deal of work to reduce bickering and get them to stay on task, but by the second week, the learners had begun to get used to it. This was done by outlining the class rules about mutual respect, redirecting them to focus on the task, and explaining that pairing in mixed-gender groups was helping them to learn essential life skills such as communication and collaboration.

By the last week of implementing the action plan, 90 per cent of male and female learners were capable of reading with correct expression and making eye contact with other classmates, as noted and recorded in the descriptive journal. This was a huge improvement from less than 50 per cent of male learners and about 80 per cent of female learners.

In the focus group discussion, learners' responses indicated that all male and female learners were able to read more frequently due to the weekly routine of taking books home. Some of the learners, specifically the males, did mention that they were not consistent in applying the reading strategies or using the guiding questions when reading outside the classroom setting.

There was a marked improvement in their confidence and general attitude to reading as 100 per cent of male and female learners affirmed during the focus group sessions that their reading fluency and comprehension had improved over the period. In addition, all male and female learners have become more confident than at the beginning of the research, but one boy still wished he did not have to face the entire class, while one girl wished she didn't have to read to the whole class. The focus group also corroborated the shift in their attitude to working with members of the opposite gender which I noted in my journal. All male and female learners became used to being partners with a member of the opposite gender, from an initial 90 per cent of all males and females learners being uncomfortable working with a different gender (focus group).

It should be noted that three girls say they still prefer working with the same gender, citing reasons like 'some of the boys cause distractions' and 'some of the boys read too fast'. Half of the males (four boys) prefer being partners with other males, stating that 'the girls act too bossy' or 'the girls like to do everything during pair work' (focus group).

The information gained through the evaluation led to the following general conclusions on the impact of the actions:

The regular highlighting and practice of reading strategies helped student engagement generally in class and resulted in a remarkable improvement in engagement during mixed-gender groupings.

Use of partners and giving partners of a different gender helped to improve confidence to a large extent, but based on the learners' responses during the focus group interaction, it may be necessary to monitor the pairs more closely – and step in when necessary – to reduce the task being dominated by any individual in the pair, which was a concern from some boys.

The use of guiding questions assisted in improving comprehension as evidenced by my observations during lessons, but I may need to allow learners to come up with their own questions so that they can use the strategies regularly when they are reading outside the classroom setting.

The time was insufficient for all learners to review their books every week, so this part of the plan may need to be implemented fortnightly to be more effective.

The process of exploratory action research is a valuable one that helped me gain a better understanding of my classroom dynamics and clear some of my misconceptions about the innate skills of boys and girls regarding literacy. I also realised that I am not powerless to solve challenges that may arise as I teach. I can now track the effect of changes made in my class through evaluation and use the data generated.

Another key benefit was the increased rapport with my learners, who were happy to have a say in their learning as they shared things I could do to help improve their reading. They were comfortable and eager to share their views regarding their attitudes to reading and preferences of same-gender settings pairings. They felt happy that their voices were heard and were delighted to be carried along as I shared some of the research information with them.

I look forward to sharing my research findings with my colleagues in school and in communities of practice to which I belong.

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**My students became
more willing to
participate in the class,
especially the females.**

Ibrahim Ishaya (Nigeria)





Ibrahim Ishaya

Ibrahim Ishaya teaches English and literature at Nigeria Secondary School. He has also been teaching the use of English at the Kaduna State University and the College of Education part-time. He has 17 years of intensive teaching experience. He holds a master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL).

Choice of learning resources and its influence on inclusive gender education



I work at a state girls' secondary school in Zankwa Kaduna State, Nigeria. My teaching context is in Senior Secondary III of Francis College Zankwa Kaduna State. The students are between the ages of 16 and 18. Long before now, in most of the communities in southern Kaduna, girls' education has not been taken seriously. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some people consider it a waste of resources to educate girls, as women may not live with their families for a long time or may get married in the course of their education.

In most homes, gender roles are stereotyped already. Boys are into farming, football and racing, while females are mostly known to perform domestic chores. Furthermore, I have observed that most of the learning resources have specific gender roles assigned to boys and girls respectively. For example, girls are assigned roles in domestic chores, while boys are assigned professional duties such as engineering and medicine, among others. These gender stereotypes as they are found in the home are also reflected in the learning resources used in class. In most of the resources I have gone through, the focus is more on males than on their female counterparts. For example, in most of the textbooks, the stories used to centre around males, with females playing minor roles. I became so inquisitive to establish what impact these learning resources have on the learners, as they see the 'reality' of the outside world through them. I was particularly interested in different learning resources, such as textbooks, chart pictures and stories, that appeal to both male and female learners in the classroom.

To better understand and explore the situation I formulated three exploratory research questions as follows:

- What do my learners think about the way gender differences are presented in my lesson?
- What do my colleagues think about the choice of learning resources on gender?
- How are gender differences presented in the learning resources I currently use?
- How do my colleagues feel about the reading fluency of female and male learners?

To answer these research questions, I decided to use structured questionnaires because they are fast and efficient in gathering relevant information and measuring opinions. I also used focus group discussions. Through the questionnaire, I got students' opinions on how gender differences are presented in my lesson. Ten students – five male and five female – answered the questionnaire questions. I chose ten students as a sample out of the 20 students in the class using random sampling such that I was able to collect data easily and interpret it easily to obtain satisfactory results. The questions raised in the questionnaire were meant to determine how gender differences are presented in my lesson, the roles of learners, the influence of the learning resources used by the teacher and the interest level of the students in those resources and how it helps students to collaborate in the classroom. The focus group was also employed in order to know what my colleagues thought about the choice of learning resources on gender and to also find out how gender differences are presented in the lesson resources. A focus group was also held with eight students to determine what they thought about the choice of resources on gender and to ascertain the impact of the resources on learners' choice of career and class participation, and to reflect on the achievement of women in society.

Learners indicated that the teacher includes both males and females in the lesson by varying the use of language and assigning tasks to students during the lesson. In the focus group, a student said, 'My teacher's use of pronouns in the class to reflect male and female gender is appropriate'. Another student said, 'My teacher assigns both males and females the role of teacher, nurse, lawyers' (focus group interview). Three students were of the opinion that the material the teacher currently uses in the class is not useful to them (questionnaire). The resources currently used had more males than females in them, according to one respondent (focus group interview). It seems that the way gender differences are presented in the class has a negative impact on female learners in the class and therefore affects their achievement. A student said, 'To be fair, whenever pictures, textbooks or charts are used, both genders should be projected as nurses, teachers, engineers, lawyers, among others' (focus group interview). A student indicated that 'teachers must always focus on resources which reflect gender equality instead of giving a superior role to a particular gender' (focus group interview). The teacher involves more male than female learners in the lesson, which is made glaring through the teacher's use of language that addresses the male gender like he, him, instead of he/she or him/her. These instances were said to occur in the teacher's dialogue, storytelling and choice of videos and stories.

In the data collected from the questionnaires, four students indicated that the teacher gives equal opportunity for both learners (male and female) to participate in the lesson by way of using pictures, charts, dialogue and debate. The learners are motivated by adequate and appropriate use of learning resources. In the questionnaire also, two students indicated that the learning resources the teacher currently uses appeal to the male gender more than the female. As a result, they enhance male participation. On the aspect of the kinds of resources the teacher uses in the class to engage male and female learners, a student commented, 'My teacher only uses textbooks', while other students mentioned textbooks, pictures, videos, storybooks, songs, smartphones and computers (focus group interview). During the focus group with colleagues, three teachers responded by saying that the learning resources they currently used help both male and female learners to actively participate in the class activities and understand the lesson better. One teacher also holds the view that learning resources help the learners to interact with one another as well as the teacher (focus group discussion). This opinion is also shared by students in the focus group. However, four students admitted that most of the resources appeal more to the male gender than the female (focus group interview). The male, according to another respondent, is placed in more prestigious professions in the learning resources than the female. The men are portrayed to be lawyers, doctors, engineers and accountants, while the females are mostly portrayed as teachers, nurses, petty traders and caregivers (focus group interview).

The findings from the above suggest that female learners' inactivity in the lessons may be due to the fact that learning resources focus more on male than female learners. They may not be comfortable with the resources used since they seem to appeal more to the male gender, giving them 'more important' roles and leading to females' reduced participation in class. This lack of engagement may be one of the causes of female learners' lower level of achievement. Owing to the findings, I came up with an action plan to remedy some of the issues identified.

