

Chapter 14

Teachers' gender beliefs and teaching practices in single-sex EFL classrooms²⁵

Laura Malagón Cotrino

Gimnasio Vermont School- Bogotá, Colombia

The story behind my study

I have been an English teacher for twelve years now. I have taught on a wide range of levels: from schools to a university and from second-graders to adults and teachers. I firmly believe that our profession needs constant reflection and research naturally allows you to do that. Thus, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, I embarked on research and it took me along interesting paths. I have always been interested in gender, probably because I was raised in a family mostly made up of women. I remember undertaking my first study as a high school senior; it was in my Master's program that I began to inquire into the role of gender in teaching English.

In 2009, when I was told that the school where I was going to work followed a model with a gender perspective, I got really excited because I thought it would understand the need for inclusion and gender equality. However, I became a little doubtful about that "fancy term" when I realized that although it was a coeducational school, the boys and girls studied in separate classrooms. As a teacher, I realized this was more of an experiment than a model, but it turned out to be an ideal opportunity to analyze the relation between gender and ELT.

25 This chapter draws on my thesis for the M.A in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia) in 2015, Teachers' Gender-Related Beliefs and Pedagogical Practices: experiences in Single-Sex EFL Classrooms.

My graduate research

In 2012, when I started this study, little had been written about Colombian schools where boys and girls studied in separate classrooms and what teachers thought about it. There had been some studies of that situation in English-speaking countries to do with educational policies to create boys-friendly pedagogies (Martino et al., 2005; Younger and Warrington, 2006, Iverson and Murphy, 2007). But the information about single-sex classes in coeducational schools in Colombia was and still is meager.

This study is based on my time at a bilingual school in Bogotá, originally all-girls, where the boys and girls were and still are in separate classrooms. The school had what it called “a model of coeducation with a gender perspective”, but I became aware of two problems with it. To start with, the teachers misunderstood the model, and after that, there was a contradiction between the school’s mission and what was actually happening in the EFL classroom.

To better understand that situation, I posed the following research question: *How do teachers’ beliefs about gender influence the way they teach in a single-sex EFL classroom in a coeducational school?*

Findings

This study found that, while the four teachers who participated in it had a binary-gender view of their students, their teaching did not show a clear-cut distinction, nor did that view affect their students.

The separation of genders did not change the teachers’ approach

First, I found that the way the teachers taught their classes did not depend on the gender of their students, but their personal pedagogical styles. However, this may have been due to their lack of knowledge of a system where boys and girls study in separate classrooms. The teachers also said that they did not have the time to develop a method where gender is explicit because you teach boys and girls separately in the classroom. According to Iverson and Murphy (2007), this situation may lead teachers to unwittingly

cling to the conventional binary division of gender when such issues emerge in their schools.

Differences in the way teachers handled discipline were also noted, as well as the need to exert a stronger discipline in a class of boys. Two of the four teachers had to enforce codes of conduct to deal with the disruptive behavior of boys, which had to do with a “laddish” culture (Jackson, 2010) and took the form of seeking attention and interrupting the class. The two teachers, Jessie and Jorge, reported that they needed to be stricter with the boys since they would not follow the rules. The study found that there were two approaches to discipline. Both penalized misbehavior, but one resorted to peer-approval, which made it less authoritarian and socially acceptable, whereas the second was highly punitive and used writing an extra assignment as a punishment. This latter may discourage boys from learning (Bristol, 2015).

This shows that gender is dynamic it is not fixed, it is changeable, it is mediated by multifactorial interactions. However, it is important to recognize that gender does mediate in the classroom and teachers need to be aware of how society creates an idea of what being a man or a woman is.

The students' behavior: going beyond gender difference

The students' behavior did not depend on their gender but the approach of their teachers and the dynamics, of the class in general. This was evident in the difference in the classroom environment of two of the teachers. The classrooms of Luis were noisy because he was not used to dealing with teenagers and some of his students were rowdy. The classrooms of Jessie were quiet because she favored individual, silent work.

The students' interest in their classes did not have a clear relation to their gender. Both the boys and girls might be interested or bored. Their engagement in their studies had more to do with the particular exercise in the class, while their lack of engagement was related to the way the teacher handled the class. One difference between the boys and girls was the way the former would participate in the classroom discussions, prompted by male teachers. Instead of following an order set by the teacher, they themselves decided whose turn it was to speak. In that respect, they displayed more agency than the girls, in line with the ideas of Ivinson and Murphy (2007) about how traditional concepts of masculinity encourage boys to be autonomous and competitive.

