

## English as a School Subject – Briefing Paper 3

### **Researching with children: Experiences from Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan**

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This is briefing paper the third in a series of papers originating from a research project named “*English as a school subject: learning effective practices from low level primary school English language teachers*”. The project is being funded by the British Council and implemented in Malawi, Bangladesh, Mexico and Uzbekistan with oversight from the University of Stirling, UK. The project aims to explore, identify and share successful teaching practices of teachers with low English levels and few resources. This briefing paper highlights the role of children as young researchers and how they were engaged to support the data collection process for this project.

#### **Children as co-researchers**

Contrary to the normal expectation where adults research *on* children, this project also involved learners as co-researchers. We termed them “young researchers” and empowered them to conduct research with their peers and collect data that responded to the objectives of the project. The aim was to enhance the professional role of the children in conducting research on their peers in order to generate contextual knowledge about the teaching and learning of English. The data collection was completed through child-led surveys, where a total of 47 young researchers from 6 primary schools across the four countries were involved in the study. These young researchers collected data from a total of 393 learners using a structured questionnaire administered face-to-face in Malawi, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan; and through Google forms in Mexico, as schools were still closed due to COVID-19 during the time the child-led surveys were being conducted.

#### **The process**

What stood out in all the four countries involved in this study is that the initial process of briefing the young researchers was similar across contexts and included discussions about what research is, what it is for, and the introduction of some tools for conducting research. Thereafter, the young researchers formulated some questions to ask their peers at the school. The questions centred around the following thematic areas: the learning of English; the language used in an English class; the classroom activities in an English lesson; the English textbook; the exams; gender; and COVID-19 and education. The principal researchers only refined the questions to ensure clarity and good flow. Then, another session followed, where the principal researchers and the young researchers went through the questions together so that the young researchers could understand and familiarize themselves with the questions. Thereafter, the young researchers administered the child-led surveys to their peers. Art books in Uzbekistan, Bangladesh and Mexico were used in the data collection process, whereas questionnaires/booklets were used in Malawi, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below.

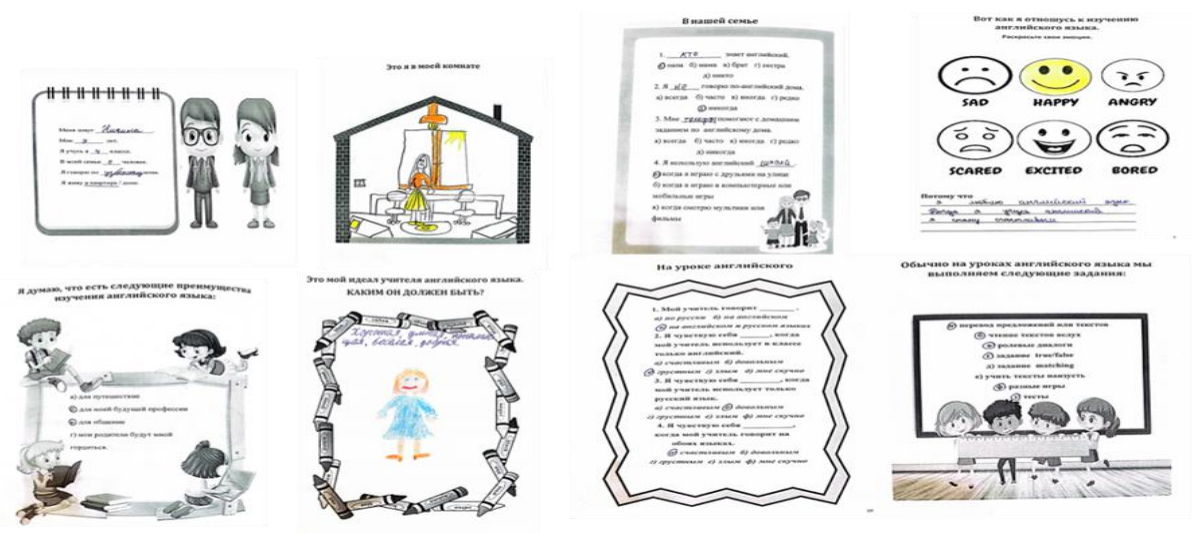


Figure 1: Examples of some of the artbook pictures (Uzbekistan, Bangladesh and Mexico)



Figure 2: a young researcher explaining how to fill a questionnaire (Malawi)

After the data collection process, another session with the principal researchers followed to allow the young researchers to elicit their experiences and the major issues that came out from the survey. The whole process took not less than three days in each of the four countries. Further to the child-led surveys, some of the young researchers were also involved in making vox-pops<sup>1</sup> with their peers. Young researchers were asked to pose as journalists and ask one question to a number of learners. Another young researcher or cameraman took the role of camera operator, video-recording the interviewer and the respondents on camera.

The findings of the child-led surveys and the vox-pops are highlighted in Working Paper number 3 of this project, which can be accessed at this link: <https://ess.stir.ac.uk/files/2023/01/ESS-Working-Paper-3-Children-as-Researchers.pdf>

### **Challenges faced by the young researchers**

The administration of the child-led surveys, including the vox-pops, did not go without challenges for the young researchers. Firstly, this was the first time that the young researchers were involved as co-researchers. They were not sure whether indeed they would collect good quality data as hoped for by the project. The briefing sessions helped a lot in giving them confidence to be good young researchers. Secondly, the young researchers lamented that some respondents could not understand what was required of them. It took some effort for the young researchers to explain clearly to the respondents about what to do and how to fill the questionnaires. Thirdly, there were instances where the interview could take longer than expected, as some respondents were writing slowly, and this affected other scheduled school programmes. Lastly, some respondents did not fully complete the survey, so the young researchers had to return the questionnaires to them to complete.

### **Experiences / feelings of the young researchers**

During the debriefing session of the data collection exercise by the young researchers, we were interested to hear from them what their experiences and feelings were as they engaged their peers in the study. Below are some direct quotations we gathered from them:

*We were happy and excited about the survey as it gave us a sense of adulthood and authority. We felt to be in control of things as we explained the research questions to our friends and responded to their questions as well.*

*The focus group discussions we participated in, prior to the child-led surveys, coupled with the briefing we received from the principal researchers, empowered us. We could know what to do and how to do it. This made us feel quite confident and relaxed throughout the research. To some extent, we mimicked how the principal researchers conducted the focus group discussions.*

*We liked being researchers. We could negotiate and interact with our peers freely and in the process got to know and understand them better.*

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<sup>1</sup> A vox-pop is a short video made up of clips taken from interviews with members of the public. The study's vox pops investigated pupils' opinions on the teaching and learning of English.

## Conclusion

As principal researchers, we were humbled and overwhelmed with the excitement and enthusiasm that the young researchers displayed in carrying out the whole activity. They led it quite well and collected useful data that added value to the findings of our research project. As teachers, it is perhaps time we started engaging learners as active players in the teaching and learning process. They should be given opportunities to research and explore things on their own and so contribute to knowledge sharing in the teaching and learning process. Importantly, research can be a very useful pedagogy in the teaching and learning of not only English as a school subject, but also of other school subjects.