First of all, I incorporated collaborative learning in the classroom by grouping the students in a mixed-gender group of at least five students a group, with two or three female students. This would motivate all learners to fully participate in the class activities within smaller, co-operative learning groups rather than in the whole class. I also chose resources such as documentaries, videos, textbooks and charts that reflect the achievement and contributions of women in society, just to encourage my female learners to contribute to the discussion and make the lesson more interesting to both learners. In my choice of materials, I also chose resources that project both males and females as engineers, lawyers, teachers, nurses and administrators, among others. In addition, for each topic or context, I invited a female teacher to the class to talk to and motivate the learners. I also asked the students to act in a simple drama where both males and females play different roles regardless of their gender.

To evaluate the effect of the action plan on the students, I used a questionnaire and focus group interview. Eight students were in the focus group, while the questionnaire was administered to ten students (who answered the initial questionnaire) and sought to establish the influence of the learning resources on inclusive gender education and to further assess the impact of the adequate choice of learning resources in promoting gender inequality in teaching and learning in the classroom. In the questionnaire, six students strongly agreed that they prefer working with the opposite sex on familiar tasks. While one said, 'Working with students of the opposite sex was enjoyable', another said, 'The recent lesson helped me to get a broader understanding of the role of women in society'. Four students disagreed with the above, but also agreed that their exposure to the lesson reveals that women too are good administrators; the resources revealed that teaching, engineering, nursing and law are suitable professions for both males and females; the resources used in the class enhanced their understanding of women's abilities.

In the questionnaire, four students indicated that they enjoyed classes with mixed-ability grouping. They enjoyed doing tasks in pairs. Three of the female students strongly agreed that the pair group enabled them to become more active. Three out of the five female learners were observed taking centre stage as group leaders and scribes during group activities at the implementation stage. In the questionnaire, four of the female students affirmed that they enjoyed working with the opposite sex in familiar tasks, most especially if it involved the use of songs, dialogue, videos and storytelling. Even though a larger percentage of the students enjoy working in groups and the learning resources used by the teacher, four of the learners in the questionnaire said they need more support to be able to work with others.

Results from the questionnaire also indicated that three female learners became more interested in the lesson and willing to participate in class activities and discussions. In the questionnaire also, seven learners agreed that the resources used in the class have positively influenced their views on gender education. In the focus group, learners indicated that women can be outstanding in administration, law, as managers, etc. Six of the learners are of the view that women can be engineers and lawyers, stressing that it is important for both genders to participate in those professions since both have the ability to excel in them (questionnaire). However, three of the learners, both male and female, still hold a strong view that women's participation in some professions, especially engineering, could be a Herculean task. They hold the view that most women cannot endure or resist hardship in those professions. In the focus group, females indicated they will prefer less busy jobs like simple business, teaching and agricultural activities. One respondent, still in the focus group, said, 'I prefer women taking less risky and less time-demanding jobs'. The students were asked whether women can be engineers, lawyers, bankers or administrators. Another student added, 'I prefer to teach than be an engineer due to the risk involved'. Another student said, 'I prefer jobs that are not time-demanding' (focus group interview).

After the implementation stage, most of the students affirmed that the lesson helped them to have a broader understanding of women's role in society. A learner said, 'The teacher's choice of learning resource enabled me to understand the role of both male and female gender' (focus group interview). Another one added, 'The resources have helped me to know that females can be good lawyers, engineers and doctors' (focus group interview). Yet another respondent admitted, 'I realise that women can be good administrators' (focus group interview). Others said the lesson had influenced their choice of career. Seven students agreed that the learning resources the teacher used are interesting and engaging, especially textbooks, pictures and drama, while two students held a contrary view.

This research has in diverse ways exposed me to different learning resources which are available to the teacher, such as content and material resources (videos, images, animations, computers, etc.). The teacher is considered the first resource in the class that will make other resources workable. Personally, when I discovered that learning resources could influence my learners' achievement in the class and influence class participation and interaction among the learners, I made it a point of duty to make these resources available for every lesson.

The action plan implemented has helped me to determine the best learning resources to engage both male and female learners and also erase stereotypes that students hold about the choice of career. My students became more willing to participate in the class, especially the females after being exposed to documentaries, drama and pictures of women who are excelling in more prestigious professions. It helps boost their confidence and makes them active instead of passive learners in the class. My male learners too are put on a balance to accept the fact their female counterparts too can be good engineers, teachers, administrators and lawyers, among others. Nevertheless, a few learners – because of their background, inadequate exposure and inability to interpret charts, pictures and videos – had reservations about the role of women and also find it difficult to work with the opposite sex.

In a typical classroom setting, gender bias exists whereby even teachers believe that boys are more skilled and knowledgeable than girls. As such, the boys are always put at the forefront in terms of assigning tasks. There are also widespread beliefs that boys perform better as compared to girls in science, like chemistry, biology, physics and mathematics. However, adequate and appropriate use of learning resources is an avenue that is capable of changing the narratives. Learning resources, if properly and adequately handled, will help both genders to compete comfortably in the class. We must ensure that learning resources show gender in equal measure.

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**As a teacher, I should
design more activities
that allow for
collaboration.**

Moussa Ngom (Senegal)





Moussa Ngom

Moussa Ngom is a Senegalese teacher of English and French. He has a teaching degree in secondary education and has 14 years of teaching experience. Moussa holds a bachelor's degree in the sciences of education.

Girls' passivity in the classroom



I teach in Kaolack, a region in the centre of Senegal, 226km from the capital city, Dakar. My school is located in a village called Mbouma in the region of Kaolack. There are around 300 students in my school, both boys and girls, and an average of 30 students per class. There are also 20 teachers of different subjects, among whom we are four teachers of English. My students are mostly between 12 and 17 years old. In Grade 4, where I conducted this research, students are between 15 and 17 years old. The school has more girls than boys.

Over the years, I have noticed that girls in my classroom are rather passive. By passive, I mean that the majority of my fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade female learners do not participate in classroom activities. I first referred to my school head and to my colleagues who teach at the school before I was posted there. They all argued that it was a religious belief: females should stay at their place and observe. This has led to a situation where I have to prompt them to speak and/or respond to questions in class. Classroom participation has been shown to improve students' learning outcomes, so it has bothered me when my female students are passive in class. This is why I chose to explore the fourth-grade girls' passivity in classroom activities to enable me to understand the situation and, if possible, remedy it.

I have chosen this topic because the success of my teaching depends mostly on the involvement of all students, boys as well as girls. In addition, I realised that it behoves me to find a solution to that problem in order to effectively reach my pedagogical objectives, because with a class partly active, the final goals of any teacher could be denied and learners themselves will feel a lack of interest and involvement.

In order to have an overview of the situation, I asked four questions:

- A. What do I mean by girls' passivity in the classroom?
- B. How do girls participate in the classroom?
- C. What do my students think of their participation in the classroom?
- D. What do my colleagues think of girls' participation in the classroom?

To answer these questions, I decided to set up four tools to collect data. I used a journal to enable me to record anecdotal happenings regarding girls' participation that would put meaning to the occurrence. I tried to outline the importance of the topic to me and wrote down my expectations in terms of girls' participation. I also used classroom observation to have clear evidence of how participation occurred in the classroom during activities, appreciating girls' behaviour. A colleague observed my class three times to answer four questions, and during his observations he answered the questions based on what he noticed.

Another tool I used was a questionnaire for the 12 female learners of the class because I needed to know what my learners thought of their participation, how they felt in the classroom and what activities they preferred. I gave them one day to answer the questionnaire individually. But not only that, I also did an interview with colleagues who intervened in the same class to know what they thought of girls' participation, to know how they appreciate the issue. With colleagues who do not speak English, I did the interview in French. This step of collecting data took about one week to be completed.

Using such tools made me confirm my initial views that my female students were not actively involved in classroom activities (observation notes). They were more observers than actors. They rarely raised their hands or spoke aloud in the classroom, and they were not at ease when they had to act in front of the whole class (interview with colleagues). I also noticed that female learners sat most of the time behind and seemed to lack interest in what happened in the classroom (journal).

Another thing observed was that the majority of them used to work alone instead of participating in pair work or group work (observation notes). I also noticed that some girls didn't want to make an effort at the first session when I organised them into groups. They were not very enthusiastic (journal). And I do understand that my female students didn't have the habit of working in groups because, during the interview session, my colleagues confirmed that they didn't organise students in groups because of the large number of students. For them, it takes time to organise learners in a group, and they need time to finish the assigned programme (interview). Also, the girls themselves confessed they preferred individual work. Ten of the 12 girls in the class ticked 'individually' when I asked them what their preferred way of interacting in the classroom was (questionnaire).

Based on the findings above, I created an action plan to address the issues identified. The action plan was carried out for four weeks in ten hours.

