Teacher's Role in Eliminating Stereotypes in Class

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Abstract

The paper Teacher's Role in Eliminating Stereotypes in Class deals with stereotypes in education, takes a closer look at gender stereotypes in EFL, and focuses on the teacher's role in eliminating stereotypes in the classroom. A major part of children's socialisation occurs in schools, through formal education. School is the place where children consciously and unconsciously learn about stereotypes. This paper examines whether stereotypes exist in school, in EFL, and in what way and how to overcome them. In the beginning it describes stereotyping, sexism, gender roles and how they are present in the (EFL) classroom. It furthermore discusses the problem of stereotypes and sexism in education and the period of middle childhood in terms of the development of self-image. The central part of the paper focuses on ways of overcoming stereotypes in the EFL classroom and emphasises the role of the teacher. In terms of methodology, the paper is theoretical in nature and uses the descriptive and comparative research method as it describes some findings on the topic and comparative research method when comparing professional and scientific findings of different authors. The paper also provides some examples and is an output of the author's ongoing personal research and work in the area of English language teaching.

Keywords: EFL, gender, stereotypes, sexism, teachers

1. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are widely believed, over-generalized, simplified certain beliefs about a specific group, whether based on sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, language, etc. Stereotypes permeate our culture and society in general and are often evident already during the early stages of childhood. Stereotypes affect children's socialization, lead to social categorization, and create prejudices.

1.1. Gender Stereotypes

Gender constitutes a social, economic, and cultural structure and is recognized as the basis of social organization, equally important as class or race (Turner, 1991). Gender stereotypes are (over-) generalized views or concepts about the characteristics that women and men have, what they like, and the roles that they should perform. One such example is that pink is for girls and blue is for boys, a stereotype that is clearly present already in our culture, for example in baby clothing. If a baby is wearing pink, people assume it is a girl, if it is wearing blue, it must be a boy. The clothes shops are typically divided into two sections, one for girls, the other for boys and the dominating colours in the two sections are usually pink, red for girls and blue, black for boys. As children grow, they are surrounded by gendered clothes, toys and later on school things (pink school bags for girls and blue ones for boys). The stereotype pink for girls and blue for boys is assimilated and by the time children reach school, girls love the colour pink and boys avoid it (LoBue, 2011). According to Benn (2020, p. 2): "The pink and blue problem is the enforcing of gender stereotypes through color, associated roles, and imagery." The effect

that stereotypes have on children was also researched by Bian, who in her research discovered that stereotypes, namely gender stereotypes, play a significant role already for preschool children and that girls begin to feel less intelligent than boys from the age of six (Bian, 2017). These stereotypes discourage girls to pursue prestigious careers. Twenty years later, the adult workforce in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) consists of only 28.4% women, which is surely in part the result of assimilation of gender stereotypes during socialization and education (Kerkhoven, 2016). These two examples show that stereotypes have a powerful impact on children, how early children recognize stereotypes, how they assimilate them, and why stereotypes have a great impact in schools and even more so in primary schools. Stereotypes inhibit the capacity of children to develop their own characteristics and skills and to decide what they want to do with their life. Equal opportunities in education for both men and women have been widely researched and inclusive education is a basic right of all people. This is why it is imperative to overcome stereotyping in schools and by doing so promoting positive self-image in the classroom.

2. Self-Image in Middle Childhood

The period between the ages of six and ten is especially important in terms of self-image. At that time, self-image is developing on the one hand because of the **cognitive development** and on the other because of the **social environment**, which has a powerful impact on children at that time (Hazel and Nurius, 1984). This is when the children's self-image is formed, because children are able to test themselves for the first time in new areas. For instance, whether they are good at maths, science, etc. and therefore have a chance to build a self-image around it. The foundation of the child's self-image forms in this period in particular in terms of the academic self-image, because children learn what they are good at and what they are not so good at in school. The period of middle childhood is when the self-image, especially intellectual self-image, is broken down in different areas. The social factors that influence a child's self-image significantly increase as a child enters primary school, simply because of the time spent in school. When starting school, most children have much more contact with the society than before and need to coordinate their needs and desires with those of others in the environment (parents, teachers, classmates, etc.). Children help others, follow the rules, and become susceptible to the social demands and the benefits that come by following the rules. During middle childhood children acquire a great deal of knowledge and skills in different areas and form their self-image based on the knowledge that they are good at some things and not so good at others. Their cognitive development affects their self-image and at the end of middle childhood the physical aspects and puberty kicks off sexual maturation and physical differences between men and women. Freud marks this period as a latency period, when a child turns away from the family and opens to the outside world (Freud, 1959). Most scientists agree that middle childhood is a period when a child becomes more aware of the opinions and feelings of others and that it is a critical period for developing one's self-image. Erikson says that a child's self-image depends on the experience in this period, that is, the more a child excels at school, the better their self-image and vice versa (Erikson, 1959). Children during this period begin to compare themselves with others and develop self-image in different areas:

- appearance ("I like my eyes."),
- academics ("I'm good at Maths."),
- social skills ("I get invited to everybody's birthday parties."),
- physical abilities ("I'm the fastest in class.").

They describe themselves based on what they can do, there is also an ideal self and an actual self. There are many different factors that influence the self-image in this period, such as the

family environment, culture, the learning environment, that is school. Therefore, school plays an important part in developing a positive self-image.

2.1. Stereotypes in School

Socialization begins from the moment a child is born, primarily in a family, then later in school, when the education system plays an important part in socialization. Children learn a great deal about social roles in schools, including about gender. Basow states that there are some differences between the two sexes which may have a physiological basis, however the bulk of the research suggest that gender differences specifically are a function of gender roles rather than a cause (Basow, 1992). School is one socializing instrument in society that serves to reproduce a given culture to benefit the dominant classes and impose exclusions and inclusions based on social order (Bordieu and Passeron, 1990). School plays an important role in transmitting culture and therefore also transmitting stereotypes. "The social role theory" states that stereotypes arise from roles and jobs typically held by women and men, and the distinct skills developed by women and men due to this. Thus, these skills and abilities are assumed as innate by the society, reinforcing stereotypes. Therefore, socialization is an essential process in which social roles and stereotypes are transmitted and school is a major instrument of socialization (Pellicir Ortin and Asin Abad, 2018). Gender stereotypes in schools are also present in the language itself. According to Basow sexism for example has three major forms: firstly, ignoring women by using the masculine gender to refer to human beings in general. Stereotyping defines women by labelling what is considered an exception to the rule like 'policewoman'. The second one is the status of women defined by the order in which they are usually mentioned, usually the second place (i.e. boys and girls). And finally trivialising or sexualising women (Basow, 1992). Feminist Stylistics states that: "Sexist language has three effects:

1. It may alienate female interlocutors and cause them to feel that they are not being addressed.
2. It may be one of the factors which may cause women to view themselves in a negative or stereotyped way. It may thus have an effect on the expectations women and men have of what women can do.
3. It may confuse listeners, both female and male (for example, as to whether a true generic noun or pronoun is being used or a gender-specific one)" (Mills, 1995:72).

Therefore, language and instruction in school also plays an important part in either perpetuating stereotypes or overcoming them.

As a result of the fact that the period of middle childhood is when self-image is greatly developing and stereotypes have a major impact on the children's intellectual development and self-perception, it is of crucial importance to avoid and eliminate stereotypes in school in order to assure inclusive education for all.

3. Stereotypes in the EFL Classroom

In foreign language learning, especially in early teaching and middle childhood, students learn about everyday life in a foreign language. They learn about topics such as time (the seasons, months of the year, days, telling time, daily routines, etc.), animals, living (homes, rooms of a house), food, jobs, professions, hobbies, clothes, family, etc. They are learning how to communicate in another language about common, everyday things and life situations. Within this framework, they subconsciously pick up and assimilate various stereotypes and also learn a great deal about gender roles, because of the very nature of topics and lessons learnt at that

stage. Stereotypes are present in different forms in EFL, they appear in materials (e.g., textbooks, flashcards, videos, audio recordings, etc.), language and instruction, and in interaction with other classmates, and teachers.

