

## Working Paper 3: Children as Researchers: Insights from Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan

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### Introduction

This working paper stems from the research project “*English as a school subject: learning effective practices from low level primary English language teachers*”, funded by the British Council (<https://ess.stir.ac.uk/>). It began in March 2021, and its project team is based in Scotland, England, Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico, and Uzbekistan. One of the goals of the project is to learn about children’s views and insights regarding learning English as a school subject. As such, this working paper presents some of our preliminary findings emerging from different research activities where children acted as co-researchers.

Overall, this research project aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. What classroom practices do teachers and children with low levels of English in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan engage in to support English learning?
2. What are the similarities and differences in classroom practices between Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan?
3. How do primary school children in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan engage with different language learning pedagogies?
4. Are there differences according to gender in how children perceive the value of English and the classroom practices they prefer?
5. In what ways does translanguaging support the learning of English in the primary school classroom in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan?

To answer these questions, the project adopts a qualitative, inquiry-based design working with teachers and students in the four countries. Responding to the call of Pinter and Zandian (2014) about the importance and benefits of involving girls and boys as researchers, in this working paper, we focus on four micro-research projects where children assumed the role of researchers, led by their classroom teacher and our co-investigators and research assistants. Originally, as part of our research plan, it was agreed that children would design a survey, administer it, and analyse the results. As we will see, due to different contextual factors, the survey was shaped differently in the four countries. Nevertheless, in each of the four contexts, children were highly engaged and enjoyed acting as researchers.

## **Young Researchers and Methodology**

As previously mentioned, designing and administering the survey took different paths in the four countries, due to the pandemic and other contextual constraints, such as having access to the Internet. In Mexico, for instance, this entire process was carried out online due to school closures. Conversely, in Malawi, carrying it out online was not an option, due to lack of connectivity. In this section, we present the process and methodology in each country.

In Malawi, three schools in two educational districts were involved in the child-led survey (one from an urban setting, another from a semi-urban area and the third one from a rural setting). Research participants included 15 young researchers ranging from 10 to 12 years old (8 girls and 7 boys). The language of communication used in the child led surveys was mostly the local language, Chichewa. The methodology that was used in administering the child-led surveys was as follows. The 15 sampled young researchers were briefed on how to conduct child-led surveys. The briefing took place at each of the three schools and targeted the 5 learners who had been involved in focus groups discussions earlier in this project. Among other things, the briefing mainly focused on what research is all about, its purpose and goals, and how data are collected and analysed. After the briefing, the young researchers devised questions to ask their fellow learners in their class. The questions centred around the issues that were discussed in the focus group discussions and included 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 co-investigators then refined and finetuned the young researchers’ questions. After the briefing, and on another designated day, the young researchers were briefed on the refined questions and went through another session in order to understand the questions and familiarize themselves with them before they could go out and collect the data from their classmates. They also practiced how to introduce themselves as young researchers and how they would introduce the research study.

After the orientation, the young researchers in Malawi then conducted the child-led surveys with 45 participants in total. Each of the five young researchers identified 3 study participants from their class to respond to the survey questions. The interview was conducted in a group format, where each of the 5 young researchers gathered all their three research participants at a comfortable place and gave each a booklet containing the survey questions and space where to write their responses. Before the research participants started filling out the survey questionnaire, the young researchers introduced them to the activity and took them through each of the questions, question by question. The co-investigator was present, but was just observing what was happening and guiding where necessary.

In Bangladesh, the survey research was undertaken at an urban school in an area catering to children from a moderately low to medium socio-economic background. The children came mostly from the nearby neighbourhoods. The research assistant (RA) went on three consecutive days to the school to carry out the survey with the children as researchers. Ten children (5 girls and 5 boys) from Grade 5, ranging from 10 – 12 years conducted the survey with 50 children from Grades 1 – 6 (19 girls, 31 boys). The entire methodology process lasted three days.

On Day 1, all the children in Grade 5 (about 30) were introduced to an Art Book created by the RA in both English and Bangla (children’s L1). The children looked through the 15 pages created with very simple instructions, pictures and emojis. The questions often had to be answered by the children by simply drawing something or an emoji. Examples of the format of answers helped the children to do the task readily. Questions in the Art Book ranged from

children's personal information, family, home, food, favourite sport, favourite comic character, school, school subjects (e.g., English), feelings about English class, exams, and their goals in life. The RA explained things as the children asked various questions regarding the book. They were encouraged to only give genuine answers about themselves and not copy answers from friends – the RA drew particular attention to the title which was “My Book About Me”.