I designed a reading lesson about topics related to gender in order to raise awareness about the role of women in today's society. I proposed to use pair work and group work, mixing the boys and girls in pairs or groups. First, I planned pre-reading activities like asking questions, mind mapping and brainstorming on the topic of the day. In mixed groups, the students familiarised themselves with the text, and then, in turn, girls and boys practised individual reading aloud. Students then answered comprehension questions (give causes – consequences – comparing with their local experience – and so on). At the very end, students worked in pairs and presented or performed a dialogue about gender issues such as their dependence on men, inequality in employment, gender-based violence, and so on.

To evaluate the effects of the strategies in the action plan, I created three tools to collect data. I used a journal once again during the process of implementation. It permitted me to note the information related to female learners' behaviour. Also, I used other classroom observations that were carried out by the same colleague. He observed at the beginning of the implementation, during the process and at the end. This time, he focused on the strategies I was using and the female learners' behaviour, whether it changed or not. And at the end of the implementation, I conducted a focus group with the female learners to know their thoughts about the strategies that were included in the action plan and their effects.

After analysing the results, I noticed that my strategies had a positive impact on my female learners' behaviour. The evaluation revealed that my female students were able to act and express themselves more. The observer noted, 'They looked comfortable and seemed to be unafraid of sharing their views. Only two out of 12 female students were passive. They didn't interact with their mates in the group work. During dialogues also the same two girls didn't speak aloud' (observation notes).

My journal notes revealed that during the presentations, one female student went blank while speaking and did not want to continue her presentation. However, I decided to talk to these students individually to know how I could help them. It seems that getting out of being shy will take time. With consistent practice and encouragement, they may eventually overcome shyness (journal notes).

Based on the female students' answers, the focus group showed that they were able to participate in classroom activities like the majority of their male mates. To the question 'Do you consider the practice we had in recent weeks has been enough to improve your confidence to speak in class?', they all said 'Yes' before explaining. One confessed, 'I didn't want to speak before because I didn't have the habit of speaking in front of many people, but during group-work activities I knew that I was as capable as my classmates.' Another one explained, 'During the activities I gained a lot of confidence because in our group work, everyone had a role. I was once a "notetaker" and once a "reporter". It is my first time to be enough [sic] involved in classroom activities' (focus group interview).

Students indicated that in different ways, they were able to speak in front of the class because when they worked in groups, they became self-confident, and the topic revealed that as girls, they could act as well as boys. From the text about gender equality and the debates around it (brainstorming, comparing information of the text to the local reality), female students were encouraged to play roles in the activities and to express themselves with no doubt (observation). This seemed to enhance active participation (journal notes).

During the implementation process, students – girls as well as boys – were very interested in the topic. All the class worked actively in groups or in pairs, as the observer noted, 'The classroom was very noisy and I found the students very involved and excited to discuss the topic' (observation notes). When they started reporting, it seemed as if girls would not let the boys dominate the activities any longer (observation notes). A girl reported, 'Because the points were already discussed in groups, I was confident to say it' (focus group interview).

The pre-reading and the post-reading activities met my expectations because female students seemed motivated and they were very active. Ten out of 12 presented in front of the class, they spoke aloud, they raised their hands, and the most important thing was that they interacted in groups or in pairs (journal notes). One girl remarked that this strategy allowed her to 'stand alone in front of my classmates and speak' (focus group). The female students liked the dialogue activity very much, and it was very interesting because they even presented new ideas that are not in the text we dealt with (observation).

This experience let me know that my female students are not different from male students at all. My female learners are able to express and defend their points during debates and they are motivated as well. All I needed to do was to take into account their needs and interests. I will keep choosing topics that may be interesting for both boys and girls. Also, I will continue working with my classes the same way as long as possible to ensure the participation of all learners individually and in groups/pairs.

My action plan improved and enabled me to address the issues identified by my learners. It was annoying for me to see my female students so passive, but now they are behaving differently. Talking about gender equality, their obstacles and dealing with gender stereotypes helped my female students to be at ease and become more confident, as they strongly believed that they could be as active in the classroom as boys. I noticed this as they were able to take notes during group work and agreed to report and perform dialogues too. They are now interested in pair work, group work and having specific roles in their groups. Before implementation, some girls didn't want to work in pairs with boys. They wanted to work with girls, otherwise they didn't participate. But now, they accept working with boys as well. Though these activities were applied in four weeks, with constant practice, learners will make further improvements.

I believe that when the actions are applied consistently and longer, the results could be even better. I learned that providing opportunities for students to speak with their peers enables them to practise in a friendly environment, making them more confident, and this was exactly what I aimed for when conducting this research. As a teacher, I should design more activities that allow for collaboration.



This page Girls playing soccer.
Photograph by Mat Wright.

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**Exploratory action
research is an ideal form
of practitioner research.**

Kikelomo Adeniyi (Nigeria)





Dr Kikelomo Adeniyi

Dr Kikelomo Adeniyi is a teacher and teacher-trainer at the Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos, Nigeria. She teaches courses in General Studies English and also core English courses to her undergraduate and Professional Diploma in Education students. She has a couple of publications to her credit, and she is a contributor to the British Council, Teaching English Africa platform.

Gender effects on choice of words in a writing task



I am a teacher-trainer at the Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos, Nigeria. My research was carried out at the Nigeria French Language Village International Secondary School, Badagry in Lagos, Nigeria. It is a secondary school where learners are expected to spend six years – three years for Basic Education and another three for Senior Secondary Education. The participants of this research were of an average age of between 15 and 16 years. They were all in their final year of Senior Secondary Education. These students are drawn from different tribes of Lagos, the economic headquarters of Nigeria, which is a cosmopolitan state.



Photo of the French Village International College

I have been a teacher and teacher-trainer for more than three decades. Over the years, I have observed that more often than not there are differences in the written essays of my male and female students. I also observed that male students tend to write better than female ones. For example, they tend to use words more expressively. A discussion with a colleague made me realise that her thoughts on this were aligned with mine. This piqued my interest and hence the desire to explore the area of writing tagged 'Gender differences in the choice of words in a writing task'. This would enable me to get empirical evidence to support my students more in improving their writing.

To ensure I obtained the needed data for this exploratory research topic, I identified three exploratory research questions (ERQs) which guided my thoughts viz:

- A. How often do I generate differences in the choice of words between male and female students?
- B. How often do students manifest differences in the choice of words in a writing task?
- C. What do students think about the different choices of words used in their writing task?

I obtained data on these ERQs through a focus group discussion, a reflective journal and a pre-test. Such a test was based on essay questions to identify if indeed differences existed in the students' choice of words and their performance in the written task. This data predominantly formed the basis of this research. The reflective journal was specifically selected as it gave me the opportunity to think over the probable reasons for the differences in the choice of words between male and female students after analysing their written task. In addition, the focus group discussion – held with eight of the students – gave the room to further interact with the students to identify the probable factors responsible for the differences in the choice of words (as the content of some of these essays was revealed to them) and also assist in overcoming the identified challenges. Moreover, this informal discussion also gave me the chance to identify what these students think about the different choices of words used in their writing task. The task for the pre-test was to write an essay of between 200 and 250 words on the topic 'It is important that the Nigerian government gives free education to university students'. The students were asked to state if they agreed or disagreed with the statements and give reasons and some specific examples to support their opinion.

Forty students, comprising 20 female and 20 male students, participated in writing the essay as class work. The analysis of this writing task was done to identify if differences existed in their writing tasks, thereby answering the ERQs. After the essays had been written and analysed, a focus group discussion was held with eight students that originally wrote the essay. Their responses in the focus group discussion, the reflective journal and the analysis of their essays formed the basis of my research finding.

There was a significant difference in the vocabulary used by male and female students, with males exhibiting a flair for advanced choice of words against the simple word choice of female students. Male students were also more articulate than female ones (this finding was taken from the analysis of the writing task). Precisely, it was discovered that most male students (15/20) used advanced words in their essays. Meanwhile, a few female students (7/20) used advanced words, while the majority of them used simple and elementary words in their essays.

From the focus group discussion, the students were able to distinguish advanced vocabulary items from simple ones when read out to them. However, they could not detect the gender of the writers from the examples from their written texts.

Specifically, most students in the focus group (6/8) could not identify if an essay was written by a male or female when read out to them except if the gender of the writer was explicitly stated. However, most of them knew the difference between simple and advanced words. Moreover, a little over half of them linked correct usage of advanced words to a high level of intelligence and better writing skills. In my reflective journal, I ruminated over what could be the reasons for these differences and felt it could be that the male students spent much time reading extensively and also watched educational videos, which might have contributed to their advanced word choice.