There was an interesting difference in the way the boys and girls teased their classmates. Whereas the boys would openly make fun of each other, in line with the idea of a “laddish” culture (Jackson, 2010), the girls teased each other in a more discreet and indirect way, in accordance with the cultural belief that men act in a public realm, while women act in a private one (Iverson and Murphy, 2007).

In short, the gender of the students did not influence the way they behaved in class. Nevertheless, there were times when the students did act as gendered subjects: that should be understood and questioned. Schools need “healthy” masculinities and femininities.

The teachers’ beliefs: the binary concept of gender

The teachers believed that there was a binary division between boys and girls, understood in terms of opposites: one gender was what the other was not (Iverson and Murphy, 2007). Thus, the teachers’ thought gender was responsible for differences in their respective language skills, relationship with their teachers and academic performance.

Most of the teachers thought that the girls were better at communicating in a foreign language. They attributed it to a biological difference between the boys and girls, apparently in the belief that mastering a foreign language is a female domain (Lu and Luk, 2014). However, my study found no evidence of this in their classes. Instead, I noted that the girls tended to participate more than the boys. This fits in with the idea of Davis & Skilton-Sylvester (2004) that, in same-sex classes at least, boys and girls are socialized to behave differently and thus have different communicative styles.

The teachers noted that gender influenced their relationships with their students, in that they all showed a preference for one or the other gender, due to the personality and professional experience of the teacher, his or her physical proximity to the students and the students’ academic performance. For example, Jorge preferred to teach boys because he had been raised in a “male world” and, because of his professional experience, felt he understood them better. He thus reproduced the masculinity he had created in his life (Iverson and Murphy, 2007). Thus, when contrasted with his practices, certain “gender complicity” was detected in some “masculine” conversations he established with his male students. With his behaviors, Jorge established a

blurry line between the perpetuation of a hegemonic idea of masculinity and a strategy to handle his boys in class. Remarkably, with the girls, he established a father-like relationship, which was evidenced in his practices and beliefs. This posture although challenged the traditional vision that the ethics of caring is often linked to female teachers, (Lahelma et al, 2014) just occurred precisely in girls' classrooms.

The final example of a binary gender attitude was that the teachers believed that the girls were more responsible and hard-working than the boys, judging by their great skill at learning a foreign language (Lu and Luk, 2014). As teachers, we must acknowledge the way that our culture and personal background permeate our beliefs and conduct in the classroom. If we are to challenge gender stereotypes, we must be aware of our mindsets.

From the start of this study, I noticed that the teachers were stressed by the contradiction between their daily activities in single-sex classrooms and the ideal promulgated by the school. That tension still exists, but the "moral" this study draws from it is that we must accept, rather than reject, such a system, even when the teachers are not happy with it. While we understood the reasons for that situation, we could not offer a solution to it. Accordingly, we reiterate the need for teachers to be more aware of their role as gendered teachers in a gendered classroom and the resulting interactions with their students. The blurry line exists when a system like this reproduces gender stereotypes in the name of catering to their students' needs.

Possibilities for further studies

Teachers must avoid privileging the agency of one gender, particularly males (Iverson and Murphy, 2007, Pavlenko & Piller 2008 and Gordon, 2008) and they should be critical of the historical and cultural reasons for the belief that men are more autonomous and competitive.

Embracing a system of single-sex classrooms does not mean favoring stereotypes which ignore individuality and perpetuate hegemonic ideas (Schmenk, 2004 and Lynch, 2014). When teachers are aware of the implications of gender stereotypes, they can challenge them. For example, they can try typically female or male "topics" in both kinds of classrooms

and discuss the concepts of feminine and masculine with their students to get a better understanding of them.

Teachers should not overlook the role in language learning of gendered subjectivities (Pavlenko & Piller 2008, Gordon, 2008 and Lu and Luk, 2014). If it is evident that girls are more devoted to learning English, they should come up with strategies to encourage boys to work harder. The aim would be to remove the barrier of gender.

Finally, teachers need to be aware of the kinds of masculinities that they face in schools, like that associated with laddish behavior (Jackson, 2010), in order to meet the challenge of correcting such shortcomings. An understanding of that culture will create a better learning environment.

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