On Day 2, Bangladesh children excitedly showed each other their Artbook, comparing and laughing about their individual responses and the pictures they had drawn. Then the RA introduced the word “survey”, writing it on the board in English and in Bangla (জরিপ - pronounced /jorip/). She explained that a survey tries to ask people questions to find out things about them. Some children were quick to voice, “Miss, did we do a survey on us in the Artbook?” The RA was pleased to hear this. The children were beginning to understand the purpose of a survey. Then she floated the idea “Would you like to question your friends and find out what they think and believe?” They all chorused “Yes”. “If you do, then you are a researcher, just as I am a researcher asking you questions”. In this Pre-research stage, children learnt what a survey was and what the role of a researcher was, exemplifying it through the Artbook. The next step on Day 2 was “learning how to make questions for a survey”. The RA selected 10 children (5 girls and 5 boys from the class) for the survey. All the children were eager to take part, so she carried out a lottery, asking them to write their first name on a piece of paper she handed out to everyone. She then drew random names from the slips of paper to select the children who would participate.

In the second part of Day 2, the RA then asked the 10 selected children to write some questions on a sheet of paper, without consulting with each other. Apart from the general questions, such as ‘What is your name?’, ‘How old are you?’, the children came up with questions, such as “Who is your favourite football player?”, “What do you want to become when you grow up?” “How do you feel about learning English?” and “How can English help you when you grow up?” Then the RA told them to select 5 questions for their survey. Some children wrote their questions in English, while some used Bangla. The RA then had the children practice conducting speaking interviews. The children helped one another as they practiced.

On Day 3, the Bangladesh children conducted the survey. Throughout the whole day, whenever they had some free time, the children went around carrying out the survey. The major coverage was completed during the lunch break. They were careful not to overlap their respondents, asking first, “Have you done this survey before?” Once they were finished, the children came back and tried to sort out their answers. The RA drew columns on the board and the children read out the answers and collated them on the board with the RA helping them. As there were various types of questions, the more common questions were used in collating the answers.

In Uzbekistan, similar to Bangladesh, the whole process took three days. On Day 1, the RA met with ten children, who had participated in a previous focus group discussion, in order to explain to them what a survey is and to introduce the idea of children conducting research. The children were assigned the role as researchers, talked about the research process, and defined the research agenda (e.g., selecting topics, data collection tools, and interaction modes). They also made decisions about the survey participants and formulated research questions. The children stated that they liked the focus group discussions as data collection method. They used an Art Book, similar to the one used in Bangladesh, as a starting point to select the survey questions that would be integrated in a survey booklet for their peers. They called this booklet: “Young Researcher's Diary”. The researcher children stated that it was always interesting for them to interact with their peers. Furthermore, some children shared the idea of interviewing

their parents and started to formulate the questions to be included in a questionnaire for their parents. Each young researcher formulated open-ended questions for his/her own parents. Hence, the children unanimously agreed to use two data collection tools: the “Young Researcher’s Diary” and the “Parents’ Questionnaire”, designed in Russian, as it is the language of instruction in this class.

On Day 2, the focus was on reviewing the Young Researcher’s Diary and the Parents’ Questionnaire, which were printed and brought to the class, so that children could practice conducting the survey. The young researchers in Uzbekistan chose their respondents independently and worked in small groups. Children were divided into groups of three: each young researcher chose 2 peers and provided oral instructions on how to fill in their diaries. In total, 10 young researchers (5 girls, 5 boys) provided oral instructions to 20 research participants (11 boys, 9 girls). The survey lasted for an hour and a half. The process was video recorded. The Young Researcher’s Diary consisted of 18 pages with 15 activities subdivided into the sections: background information, attitudes towards learning English, benefits of learning English, the ideal English teacher, their English class, English exams, the English textbook, future profession, and feelings about COVID-19 education restrictions. The parents’ questionnaire was sent home and returned after three days. Ten young researchers conducted the survey with their own 10 parents (10 mothers) at home, discussing each question and filling in the form. The designed questionnaire was about the quality of English at the primary schools and included the following sections which included three-to-five questions each: background information, the quality of teaching English at the primary school, gender issues, online mode of study caused by Covid restrictions, and recommendations of parents to improve the quality of English language teaching. The young researchers asked and discussed the questions with their parents and wrote the responses on the form. On Day 3, the RA conducted a post-research meeting with research participants to discuss the preliminary findings based on the Young Researcher’s Diary and the Parents’ Questionnaire.

