

Integrating Gender Sensitivity into English Language Teacher Education: Building Inclusive and Equitable Classrooms

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Abstract

Gender sensitivity is an aspect of inclusive education, and as such, it receives far less attention than it deserves in most English Language Teaching (ELT) teacher preparation programs. The article discusses how gender sensitivity can be effectively taught to promote equitable practices and challenge harmful stereotypes around gender that many students encounter in language classrooms. It provides an overview of some of the more unaddressed aspects of gender bias in ELT, including material analysis, classroom interaction reflection and inclusive lesson design. The discussion will focus on the impact that some educators' deep beliefs and biases may have on upper-stated gaps: belief, participation and feedback. Thus, it is important to spread knowledge and provide teachers with tactics to establish a fair, collaborative and gender-sensitive atmosphere.

Keywords: Gender sensitivity, English language teaching, inclusive lessons, gender equity, critical analysis

Introduction

In recent years, inclusive education has become a central focus, highlighting equity and diversity in all areas of education (UNESCO, 2017). It reconsiders teacher education programs, advocating for interdisciplinary perspectives including gender equity. In English Language Teaching (ELT), classrooms are

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now recognized as not being ideologically neutral settings, but contexts impacted by complex social, cultural, and gendered relations (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004). Nevertheless, the field continues to be less than student-oriented regarding their gender, with limited potential and promise for developing a gender sensitivity in most ELT teacher preparation programs (Gray, 2013). More importantly, the potential to engage with gender-responsive pedagogies in teacher education programs is problematic, since unchecked biases may be expressed and reinforced as stereotypes and unequal treatment in classroom practices, materials and assessment (Gabriel & Tate, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that teacher beliefs and perceptions, often informed by subconscious biases, can shape students' engagement, participation, and achievement in gendered ways (Sunderland et al., 2000). Additionally, there exists opposition in ELT textbooks to indicators that imply "genderedness," particularly in the views portrayed of gender that reflect normative and binary characterizations (Lee & Collins, 2010). While there is some recent activity working to resist bias and material reflecting biased representations, many preservice teacher education courses and programs lack support to directly teach preservice teachers to recognize and mitigate their biased perspectives in personal enactments (Hosseini & Amirkhani, 2025).

The current study will address this gap by examining the ways that gender-inclusive curriculum and pedagogy can be developed within ELT teacher education by using a reflective and practical pedagogy. This research aims to develop a framework to assist preservice ELT teachers to develop gender-equitable practices. Specifically, it aims to: (1) establish if there is evidence of latent gender bias in ELT materials and/or classroom interactions; (2) assess the role of teacher cognition as mediating factors of gendered bias; and (3) provide instructional opportunities to implement a pedagogical model prioritizing gender-friendly teaching practices.

The theoretical significance is that it takes a step in bridging a divide between gender theory and ELT practice and gives an applied model to fostering critical gender consciousness amongst future educators. Practical implications include a range of examples for curriculum designers and teacher educators to consider how to integrate gender sensitivity into pre-service training. Ultimately, the article will argue that not only do we need gender-sensitive teachers in our field: it is an ethical responsibility and pedagogical urgency to ensure equitable and effective language education.

Theoretical Framework

Integrating gender sensitivity within ELT is built on multiple intersecting theoretical foundations, including *feminist pedagogy*, *critical language*

awareness and social constructivist paradigms of learning. Taken together, these approaches inform the theory of how gender is manifested in education and the theory behind why teacher training must actively intervene in issues of gender equity.

Feminist Pedagogy and Gender as a Social Construct

Feminist pedagogy poses a challenge to traditional and hierarchical models of education, highlighting this is an inquiry into issues of equity, collaboration, and critical thinking. (Hooks, 1994).

Basic to this view is the notion that gender identity is not biologically fixed, but socially constructed through cultural norms, power relations, and institutional practices (Butler, 1999). This would mean in the ELT context to understand the impact of prevailing gender ideologies on language use, materials, classroom relations and teacher expectations in daily ELT work. Feminist pedagogy calls upon teachers to question gendering processes, to abolish the practice of gender binaries, to encourage inclusive discourses and to raise the consciousness of the learners so that they fight discrimination whether within or outside the domains of the school.

Critical Language Awareness (CLA)

The Critical Language Awareness framework (Fairclough, 2013) supports the approach that language is never neutral but serves to legitimate social hierarchies, including gender inequalities. CLA urges teachers and learners to consider the ideologies behind language use and the ability of textbooks, the media, and practices within the classroom to foster gender stereotypes. Via the application of CLA to ELT, future teachers can acquire the capability to scrutinize gender-biased language representations and to challenge the gender-normative use of language and design learning materials that reflect diversity and inclusivity.

