

“

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 Zonkwa Kaduna State, Nigeria. My teaching context is in Senior Secondary III of Francis College Zonkwa 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:

- A. What do my learners think about the way gender differences are presented in my lesson?
- B. What do my colleagues think about the choice of learning resources on gender?
- C. How are gender differences presented in the learning resources I currently use?
- D. 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.