I therefore concluded that the male students performed better in the writing task than the female ones. The male students' vocabulary and expressions were more advanced. For example, I found the use of vocabulary items that are more advanced with the male students – such as 'intellectually capable', 'full potential', 'mass produce' and 'nonchalant' – than with the female students.

From the analysis, I realised that I needed to support the female students to improve their expressive skills, particularly in expanding their vocabulary through intensive and extensive reading and listening, oral composition drills and the use of a vocabulary book and dictionary.

To address these challenges in writing and improve female students' writing, I took the following actions:

- I introduced oral composition drills where I had a tutorial with the students on the nitty-gritty of essay writing, specifically structure, choice of words, use of data and evidence, and paragraphing among others.
- I introduced a read-and-write session where we went through the write-ups of some female journalists who wrote on a similar topic. This was to give them more exposure and to also teach the female students that they could also write as excellently as the models given them. Male and female students were paired for feedback activities so that they could learn from one another. We further went through the earlier written task to ensure they learned from their mistakes.
- A writing activity – a post-test – was given to the students to find out the impact of the intervention on their performance. In all, emphasis was laid on the female students.

To identify the impact of these actions, I evaluated the actions by analysing the post-test given. I also had a focus group discussion with 12 of the participants – 8 females and 4 males. The following questions were asked in the focus group discussion:

1. What do you think of the oral discussion on writing activities? Did it help you in writing better, and how?
2. What do you think of the lesson/session where we examined the write-ups of some selected female writers? What did you learn from these activities?
3. What do you think of the feedback activities that allowed you to do the analysis of the writing task of your male/female classmates?
4. Do you think you are a better writer now after these actions?
5. What do you think about the guidance provided by your teacher? What other type of support do you think you need to improve your writing skills?

The results of the post-test indicated that the actions attempted made learners – males and females – generally perform better in the writing task. In the post-test, 88 per cent of the male students showed a noticeable improvement by performing better than they did in the pre-test. A male respondent stated in the focus group that the oral activities assisted him in 'using better vocabulary (words), proper organisation of paragraphs and points' (focus group interview).

Of the female respondents, 89 per cent also showed a better performance in the post-test, with improvement in their manifestation of the ability to have more content to develop and better organisation of their write-ups. Indeed, one stated in the focus group that 'the actions made me write a lot better than the one I wrote previously' (focus group interview).

On the issue of the need to support my female students to improve their expressive skills, particularly to expand their vocabulary, data indicated that female students (100 per cent of them) admitted that the oral composition drills/discussion were impactful. Some stated that it made them develop their vocabulary/choice of words and sense of reasoning (focus group interview). All the students agreed that the examination of the write-ups of female writers was also of much assistance. One said, 'It is a brilliant idea, though the male gender was dominant, females are also making an impact in this aspect' (focus group interview).

Some also stated that seeing female writers' work made them aspire to also write (well) like them. Indeed, another said it 'made me realise that females are also good writers and made me believe in myself as a female' (focus group interview). Further, students stated that the feedback activities that allowed them to do the analysis of the writing task of male/female classmates were also worthwhile. One said she was able to learn from her male classmate as he pointed out some of her mistakes. Another said she learned about how to make a good choice of words and use of punctuation marks, among other things (focus group interview).

All the participants in the oral discussion agreed the teacher's guidance assisted them. One stated that it helped her in 'developing my vocabulary and spelling', and another declared that 'the guidance was satisfying and encouraging'. They all believe they still need to engage in more practice, to ensure consistent writing and guidance.

After the implementation of action plans, I realised that the learners, especially female ones, wrote better, their sense of reasoning improved and they had more content to write, but I needed to ensure more practice exercises to facilitate further improvement.

I realised that exploratory action research is an ideal form of practitioner research, one that may be used to identify and eradicate issues in the classroom. This exploratory research training has made me learn quite a lot about classroom research and using such to tackle existing classroom challenges.

I have learned that when such issues arise/exist, I need to delve into finding out why such is the case and how such challenges might be ameliorated. Indeed, the exposure has successfully empowered me to carry out more such exploratory research and also train others on it. I plan to get further engaged in such research and also teach my trainees and pre-service teachers to get involved in such.

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When the teacher gives more consideration and responsibilities to female students, they become more active in classroom activities.

Issa Tounkara (Senegal)

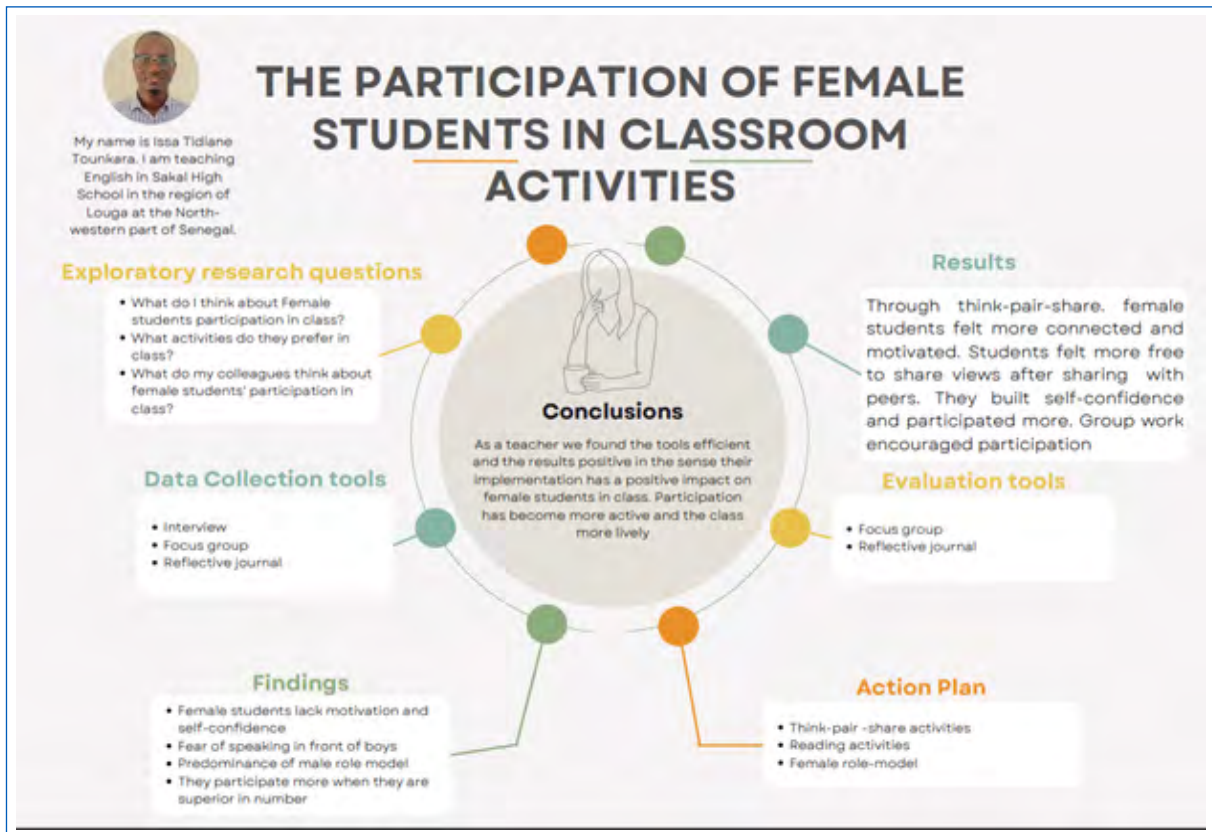




Issa Tidiane Tounkara

Mr Issa Tidiane Tounkara is a teacher of English (Senegal). He teaches in a village named Sakal, in the region of Louga. He has been teaching for 12 years now. He holds a master's degree from the English Department of Gaston Berger University in Saint Louis (UGB), Senegal. After his master's degree, he was admitted to the first university in the country, Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), where he started his doctorate. After, he succeeded in the entrance exam and was enrolled in the National Teacher Training School, where he has been trained for two years as a teacher of English in ESL/EFL contexts.

Female students' participation in classroom activities



My name is Issa Tidiane Tounkara and I am an English language teacher in Senegal. I teach in Sakal, a small village in the region of Louga located in the north-western part of Senegal, 228km from Dakar, the capital city. I am in a high school where I have been teaching for 12 years now. My students are aged between 15 and 20 years old in the fifth, lower- and upper-sixth forms. The particularity of this context is that we have a large number of female students compared to many schools around the country. The female students are many in terms of number in almost all my classes. This is a result of the government policy of enrolling the maximum number of girls in school over the past ten years. In this area, there is a strong belief in religious, traditional and cultural practices. Among these practices are the respect of females not mixing with males. These practices can have a significant influence on the behaviour of female students in the classroom.