Social Constructivism and Inclusive Education

Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) maintains that knowledge is co-created in interaction and through social engagement. From this prospective, an inclusive education would mean setting up learning environments that support and nurture the plurality of identities and experiences of learners.

The integration of gender sensitivity into ELT teacher education goes with this paradigm given that it sees the learner as a highly abstracted social being, with some intersecting social variables constraining learning, such as gender, culture and language background. Therefore, teacher educators ought to exemplify these inclusive practices themselves, fostering an opportunity for

student-teachers to learn to enact in their classrooms the spirit of inclusivity that promotes equity of participation and mutual respect.

Discussion

The findings and observations that come forth from literature as well as from classroom city experiences highlight an urgent need to make gender sensitivity a substantive and intentional matter within the ELT Education. While there seems to be some degree of awareness regarding inclusiveness among teachers, many of the pre-service teachers actually enter their training with no critical tools with which to uncover gender bias in teaching materials or in the classroom behavior itself; hence, oftentimes, language learning environments do more to replicate gender inequities than actually confront them.

ELT materials are one of the major handholds of gender bias. Gender roles portrayed by textbooks tend toward stereotyping-men as active and in professional environments while women are seen as passive and domestic-oriented. These representations tend to create perverse ideas in the minds of learners about gender norms. Each time the bias remains unchallenged, it further enhances limiting views and marginalizes a learner who decides not to conform to such precepts on gender. Training participants were always amazed at how these patterns had become normalized and thus expressed the need for explicit training on analyzing materials for bias.

Another important issue concerns interaction in classrooms and teacher feedback. Research and reflections observed that teachers tend to call males more often in classrooms where both genders exist, give long-winded feedback to certain learners on the basis of gendered expectations and interpret behavior through a gendered lens (labeling boys as assertive and girls as emotional, to cite just one example). These practices negatively impact student participation and self-confidence. The steps of reflective tools consisting of critical incident analyses were considered to help pre-service teachers recognize how their unconscious bias may contribute to classroom dynamics and learner outcomes.

The beliefs and identities of teachers thus appeared to play an important role in gender-sensitive practices. Here, most teacher trainees were in favor of inclusive classrooms in principle in opposition to having to translate that principle into concrete actions in their lesson planning and interaction modes. We clearly see the need for reflective teaching and guided spaces to investigate, confront, and reconstruct beliefs.

Facilitators said that when gender sensitivity was placed not as a moral issue but more as a teaching skill tied to efficacy, trainees seemed more willing to go at it on a deeper level.

The practical application of the training was much needed to really cement the theory-practice gap. For instance, in activities such as designing an inclusive lesson, rewriting biased text, or a media literacy activity, student-teachers took a further step from abstract concepts toward actual useful tools in classrooms. In one concrete example, rewriting dialogues in a textbook to avoid stereotypical characterizations or creating a lesson that analyzes gender representations in the media gave trainees the chance to actually work on developing inclusive curriculum content. Such activities concretized the idea of inclusive education and also engendered the spirit of agency and responsibility inside student-teachers.

Moreover, without support from institutions, gender sensitivity is likely to be treated as a side issue when no curricular space or leadership support is available. To sum up, gender sensitivity integration into ELTE is needed and achievable through raising awareness of bias, entering into critical reflection, and providing concrete tools for teaching. Most importantly, it has to bring a change in how teacher education looks at the idea of professionalism, not simply as the ability to teach languages, but as a moral responsibility to secure equitable and inclusive learning spaces. Through this perspective, gender sensitivity is the basis rather than an “extra” for quality language teaching in diverse, global classrooms.

Conclusion

The study emphasizes the urgent need to cement gender sensitivity into ELT teacher education as a central pedagogical competency rather than a peripheral concern. While at some level it might be said that there is an understanding of gender inclusivity, in reality, most preservice teachers do not possess the critical skills required to recognize and deal with gender bias within materials, classroom procedures and feedback. Many gendered assumptions remain unexamined in the absence of overt training and translate into domain inequalities concerning student engagement and learning outcomes. Through reflective practices, redeveloping lesson plans and materials as inclusive as possible, teacher trainees have the opportunity to start closing that gap between theory and practice. The findings, therefore, also emphasize an important consideration with respect to teacher beliefs and institutional support toward inclusive practice. Thus, ultimately, the study argues that there needs to be a reconceptualization of the ELT professionalism, which considers a moral and pedagogic accountability to achieve social justice in participation. Gender sensitivity should not be taken as an optional accessory but positioned as a founding pillar of a superior, inclusive language education amidst the highly diverse classrooms of today.

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