3.1. Classroom Materials and Stereotypes

In a society where gender equality is mandated by law, as well as an educational goal, we can agree that there is no room for outdated stereotypes or gender stereotypes in materials used in a classroom. However, research shows that outdated gender stereotypes still perpetuate in teaching materials and that there is still a difference how men and women are presented. Below is a short summary of a few examples from several research. In language, men usually appear as neutral subjects in linguistic terms, whereas women do not. Women are specifically described as feminine, never as generalized representations of humanity or for both men and women (Perez-Sabater, 2015). This phenomenon can be viewed as a sort of linguistic discrimination, because women suffer discrimination already through the use of language (Perez-Sabater, 2015). Gender stereotypes initially conveyed in language are also present in images, in visual and pictorial material. Especially in early language learning, images play an important part in learning, hence the extensive use of flashcards for learning new words and images in textbooks. Images enhance, strengthen, and reinforce the meaning of the text and facilitate language learning. Karintzaidis has found by examining certain textbooks for language learning that only in terms of occupations in images or flashcards, men are depicted in a much wider variety of occupations than women and that women are depicted in fewer occupations at a ratio of 1:3. Men are solely represented in more prestigious occupations with a certain status and standing, whereas women appear typically in occupations related to care, assistance and arts. The role prominently assigned to the woman is that of the mother and housewife, who takes care of the family, from housework to cooking (Karintzaidis, 2016). The above-mentioned examples of stereotypes in teaching materials can be quickly substantiated by a search for flashcards for EFL. Typing in jobs, English, flashcards in Google, there is a plethora of images depicting doctors as men, the nurses as women, fire fighters as men, the teachers as women, police officers are men, hairdressers are women, etc.

Figure 1. Jobs flashcards (ESL Printables, 2021)

Stereotypes are also present in images and flashcards depicting families. These normally depict the mother cooking or cleaning, while the dad is reading or watching TV.

Figure 2. What are they doing? (ESL Collective, 2021)

Stereotypes are also present in EFL textbooks, where they portray women's roles in the household typically as cooking or taking care of children, while men as fathers are resting or taking the children to events (like a football game) and only cooking in the garden (Pellicer Ortin and Asin Abad, 2018). The latter research also found that there are no different types of families apart from the traditional ones, a father, and a mother with their children, i.e., there are no depictions of divorced parents, single-parent families, or homosexual partners. The pink for girls and blue for boys division is also common in flashcards, i.e. in flashcards depicting appearance and clothes. Flashcards of girls often depict a girl dressed in a pink skirt or dress, whereas a boy is typically dressed in blue.

Figure 3. What is he/she wearing? (Liveworksheets, 2021)

The portrayal of gender stereotypes is particularly important during early and middle childhood, as this is the time when children form their self-image (Hazel and Nurius, 1984). Once children reach puberty, their self-image is very much set, and it is very difficult to change it. Therefore, it is of extreme importance that children are not surrounded by a gendered outlook of life at that time but shown gender inclusivity, therefore also for example flashcards of female firefighters, female scientists as they learn the word firefighter in a foreign language.

3.2. Teacher's Role in Eliminating Stereotypes

As shown, stereotypes are present in school and in class in many forms and it is the teacher who plays the crucial role in overcoming them. The teacher has an essential role in reinforcing or overcoming stereotypes, as teachers are the ones that usually select teaching materials and the ones who provide additional instruction regarding stereotypes through activities, modelling, and communication. In primary school and in early teaching, teachers should also be aware

that they are co-shaping the children's self-image, which is only developing at that time (Hazel and Nurius, 1984). When the period of middle childhood is over, the children's self-image is predominantly set, whether it is positive or negative and it is difficult to change it. It is also very difficult to unlearn something, especially if certain stereotypes are ingrained in a person's mind from an early age. Another reason why overcoming stereotypes is especially significant in the EFL classroom is because as it was mentioned earlier in learning a language, one is learning about the world, about different cultures, it is essential for a learner to acquire a foreign language to become immersed in both linguistic and cultural traits. And in early language learning children are learning about topics that by their nature have much room for stereotypes, but there is also plenty of room for inclusion and individuality. Students have the opportunity to perceive different situations, social roles, and social settings in a new cultural background. Consequently, it is the role of a teacher to act as a filter, an interpreter and to make sure that they are not perpetuating stereotypes but rather overcoming them.