In Mexico, six boys and five girls from an elementary school fifth-grade class participated in the development of the survey. They volunteered to work alongside with the co-investigator and the research assistant, acting as the “grown-up” researchers. The children’s English teacher participated in the session as well assuming a low-key role, so that children were regarded as the main researchers. Through Zoom, 6 one-hour sessions were held, which were video recorded. In the first 5 sessions the survey was designed and in the sixth session the results were analysed. In the first session, the topic of “What research means and what it implies from the perspective of the boys and girls” was addressed, ending this session with the contribution of one of the girls who said, “For example, a question that would be good in the survey is, ‘What would your ideal English class look like?’” Together with all the participants in the session, it was decided that this would be the main research question of the survey. In the second and third sessions, the children worked on the activities “What if...?” and “Imagine that...” proposed by Dunne and Raby (2013). These authors argue that, when children speculate about their realities and produce statements such as, “What if my English class had more games?” or “What if my teacher tested us through games?” and they describe or articulate what they imagine when they are playing in their English class in this case, they create possibilities of how they could adapt, change or improve their realities. As a result of these two activities, in the fourth session, the girls and boys wrote questions for the survey, learned about the format of questions used in surveys and decided to use Google Forms to create and carry out the survey. In the fifth session, the girls and boys took the draft survey, as a pilot, and defined the final survey. The survey included questions about activities or strategies that they would like their teacher to use or to include in their English textbooks. It also focused on the

use of languages (“English only” or “bilingual: English and Spanish”) used by teachers or their textbooks, the length of their English class, and assessment issues. It was decided that the survey would be answered by all the children in their primary school, from first to sixth grade, asking the tutors to help the girls and boys in the first grade by reading the questions and answers. In the end, 278 girls and boys, almost 90% of the primary school student population, responded to the survey.

## **Survey Results**

Despite the differences in methodology and the process in the four countries, all the surveys provided a window into children’s perspectives on the different topics and on the questions the children decided to focus on and/or include in their art books, young researchers’ dairy, questionnaires and online surveys. In this paper, we focus on the results related to the English language.

In Malawi, there were interesting results regarding the English language. English appears to be the most preferred subject for the learners, followed by Mathematics for both boys and girls. In terms of choosing English as a preferred language, the participants gave different reasons about it. One child mentioned, “English has a lot of benefits for my future life as it is an official language in Malawi”. Another student said, “English gives you status when you speak it. It is a prestigious language”. Two other students stated, respectively, “English enables one to communicate with people from outside Malawi” and “Other subjects are taught in English so I have to know and like English so that I do well in the other subjects too.” All of the children surveyed indicated that they feel happy to learn English in school and justified their responses: “The teacher teaches well and I understand”; “With English you can have a better future”; “There are interesting stories in English text books”; and “So that I am able to communicate with people from other countries”. In terms of English-speaking skills, 84.4% indicated that they speak it, while 15.6% do not speak it.

In Bangladesh, similar to Malawi, the children’s favorite subject was English, followed by Bangla language arts. Most of them mentioned that they can speak English, whereas only two children mentioned that they only speak “a little”. Regarding their thoughts about English, almost all of them mentioned that it was “easy”. About the use of English, some of them mentioned that they would use this language “to communicate while traveling abroad”. Connecting English with their schooling and aims in life, many of the children aspire to become doctors, and some to become pilots, businessmen, and scientists. In terms of hobbies and leisure activities, some of them enjoy “playing,” “reading,” “studying,” and “arts”.

In Uzbekistan, the young researchers inquired about children’s attitudes toward learning English and the activities they like to do in their English class. According to their findings, children feel happy with learning English because they hope to go abroad in the future. They also use this language to play games, to engage in interesting activities, and to understand the instructions of cell-phone games. They know that this language is necessary for their future. They think that English is taught well and that it is fun to learn it. Some children feel excited to learn English as an international language and some would like to learn it to help them to enter a presidential school. Two children feel sad about learning English due to uninteresting lessons and one child reported getting bored as she does not understand the lesson. In their English class, playing games and reading text aloud are the most preferred activities. Children also like to engage in speaking activities and translating texts. Most of them certainly do not like to have tests in their English class as they are scared about them. In their opinion, their ideal English class would be more interactive, pragmatic, communicative, and tensionless.

