



English as a School Subject – Briefing Paper 2

Project Findings Related to the Gender Differences in Language Teaching and Learning at Primary Schools

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The English as a School Subject project is working with teachers and students in the primary school sector in four countries – Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan. This paper focuses on preliminary findings relating to gender differences and girls’ views on the benefits of their English language learning and how it will help them to reach their personal goals. The findings were obtained through analysing teachers’ interviews, focus group discussions, children’s surveys, classroom video-recordings, children’s voxpops and observations carried out by co-investigators and research assistants. The project aims to promote gender equality, as a key organizing feature of the research.

Gender policy in education

Bangladesh: In the last 20 years, Bangladesh has promoted gender equality and women’s economic empowerment. This is thanks to the emergence of the garment industry demanding female labour, and only those with a basic level of education. The government has introduced free education at schools for girls, including a stipend scheme which supports girls from poorer backgrounds to continue their education. Thus, a gender gap has declined. An important contribution to gender parity is also being made by the network of NGO schools established by BRAC.

Malawi: Malawi has a National Girls Education Strategy that emphasizes increased girls’ enrolment and retention; improved performance; and the creation of an enabling environment for girls’ education. However, substantial gender gaps are visible in its implementation and in public resistance, based on cultural and traditional practices. The country had made progress towards enrolling more girls in primary school, however, the completion rate at primary schools is low, particularly in rural areas.

Mexico: There have been a number of educational reforms in recent years to encourage positive changes to promote a gender balance. However, it is still necessary to eliminate the gender gap in education, particularly for rural and Indigenous women. This initiative was undertaken to facilitate a narrower gender gap in education, a reduction in school-related gender violence, and improved learning outcomes for girls.

Uzbekistan: The National Action Strategy contributes to the promotion of gender equality, facilitating equal educational quality for all, creating opportunities for females from rural areas to obtain higher education, achieving gender equality for them, and preventing violence and human trafficking. It also provides financial support to conduct government programmes in this field. However, much remains to be done to create equal opportunities for girls and women in both urban and rural areas.

Findings relating to Gender

Bangladesh:

- Society expects women to become primary school teachers, and equates the profession with motherly care. Male teachers would rather be secondary/high school teachers.
- In general, society treats teachers with respect.
- Gender-wise, girls make up 51.08% of primary school enrollment, and boys, 48.92%
- Boys and girls are given the same opportunities in class.
- Classroom achievements do not depend on gender.
- Boys' and girls' groups both agreed separately that girls perform better in English classes.
- Cultural Muslim tradition separates girls' and boys' seating arrangements in class, but some schools have mixed seating.
- Boys and girls aspire to be someone respectable, such as a doctor, a teacher, a pilot, etc. There were no gender differences observed in their aspirations.
- Both boys and girls think learning English is very important.
- Children generally perceived that boys are naughty, and that girls are shy.
- Some girl-students do not have time to study at home because of household chores.

Malawi:

- English appears to be the most preferred subject for the learners for either gender.
- Boys and girls compete in achieving good grades.
- Girls preferred nursing, teaching, being a doctor and being a bank manager.
- Boys aspired to be teachers, police officers, soldiers, doctors, and being researchers/journalists.
- Boys and girls are treated equally when it comes to school chores, although culturally girls are treated differently from boys at home.
- Teachers do not segregate genders in class during class activities and when asking questions. Sometimes girls are asked more questions than boys in an effort to ensure gender inclusivity.
- Girls are more often shy in answering questions.
- Seating plans are gender sensitive, and boys and girls mix, even in group activities.

Mexico:

- Teachers treat boys and girls in the same way.
- Boys are the ones who miss classes often.
- In face-to-face classes the children are allowed to sit wherever they want.
- Both boys and girls think that English is very important for their future careers, for communicating with other people in different countries, and especially for travelling.
- Both boys and girls are good at answering the difficult questions in English.
- Before the pandemic, a teacher asked them to seat boy-girl-boy-girl since sometimes boys were restless.
- Boys aspires to be: a professional football player, a member of the national army/guard, a scientist, an astronomer, a soldier, a veterinarian, and a doctor.
- Girls aspired to be: a veterinarian, a psychologist, a painter, a lawyer, a police officer, a teacher, an accountant, a military nurse, and a business woman.
- Children feel safe because their parents take them to school and pick them up after classes.

Uzbekistan:

- 90% of schoolteachers are female. Married women prefer to work at schools to cope with family duties and work.
- Girls and boys are treated equally by teachers.
- Girls presume that boys are more irresponsible, and that girls are more active, attentive and responsible.
- The children perceived that, although boys are usually very playful, they tend to answer the most difficult questions.
- Boys and girls sit in class in the way that they wish, or are mixed by their teacher.
- Boys and girls may skip classes equally, but for different reasons.
- Boys would like to become pilots, soldiers, presidents, diplomats, lawyers, mathematicians;
- Girls would like to become tailors, teachers, hairdressers, tourist-guides, designers, models and doctors.
- Boys and girls are sure that they will need English to enter higher educational establishments and to get a well-paid job.
- Gender difference is observed in the distribution of classroom duties. Boys do more “masculine work”, girls, “feminine”.

Implications

In all countries, both male and female students view learning English as being important for several reasons: as a required subject in schools; for entering universities; for their future careers; and for travelling and communication. Although these four learning contexts are totally different, the children’s positive attitudes to learning English facilitates students of both genders to have better achievements.

Both male/female teachers and students have similar perceptions of contextual factors in language learning: we observed no strong gender differences. This finding may be seen to be a result of greater educational awareness about the importance of education for both men and women. Although the recent governmental strategies in the four countries strive to ensure equal gender opportunities for teachers and students, local customs and traditions still interfere with the timely implementation of these strategies.