3.2.1. Exposing Stereotypes

As already mentioned, teaching materials are an indispensable aspect of education. Teachers have the responsibility to evaluate teaching materials that they use and make sure they are free of stereotypes to create an inclusive environment in class. Teachers and EFL teachers should carefully choose which material they use in class, which flashcards, textbooks, texts, etc. In the EFL classroom there are many factors that can contribute to identity construction and self-image formation of the students, such as the teacher's methodology and the materials used. Foreign language teaching materials are particularly important in exposing stereotypes because they are full of people interacting with each other in various social relationships, social settings, and social roles to facilitate language learning (Pellicir Ortin and Asin Abad, 2018). As already pointed out these teaching materials can as a result be full of stereotypes. Therefore, teachers should be mindful when selecting materials and exposing stereotypes when faced with them and making sure that they are adapted to respond to diversity.

3.2.2. Work in Class

Language, instruction, and communication all have a significant role in determining hierarchy and perpetuating or eliminating stereotypes. Teachers have to be conscious of the language that they use. Even addressing the class can be either exclusive or inclusive, depending on whether the teacher uses for example 'Guys', 'Boys and girls' or 'Students' or 'Children' when addressing the class, using plural they instead of he or she and so on. Another such example is using gender to divide children into teams or groups for activities (boys vs. girls), which is often done in class. This stresses the children's gender and reinforces stereotypes, as well as accentuates the importance of being a girl or a boy, which is completely unnecessary. Teachers should divide and make groups in class based on other things, i.e., in the EFL classroom teachers can use the topic they are teaching about and divide children into groups for example based on their favourite toy or other characteristics such their age, birthday, interests, etc.

3.2.3. Representation

Due to the very process of the development of self-image in middle childhood, representation is of crucial importance. Children are comparing themselves to other children and their peers, but they are also comparing themselves to their parents, teachers, other adults, to the people they read about, learn about and the images they see. It is of crucial importance that students have role models, so that they can identify with them, i.e., that they have a sense of opportunity in their career choices. One such example can be found in science teaching materials, where the majority of role models are white males (Stout, 2011). This makes it difficult for girls to even imagine a career in STEM. Another example of stereotypes is found in one research about

European fairy tales and how they portray the patriarchal values of society. In them the women are portrayed as beautiful and attractive without much power to change their lives, while the powerful women tend to be ugly and sometimes even evil. Influential stories that also represent women as princesses with common characteristics and that have contributed to the creation of a new 'girlhood' are the Disney princesses (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek, 2011). The characters represented in these stories are often times heavily burdened by stereotypes. However, these fairy tales can be useful in foreign language instruction because they are so well-known, read around the world and the children are familiar with them in their native language, which is why teachers often use them in class, especially early language learning. Representation in textbooks is also often times also full of stereotypes. Pellicir Ortin and Asin Abad in their research of foreign language textbooks have found that famous women are less represented in textbooks, and that most of them are actresses, singers, or princesses, whereas women are rarely represented in the scientific field. Men on the other hand are represented in a variety of professional fields as well as more represented (Pellicir Ortin and Asin Abad, 2018).

The EFL context is by its nature more susceptible to stereotypes and a determining agent of both creation of stereotypes but on the other hand also change of stereotypes. Representation is important and teachers should be aware of it when selecting learning materials, when making or selecting flashcards that they use, texts that the students read in class, examples that they give, etc.

4. Eliminating Stereotypes in the EFL Classroom

The paper **Teacher's Role in Eliminating Stereotypes in Class** presents the issue of stereotypes and in particular gender stereotyping in school and more specifically in the EFL classroom, especially in the period of middle childhood and early language teaching. The author was interested in the presence of stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes in EFL and in what ways, as well as their impact on the children's self-image. The author has found that gender stereotypes are common in the EFL classroom, both in the materials used in the classroom (textbooks, flashcards, etc.) and in instruction and that they can inhibit children's academic performance and lead to lower self-image. The author has also found that the period of middle childhood between the ages of six and ten is crucial in developing self-image and that during this time (gender) stereotypes play an important role and contribute to lower self-image. In continuation the author presents the crucial role of the teacher in overcoming gender stereotypes in the classroom and promoting positive self-image. In conclusion, the author presents some key steps and advice for teachers on how to overcome gender stereotyping and promote a positive self-image in the EFL classroom.

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