Regarding the qualities of a good English teachers in Uzbekistan schools, the survey focused on different qualities (e.g., appearance, language proficiency and pedagogical and socio-affective skills) and the teachers' use of the English language in the classroom. Most boys mentioned that a good English teacher is "beautiful", "fair, clever and sometimes strict, and someone who is kind, caring, happy and understanding". For the girls, a good English teacher is "beautiful" as well, and "has long hair and a beautiful smile". According to them, a good English teacher is "curious, clever, and fair", and "someone who knows many languages, knows English well, and does not assign much homework". A little bit more than half of the students feels satisfied when the teachers speaks only and English, but some feel sad and bored. The majority of the students interviewed feel happy and satisfied when the teacher speaks both English and Russian.

In Mexico, the survey was taken more or less equally by all grades and girls and boys (56% girls and 44% boys). Regarding the activities and games that children would like their textbooks or teachers to include in their classes, the following answers were the most selected: "Coloring drawings" (62%), "Drawing Activities" (60%), "Puzzles" (56%), "Word Search" (60%), "Board Games" (51%) and "Memory Games" (50%). Other activities were also chosen, although to a lesser degree, which could mean that girls and boys prefer to have variety rather than just one type of class activities or games. Most girls and boys like songs (83%), virtual games (90%) and crafts (82%) to be included in their English class, which contrasts with "research homework on different topics" (40%). One of the most outstanding findings came from the two questions about the use of languages, both in textbooks and in English classes. Only 10% of children want their textbook to be written only in English and, similarly, only 9% want teachers to use only the English language in class. In fact, 74% and 80% respectively prefer that the book and the class to be in English and Spanish. If we added the percentages of "English, Spanish, and other language(s)", about 90% prefer their textbooks and classes to be bilingual or multilingual. Regarding the number of textbooks that they would like to have for their English class, 50% would like to have more than one textbook and, on average, all the girls and boys are happy that their English class lasts one hour. Finally, in terms of having exams in their English class, girls and boys are more inclined not to have exams in class. If it is mandatory to have exams, 65% chose that the exams be through games or "virtual interactive exams" (34%).

## **Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications**

In all the four countries, children showed an extraordinary interest in taking part of a project that regarded them as researchers. They were happy and excited about conducting the survey. Conducting research gave them a sense of adulthood. In Malawi, they stated that they "felt in control of things and ... like superheroes". In addition, the young researchers stated that they liked being researchers, as they could negotiate and interact more with their peers. Explaining things and leading the survey with their peers also gave them a sense of authority. This research activity helped them to get to know their classmates better as well. In Uzbekistan, in particular, the young researchers stated that they were excited about interviewing their parents and it was interesting for them to learn about their parents' opinions about their English class. They also mentioned that they behaved themselves as adult researchers with their parents and it gave them a sense of self-importance. In Mexico, children were excited to learn about online surveys. They also enjoyed learning to interpret graphics as they analyzed the data. They were particularly happy that most of their classmates/peers answered *their* survey.

In the four countries, there were also challenges faced by the young researchers. In Bangladesh, some of the children were disappointed as not everybody could be included in the survey

research. In Uzbekistan, some respondents could not understand what was required and the young researchers had to explain to them what to do and how to fill the questionnaires. In addition, some respondents were writing very slowly, extending the interview much longer than expected. Some research participants did not complete the survey and the young researchers had to return the questionnaires back to be completed. In Malawi, it was noted at one of the schools that the young researchers struggled a bit to lead the process. They were slow in familiarizing themselves with the questions. They appeared to have needed more time to engage with the questions before administering them to their classmates. In Mexico, not all the children could attend all the sessions due to connectivity issues. Despite all these challenges, having to do with time and connectivity mostly, the research process was completed successfully in all countries.

A pedagogic implication clearly emerges from engaging children as researchers. It would be a useful idea to introduce simple surveys in English classes. Depending on the age of the students, children can carry out a class survey on things such as cartoon characters, colours, the games they like to play, the number of siblings they have, their birthday months, and so forth. An important element would be to collate the findings and present a report. Survey research is a meaning-focused activity, and eliminates learning anxiety, promoting collaboration and understanding among children and teachers. Most importantly, children who participate as researchers renegotiate their identities as they see themselves as someone in control, with academic authority, capable of developing new ideas, knowledge and recommendations. We conclude with a recommendation from a young female Mexican researcher to English textbook publishers, based on the survey findings:

*That they include a little more of activities such as word searches, crossword puzzles and, if it's possible ... bingo and puzzles. Like in the math [textbook], they should bring the bingo [pieces] at the back of the book or bring cut-out material in order to have puzzles, bingo and memory games ... And, as such, the children can play in the class if their teacher allows them, by giving them the cut-out material of the topic they are studying.*

## References

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