The situation I chose to explore is the participation of female students in classroom activities. There is a real challenge in making female students participate in activities conducted in class, yet they are the majority in terms of numbers. This has mainly been attributed to stereotypes. By stereotypes, I mean the exclusive image that society has of females. I chose this topic to better understand the situation and bring solutions to that. This is important to me, as I would love to see more inclusion and participation of all learners in my classroom. It is relevant in the sense that it will bring more inclusion of female students in the activities, leading to improved learning outcomes.

In order to explore the situation, I asked the following exploratory research questions:

- What do I think about female students' participation in class?
- What activities do female students prefer in class?
- What do my colleagues think about the participation of female students in class?

To address these questions, I used three methods that permitted me to collect data leading to answer my exploratory questions. First, I used reflective journals to understand my own view on the issue. By using a reflective journal, I asked myself questions such as 'What do I mean by participation?', 'How do I involve my female students in classroom activities?', 'What activities do I do in class?' I had to answer them so as to have a general understanding of the situation. Second, I did a focus group interview to get female students' views on their participation in classroom activities. I had female students in groups of four and asked them a series of questions about their lack of participation. Here the focus was rather on reasons for their lack of participation. I even resorted to mother tongues to make them feel at ease to speak. I went to each group in turn and collected information from every single female student. The third and last method used involved an interview with my colleagues to collect their views on the issue. I intended to know my colleagues' perceptions about the participation of female students in their classes. Here I asked questions such as 'What do you notice about girls' participation in class?', 'How do you ensure female students' participation in class?'

The above data-collection tools permitted me to learn that female students do not participate in classroom activities because, according to most of my colleagues, they lack motivation and self-confidence. Some of my female students confirmed this as well in the focus group. Indeed, in the area we are teaching, there are some cultural and religious obstacles for female students to express themselves in class (reflective journal). This may explain this situation.

Another reason is that they fear speaking in front of their male classmates because they are mocked once they give wrong answers (focus group). A girl told me, 'We feel so shy to speak for fear of being mocked at by boys'. So shyness remains an obstacle for female students in class according to some of them. We are living in a society with a predominance of male role models. Some of my female students told me that they participate more when they are superior in number and when they are given the lead and that they prefer to work in groups to gain more confidence. While working in groups, they can gain from the help of peers. 'We are more at ease when working together with female peers' (focus group).

My colleagues said that the lack of self-confidence is mainly due to the fact that some teachers do not pay attention to female students. They do not encourage them to participate (interview). This lack of consideration towards them includes female students in classroom activities. Another colleague argued, 'Most female students do not participate because they lack vocabulary items to speak'.

Based on these findings, I chose to implement a reading comprehension lesson that dealt with a historical Senegalese female role model. The latter was a heroine in the fight for independence against the White colonisers. Activities were done in groups. I adopted the think-pair-share strategy, in which they discussed with peers to find out answers. Here the lead is given to them to build more confidence and to make them participate actively in activities. I implemented these actions within two weeks in four lessons.

To evaluate the effects of the action plan, I used reflective journals and focus group interviews. In the first method, after each session I responded to some questions about the participation of girls after implementation. In the second one, at the end of the lessons I interviewed the girls in groups to have their own views of the lesson and their participation.

I noticed through questions and answers that they felt interested in the topic and got motivated. They discovered all the values of the female role model and even gave me others in the history of our country. The class was becoming noisier as time went on. They even competed with their male classmates to show them that girls could do better than them and go beyond boys' expectations. A student said, 'We noticed that we had more good answers [sic] than boys'. Another added, 'We are stronger when working in groups' (focus group). In my journal, I wrote down that they took the lead and challenged male students in sharing their answers.

In the think-pair-share strategy implemented, female students say that they felt more connected and motivated in activities. A student assured me this activity 'has enabled me to exchange opinions with my peers'. Another one indicated that she felt better at ease and understood more when working with peers because 'we were more talkative than in the usual times'. The classroom was too noisy, though productive. According to a member of a group, this strategy permitted her to better understand and participate in class. Still, in the focus group, another student added that she felt more freedom when discussing with peers. Yet another said that working in pairs built 'self-confidence and gave me a sense of unity, complicity and solidarity'. 'With peers, I work more efficiently, and the activity is not time-consuming', a student said (focus group).

During the activities, female students avoided mistakes and better understood difficult words. They worked to find solutions together and were eager to share them with their peers (reflective journal). This strategy enabled them to find solutions easily (reflective journal). Overall, according to the students, the strategy used – think-pair share – was really ‘positive’ and ‘beneficial’ to them because they started producing and providing answers during the activities. I noted in the journal that they were more willing to offer responses to questions than before, concluding that this resulted from them sharing responses in pairs before the whole class. Thus, the speaking of students improved as they worked in pairs (reflective journal). They found together the right answer, but initially could not express the answers.

One female pupil pointed out that the advantage of the think-pair-share strategy is that it helped her fight the stress and build self-confidence. In fact, female students appeared to be more active in activities because they felt concerned and motivated (reflective journal). One said that working with peers permits her to ‘better understand’.

Additionally, in the focus group interview, students indicated that they felt freer and were more at ease working with their peers. They are more concentrated on their work (reflective journal). I took turns with groups to guide them and help them with difficult words.

Right at the beginning they remained reluctant, but after understanding the purpose of the strategy, they became more comfortable and started working and sharing their answers with peers (reflective journal). They felt really interested and motivated by the female role model stories we were studying because, as one said, ‘it recalled the story of our old parents’ (focus group). ‘It enables us to better know the value of women in the society and learn how we must behave if we follow the role model’, another added.

As a teacher, I found the tools efficient and the results positive in the sense their implementation had a positive impact on the participation of my female students in class. Participation has become more active, and the class livelier. This experience has provided me with the required tools to measure and tackle any issues related to my students in general and females in particular. This permits me as a teacher to pay more attention to female students to better understand and solve their problems in class.

This experience has taught me that, as teachers, we should be closer to our learners and pay more attention to them. When the teacher gives more consideration and responsibilities to female students, they become more active in classroom activities. This research also shows that when teachers are sensitive to the specific needs of female students and use strategies such as think-pair-share, female students become more active in class and participate more in activities. They feel more interested and motivated, which builds their self-confidence. Above all this action research project has helped me a lot as a teacher and requires some research strategies. I acquired a lot of research skills and know better how to conduct research. Hence, I grew from teacher to teacher-researcher.

