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

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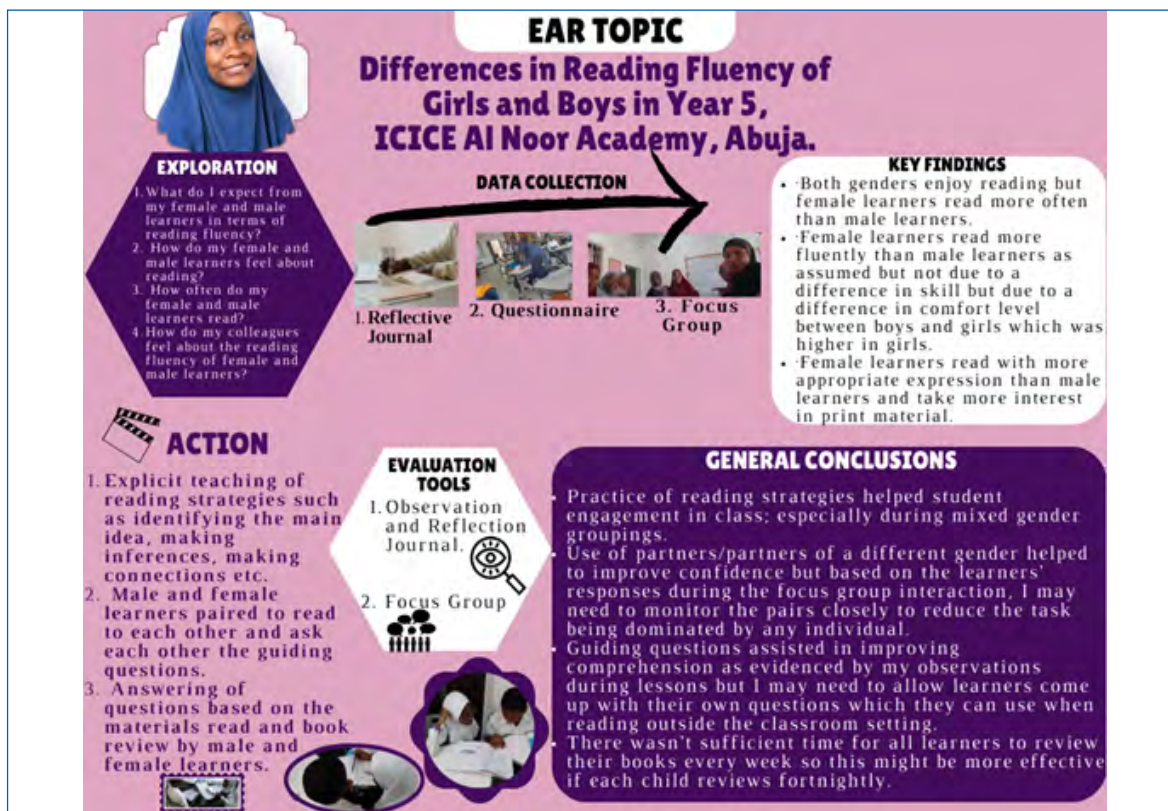




Rasheedat Sadiq

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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.