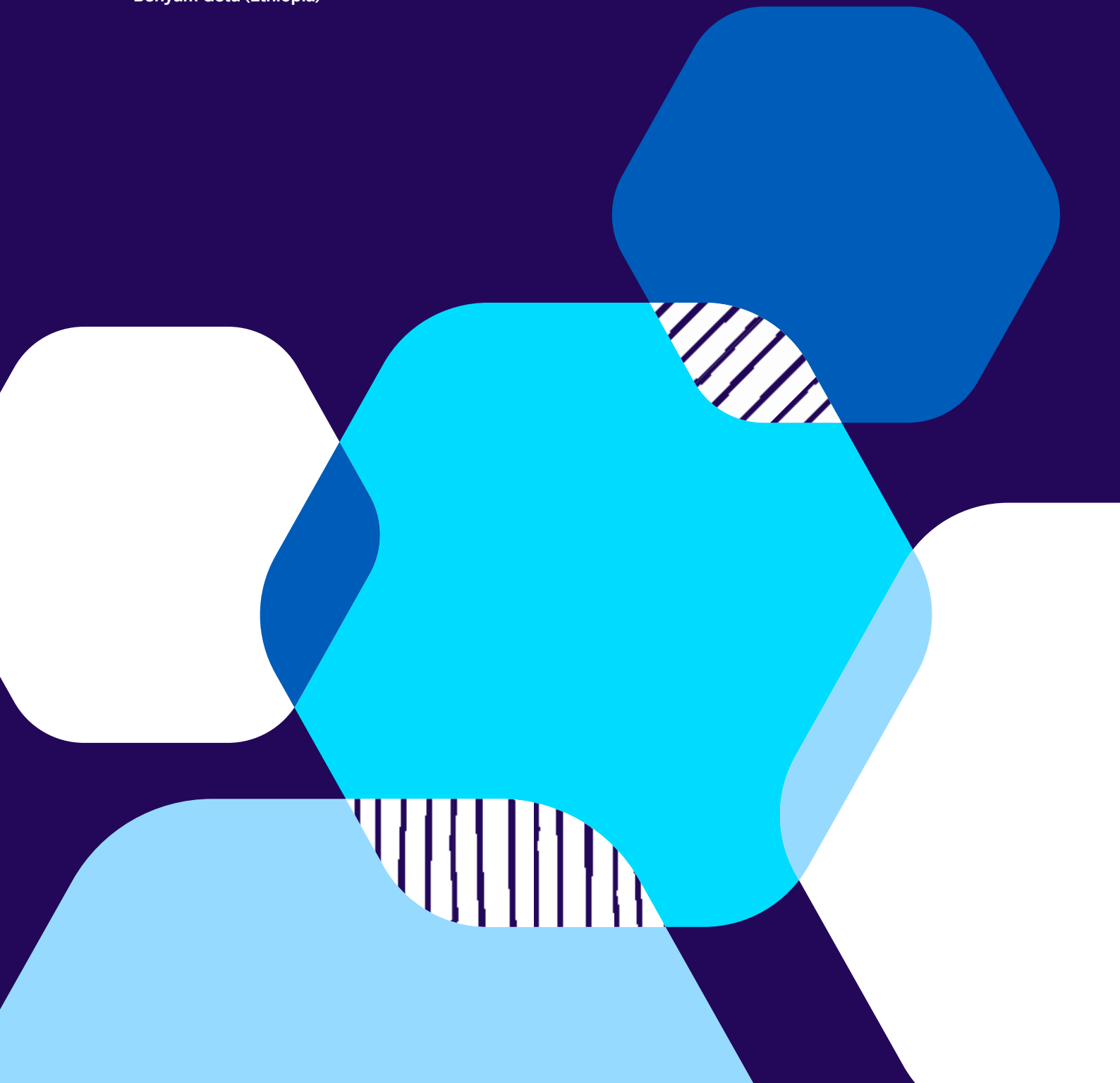


This page Two girls chatting in the school playground. Photograph by Mat Wright.

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**I believe that I now have
a ‘formula’ for dealing
with classroom issues.**

Benyam Getu (Ethiopia)

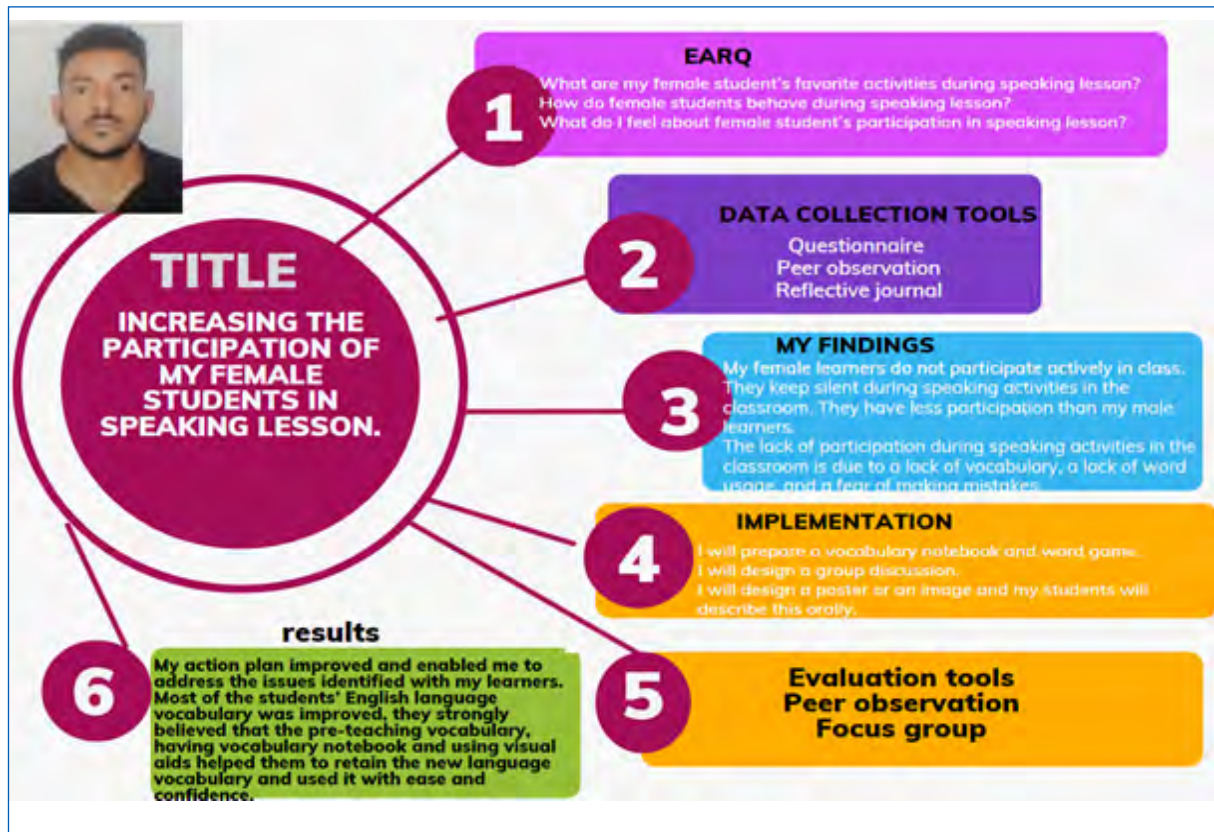




Benyam Getu

Benyam Getu has been a teacher of English as a Foreign Language for the past 16 years. He has a diploma in teaching Amharic, English and Civics. He holds a BA in Sociology and Social Anthropology and a second BA in English Literature. He did his MA in TEFL from Debre Berhan University in 2019. He loves teaching. The love of teaching explains why he has spent half of his life teaching. He aspires to continue to address teaching-related problems through research, especially exploratory action research.

Increasing the participation of female students in speaking class



This research was conducted at Dilachen General secondary school. It is located in Addis Ketema sub-city in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The school was established in 1994 EC. Currently, it has 2,400 students from Grades 9 to 12. The research was conducted with 50 Grade-12 students from sections 3 and 4. The students were aged between 17 and 19 years old. The research was conducted with 28 female students and 22 male students. The female students were the best achievers, who scored good grades in all subjects.



Dilachen General secondary school

I have been a teacher for the past 16 years. During this period or over time, I have noticed that my learners, especially the female ones, despite their good scores, are afraid to speak in class. They seem to be particularly afraid during speaking lessons, yet speaking is an important language skill. If they are good at listening, reading and writing they need to be good at speaking. Speaking is one of the productive skills, like writing. As foreign speakers of English, mastery of English language skills is enhanced when they speak the language more, yet female students are afraid to speak, thus presenting a problem. This is why I chose to explore the poor participation of my female students in the speaking class or lessons. I wanted to understand the reasons for this behaviour to enable me to get to the root cause and solve the speaking problem of my female learners. It was particularly interesting to establish the cause as I noticed that even though male students had a lot of problems with vocabulary, grammar and sentence construction among others, during speaking lessons they still tried to participate freely.

This study would enable me to understand their challenges, with the aim of improving their participation in speaking periods. It would also provide insights into possible challenges of teaching speaking which would be helpful in other classes, since English is taught as a foreign language. Moreover, the results of the study would play a great role to motivate other teachers to conduct action research to solve classroom problems. This study would also inform the school principals on an issue affecting classroom teaching with the aim of improving learning outcomes and could be part of the School Improvement Programme (SIP). Furthermore, this study could provide insights to the Addis Ababa School Bureau and Ministry of Education on practitioner research and particularly ways to improve the participation of female students especially in speaking lessons if results are shared with them.

In order to understand this situation, I came up with three research questions:

- A. What are my female students' favourite activities in speaking lessons?
- B. How do my female students behave in speaking class?
- C. What do I feel about my female students' participation in speaking lessons?

I used a questionnaire to collect data about my female students' favourite activities during speaking lessons, the activities that present difficulties for them, the kinds of speaking activities they would prefer and the nature of the difficulties they experience while speaking in English. In addition, I sought information on the types of materials they would want to have during speaking lessons.

I also used a reflective journal to share my thoughts on the exact situation that concerned me regarding my female students' participation in speaking lessons, the meaning of real participation, the activities I use to improve it, how I know whether my female students are participating or not and what I would do if they were not involved. I also wrote down what I expected from the speaking activities I carry out in the classroom. Through peer observations, I sought my colleague observer's opinion on how both male and female learners behaved during speaking lessons. I wanted to establish whether they both participate equally or not, how the teacher assists those participating less and any other concerns noticed during my speaking lessons.

A total of 54 students (33 females and 21 males) answered the questionnaire. Regarding students' favourite speaking activities, from the total number of my students, 24 of them indicated they liked discussions and 20 liked picture descriptions; presentations are the most difficult activity for 20 out of the 33 female students. Thirteen of my female students said they are passive participants in the speaking class. The 13 female students then said they were motivated in speaking lessons even though they were passive participants. With regard to the most common problems my students face during speaking activities, these are vocabulary deficiency (20), grammar (21), lack of confidence and problems with sentence construction (25). They basically said that their main problem was a lack of language vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. These were the main hindrances to participation in speaking activities in class. From the materials they wanted to have in speaking lessons, eight female students preferred science stories and 25 preferred films.

Female students' level of participation was graded based on how prepared they were, how readily they contributed to the conversation but did not dominate it, their class work and asking and answering questions. Data from observation and reflective journals corroborated the findings from questionnaires, showing that the female learners tended to hesitate and stop speaking altogether when they seemed to lack words. They seemed uneasy and embarrassed, lacking self-confidence when trying to express themselves but lacking words to use for expression (reflective notes).

From the observation, it was noticed that the female learners seemed more animated in activities involving discussion, otherwise most females kept silent. They used the local language when they attempted to answer questions (reflective notes). Even though I helped the female students who did not participate by calling them by their names, they were not active participants (observation). This lack of participation and hesitation frustrated me and affected my ability to help them learn the language well. I felt that I needed to assist the female students to participate more in class. I had to come up with strategies to achieve this (reflective notes).

From the data analysed, I now knew the main issues causing my female learners not to participate in the speaking lessons: vocabulary problems, unfamiliarity with lessons and lack of self-confidence.

To address these challenges, I designed an eight-week lesson specifically to improve their speaking skills. Before any speaking activities, I prepared vocabulary activities with pronunciation practice. I let students bring speaking lessons to their homes and come back after practising and being familiar with them. I also let them prepare and have their own vocabulary notebooks. I used pictures to prompt speaking. Information gaps and visual stimuli were among the pre-speaking activities that encouraged them to work in groups. A group setting provided a safe place to make mistakes without feeling judged.

To evaluate the effect of the action plan, I used peer observation and a reflective journal to record changes (if at all) to the degree of female students' participation in speaking activities. The main target of using those two techniques was to evaluate the effectiveness and the change that comes after the implementation of the suggested activities to establish if there was a change in the level of female students' participation.

The data collected indicated that my action plan improved and enabled me to address the issues identified by my learners. Most of the students' English language vocabulary improved, as shown in peer observations and a reflective journal. The learners were more forthcoming and ready to participate even with language challenges (reflective journal). Students were observed participating more in activities, appearing more confident and willing to speak even if they still made mistakes (observation). I believe that pre-teaching vocabulary lessons by having a vocabulary notebook and using visual aids helped them to retain the new language and use it with ease and confidence, leading to a willingness to participate (reflective notes).

Almost all female learners were able to use new words to describe images and posters in front of their classmates without being afraid of them, after participating in mini-group discussions. During the observation, learners were seen using new vocabulary words learned. The hesitation in responding to questions decreased since it seemed that learners had not been sure how to participate when they lacked words to use to communicate. With the vocabulary words learned, the hesitation decreased (reflective notes). Pre-teaching vocabulary and using visual aids seemed to have helped greatly to enable learners to retain the new language vocabulary (observation) and use it with ease and confidence (reflective notes). This was evidenced by the students' increased level of participation, how they used the vocabulary learned and their confidence, which had greatly improved compared to the period before the action.



Students in a discussion activity



Rather than blaming and accusing everyone about the weak participation of female students in speaking lessons, I tried to take responsibility for myself and correct them. The way I used to teach speaking, especially to my female students, changed. I started to prepare myself better when planning my lessons and also to prepare well before any speaking class to help my female learners by making lessons easier and more familiar. For the future, when I am thinking of teaching speaking, I will continue to pay attention to vocabulary, sentence construction, grammar and ways of developing my learners' self-confidence.

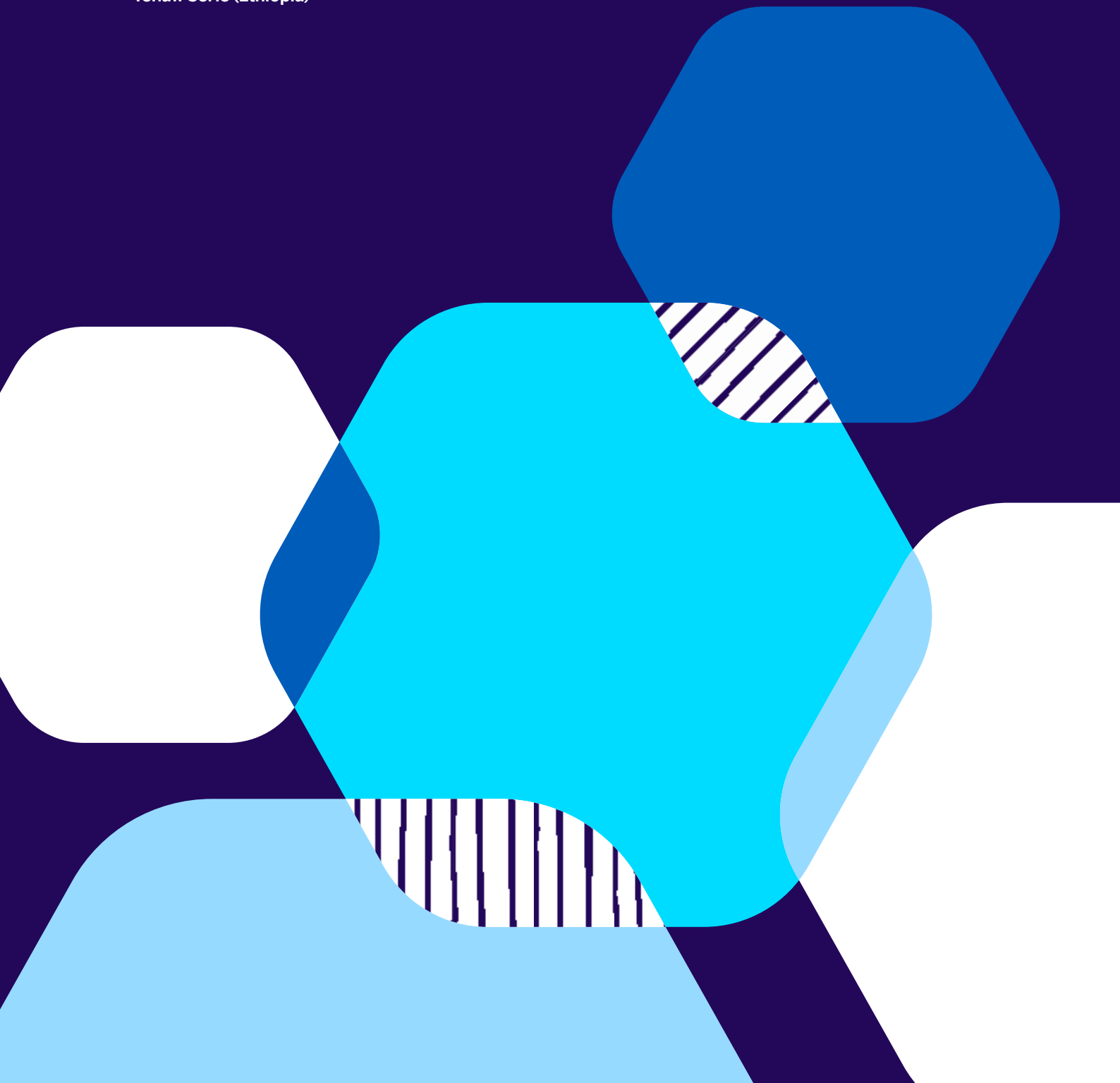
As a teacher, instead of blaming students and trying to justify the reason for their failure in every teaching-learning activity, I believe that I now am able to find a solution through classroom research. If we make efforts to investigate our practices, we can easily help our female students and can make our lessons more effective, efficient and productive. Vocabulary instruction, keeping a notebook with vocabulary words, making the learning environment conducive for learners to feel free to make mistakes and equipping them to at least construct simple sentences all help to improve learners' participation in lessons.

This research has taught me the value and importance of practitioner research. When you experience challenges in the classroom, a systematic search for answers can help you address the problem. I believe that I now have a 'formula' for dealing with classroom issues to establish the root cause: research. Finally, as a career structure, teachers are expected to do research here in Ethiopia. So if they work to conduct real research to address problems, there will be a lot of changes in their classrooms, just like I experienced in mine.

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**My students’
understanding of gender
equality has improved.**

Tenaw Serie (Ethiopia)





Tenaw Serie

Tenaw Serie is a high school teacher. He holds a master's degree in biology education. He teaches biology at General Secondary School. Tenaw Serie has more than 12 years of teaching experience in general secondary education, working in both rural and urban government schools.

Promoting gender equality in an Ethiopian classroom



I work at a government preparatory school, Dilachin General Secondary School, located in Addis Ketema sub-city Worda 3 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, around Amanueal Hospital near Merekato. I teach Grade-12 students (girls and boys) aged 17–18 years. I have 12 years of work experience teaching biology at a preparatory school. The school is in a community with low socio-economic status, so the students do not have the opportunity to get materials to study at home. Also, because they have illiterate parents, they have little or no one to assist them at home to improve their studies. The students live in a community with very little knowledge about gender equality in the classroom. To me, achieving gender equality in education means that boys and girls will have equal opportunities to realise their full potential and contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political development. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to understand and facilitate gender-inclusive teaching methods in the classroom.



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I noticed that my male learners assume themselves to be superior and they see their female classmates as inferior. Due to such perceptions, my female learners do not participate in classroom activities and also seem uncomfortable sitting next to people of the opposite gender. I also observed that female and male students lack the interest to share ideas or participate in classroom activities freely. They do not do projects together (male and female). This was a big problem in the classroom. Such obvious levels of gender inequality precipitated this research. The main purpose of this study is to facilitate gender-inclusive teaching methods in the classroom. I decided to research this situation because it is relevant to my teaching. Gender is important to equal access to opportunities to enable students to fully participate in the learning process.

I used to employ project-based learning, which was supposed to give my students the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills through engaging in the projects and working together (both boys and girls as they undertake the projects). The idea was for them to share ideas and feel free when they sit with their opposite-sex classmates, since collaboration is an important ingredient to learning. However, this did not happen. By failing to work together, the students missed opportunities to learn from one another. Therefore, I decided to address this problem by finding out what their thoughts were about gender equality and the activities they involve themselves in the classroom.

To understand the situation, I came up with some exploratory questions:

- A. What is gender equality for me?
- B. What strategies do I use in class to promote gender equality?
- C. What do students think of the techniques I use to promote gender equality in the classroom?

To answer these questions, I decided to carry out a focus group discussion, do classroom observations and keep a journal. In my journal, I wrote my thoughts regarding gender equality, my definitions of it and its importance, the activities I planned regularly to ensure gender equality in my classroom, whether I knew when gender discrimination was occurring in the classroom, what I did when this happened and what I thought about the causes of gender inequality.

I also used a reflective journal to share my thoughts on the exact situation that concerned me regarding my female students' participation in speaking lessons, the meaning of real participation, the activities I use to improve it, how I know whether my female students are participating or not and what I would do if they were not involved. I also wrote down what I expected from the speaking activities I carry out in the classroom. Through peer observations, I sought my colleague observer's opinion on how both male and female learners behaved during speaking lessons. I wanted to establish whether they both participate equally or not, how the teacher assists those participating less and any other concerns noticed during my speaking lessons.

For the classroom observation, I asked a colleague to observe my teaching in class. This would enable the observer to have a real experience of what happens in the classroom, thus noting what kind of participation was happening in my classroom, if any. I also made use of a reflective journal.

About the technique that is used to promote gender equality in the classroom, five groups took part in the focus group discussion. These students were selected based on their gender (one male and one female) in each group. The total number of participating students was 30 in five groups. The discussion was based on three questions that aimed to know students' perceptions about gender equality in the classroom and whether any strategies for promoting gender equality were used in the classroom. They helped me to respond to the question 'What do students think of the techniques I use to promote gender equality in the classroom?'

After analysing all the data obtained, I realised that my objectives matched my research objectives. In my journal, I wrote: 'The purpose of gender equality task is to improve their gender equality and ensures equal access to opportunities to enable students to fully participate in the learning process'. I also wrote that 'Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, thereby recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women' (reflective journal). In other words, gender equality is the state in which access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender. However, I also came to realise that it's not only women who are affected by gender inequality – all genders are impacted, including men, transgender people and gender-diverse people. This, in turn, has an impact on children, families and people of all ages (reflective journal).

Equality in gender does not mean that women and men will have or need the exact same resources, but that women's, men's, trans people's and gender-diverse people's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on their assigned gender at birth. Gender equality entails equal distribution and opportunity for all without regard for gender. It is the absence of discrimination on the basis of a person's gender in terms of rights, responsibilities, opportunities and benefits (reflective journal).

In relation to my second question, which focused on the strategies I used in class to promote gender equality, the observations indicated that I mixed boys and girls to work on group work, but most of the time female students did not participate because they felt inferior. However, I tried to do my best for all of my students to participate equally in class. As my peer observer noted, 'The teacher encourages every student to work together' (peer observation). My colleague also observed that I did not segregate boys and girls into separate lines or separate sports activities, and I mixed seating in the classroom. Additionally, I made sure that educational materials like worksheets, sports activities material and modules were free from gender stereotypes. My colleague wrote, 'The teacher helps the students in class irrespective of their gender, but most female learners did not participate' (peer observation).

The report from the focus group discussion revealed that female students think that my technique was not effective because I use the alphabet or ID number to group my students and I did not take into consideration whether my students' seating arrangement was appropriate or not. Also, I did not consider gender while the students voted for their class representative. They said that their seat and group arrangement should be reassigned since it was not considering their benefit. Besides, my female students indicated that 'representatives of the class should be voted from both males and females' (focus group discussion), since by default only males can be selected. Male students said that they are happy with this arrangement (focus group discussion). All of my students indicated that they needed some advice regarding gender issues since they were being affected by many factors,

The action plan included strategies to change my students' negative thinking about their female classmates by providing advice on gender issues. In the beginning, I explained gender equality to my learners and read to them our school's rules and regulations about gender equality. Then I asked my learners to explain what they understood about gender equality at the end of the session. Then, I implemented classroom activities that promoted gender equality in the classroom. I divided my students into four or five mixed groups, then assigned each group a topic to discuss and share, giving each group an equal opportunity to speak and instructing male students not to interrupt female students. My intention here was to change my students' negative thinking about their female classmates by providing advice on gender issues.

In order to evaluate the effects of my action plan, I planned a second cycle of data collection. To this end, 30 students (20 girls and 10 boys) were organised into five groups to take part in focus group discussions (these were the same students that participated in the exploratory phase). This time, the discussion was around the impact of the actions implemented and whether they were appropriate for improving female learners' participation in classroom activities.

During and after the implementation of the action plan, I invited my colleagues to observe my classes twice. The focus of the observations was to check the activities that the students were engaged in during the seating arrangement and observe if the activities met their objectives, and also look out for the female students' participation. I also used classroom observations to compare students' performance in recent spelling tasks to their performance before the application of the action plan.

The lesson observation notes I received from my colleague showed that female students were able to participate in classroom activities more confidently. They were able to ask and answer questions. Also, my students did not think negatively about students from the opposite sex. Male students did not think of themselves as superior in relation to their female classmates. Also, female students discussed gender equality in a good manner with other group members during discussion activities, and very few students remained passive during the classroom activities.


It was observed that most students were seated in mixed groups in their classroom and they shared their knowledge and worked on their project and assignment. In the focus group, one student said, 'We feel free when we sit with our opposite-sex classmates and are happy'. They said they weren't afraid to sit, help and discuss with each other. 'Our seating arrangement enabled us to benefit from each other and increase our overall interaction'.

In the peer observation, my colleague also said that when the rules and the regulations of the school about gender equality were explained to the students, they showed interest by asking questions regarding gender equality. It was also observed that the students were taking notes given by their teacher on gender equality. In the focus group, students said that they understood the concept of gender equality in detail. 'Our understanding of gender equality helped us to promote the development of life skills – like self-management, communication, negotiation and critical thinking – that young people need to succeed'. They also stated that they will follow all of their school's rules and regulations since their feelings about their classmates regarding gender had changed.

In the focus groups, students confirmed that this was enabled by a variety of practice exercises such as group work, assignments and projects. They also reported that they gained the ability to explain their ideas freely in front of their classmates in the classroom. They indicated that they felt that every student is equal except for their efficiency and promised to help each other achieve good grades in school.

This research enabled me to change my students' negative thinking about their female classmates by providing advice on gender issues. My action plan ensured equal access to opportunities to enable students to fully participate in the learning process. And also, my students' understanding of gender equality has improved. Finally, I have learned and realised that forming group discussions on gender equality and supporting my teaching strategies by using different methods like describing, I divided the lesson into a session, explaining gender equality to my learners and reading them our school's rules and regulations about gender equality. I have explained to them the benefit of achieving gender equality in their studying. Then I asked my learners to explain gender equality at the end of the session.

To conclude, I think that the best way to promote gender equality in the classroom is by simply encouraging everyone to work together.



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