

Gender Equality and *ESI* in the English Language Classroom: a Teaching Experience with Children

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Gender equality is not a topic we could easily find in EFL textbooks, and it might seem a complex issue to discuss with children's groups. However, teaching from a gender perspective is not only a highly enriching experience both for students and teachers alike, but also our ethical and legal responsibility as educators.

*At the international level, Gender Equality is the fifth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030. Sustainable Development Goal number 5 aims at ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls and ensuring equal opportunities for everyone in order to achieve a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. At a national level, the National Program on Comprehensive Sex Education, known as *ESI*, started in 2006 and one of its objectives is to guarantee gender equality among men and women.*

Having the international and national framework into account, this paper presents a project developed with children at Escuela de Lenguas, FAHCE-UNLP, which aimed at debunking gender stereotypes in traditional fairy tales and promoting gender equality.

Key words: Gender Equality, Gender Stereotypes, Fairy Tales, National Program on Comprehensive Sex Education (ESI).

Introduction

Although it is true that as language teachers we hardly ever choose the textbooks we use in our classrooms, the content and ideology we present in our classes should not be the hidden agenda of big publishing houses, but overtly and explicitly chosen by the teacher depending on their group of students and context. According to Professor Jim Cummins:

“Choice is always an option, as well as an ethical responsibility and a pedagogical opportunity. Regardless of institutional constraints, educators have individual and collective choices in how they negotiate identities with students and communities”.
(Cummins, 2009: 262)

In this paper, I am going to explain why adopting the Gender Mainstreaming in our classrooms is not only a choice, but also our ethical and legal responsibility as educators. Regardless of constraints, it is our obligation to make informed decisions when planning what to teach and how to do so, in order to work towards achieving a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

As defined by the United Nations,

“Gender Mainstreaming is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a strategy, an approach, a means to achieve the goal of gender equality” (UN Women, 2018).

Teaching using this approach means taking a stance, which lasts longer than a class or a week a year, and it allows us to see things in a different way, to constantly re learn what we have been taught and, in the context of education, to take every teaching opportunity we have to reflect on gender equality with our students.

UN Women, which is the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, explains that Gender Equality:

“...refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development” (UN Women, 2018).

Acknowledging and understanding that gender inequality affects us all is the starting point for change.

Moreover, in September 2015 the United Nations agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be reached by 2030.



Picture 1

SDG number 4 is *Quality Education* and it works towards achieving inclusive equitable quality education for all. SDG number 5 pursues *Gender Equality*, understanding it as a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a better world.

At a national level, Argentina passed Bill 26150 in 2006. This bill, known as ESI, establishes the framework for the National Program on Comprehensive Sex Education, which is cross-curricular and should be understood within a wide scope. It includes biological, psychological, social, ethical and emotional aspects in children's and teenagers' education. In 2008, the Federal Council of Education agreed on specific and appropriate curricula guidance for each education level and on strategies to reach teacher training programs and schools throughout the country.

Some of the objectives of the program are to stop and avoid any way of discrimination, to guarantee universal access to updated information and to foster gender equality among men and women.

Gender Equality and *ESI* in the English Language Classroom

Taking this international and national context into account, I worked on a project with one of my children groups at *Escuela de Lenguas, FAHCE*, which aimed at debunking gender stereotypes in traditional fairy tales and promoting gender equality. My students were 10 year-old children and it was their third year at school. The required textbook was *Super Minds 2*, by Cambridge University Press, which introduces the topic traditional fairy tales in one of its units. I decided to take the activities proposed by the book as a starting point and then expand my students' points of view. Using the gender mainstreaming strategy, we analyzed traditional fairy tales, reflected on the gender roles portrayed and wrote new stories.

The first class, we read about the Brothers Grimm in the textbook and about some of their famous tales, such as *Rapunzel*, *Snow White* or *Cinderella*. Profiting from our shared knowledge on traditional fairy tales, we did not read each of these stories in class but analyzed their characteristics. We came to the conclusion that traditional fairy tales usually have the same elements (a princess, a prince, a fairy, an evil witch, dragons and magic) and similar plots where princesses are rescued by princess.

Using expressions such as: "I like the story, because it's funny" or "I don't like the story, because it's boring", we discussed what we thought about these tales. This was not a new task, since every time we worked with a story or song in class we would express our opinion and support our answers. Although it might seem very simple, this activity implies not only understanding the story, but also analyzing and evaluating it, which reinforces the students' critical thinking skills. All their opinions were valued and respected, thus building and strengthening their self-esteem and confidence to say what they truly believe and why.

The following class, I challenged them with the story *Prince Cinders*, published by Babette Cole in 1987. It is similar to Cinderella's story, but the main character is a boy who has got three evil bothers. There is also a fairy, who is very bad at magic, and despite her good intentions to help him, everything goes differently from what she intends. He is turned into a monster, instead of into a prince, and when he arrives to the dance he does not fit through the door. Disappointed, he goes to the bus station and meets a princess. At the end, she asks him to marry her and his three evil brothers are turned into servants.

These are some of their reactions to the story:

A photograph of a student's handwritten response on lined paper. The text is written in blue ink and reads: "I LOVE THE STORY BECAUSE IT WAS BEAUTIFUL, THE ORIGINAL AND DIFERENT". The word "DIFERENT" is misspelled.

Picture 2

A photograph of a student's handwritten response on lined paper. The text is written in blue ink and reads: "- I Loved the story because it was beautiful and original".

Picture 3

A photograph of a student's handwritten response on lined paper. The text is written in blue ink and reads: "- I liked the story because it was entertaining".

Picture 4

We analyzed how *Prince Cinders* differed from traditional fairy tales and how gender roles were portrayed. We agreed on the fact that both female and male

characters should be protagonists of their own stories and that traditional fairy tales do not reflect our reality.

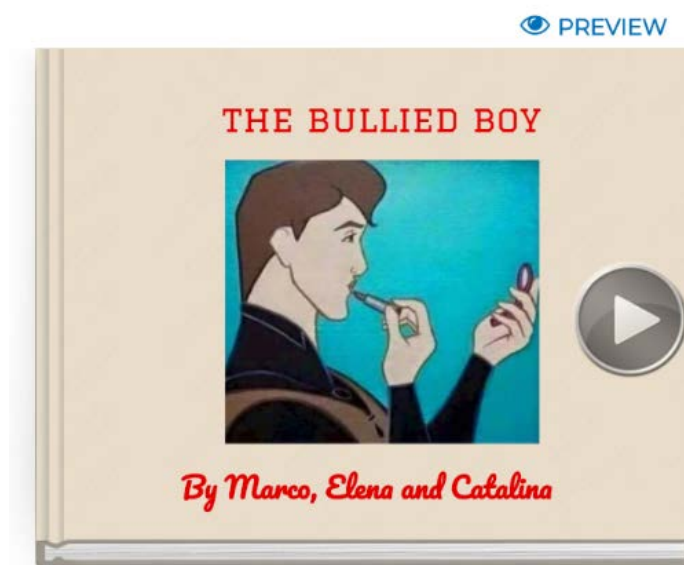
Finally, they wrote their own stories. The writing process took us three classes and they worked in pairs or groups of three. The first step was to plan what they were going to write about. We had previously worked with WH words, which were the perfect scaffold to draw the outline.

The following class, they worked on each page of the book and they wrote the script. I monitored their work and I helped them with unknown vocabulary. Because the words they learnt were not decided by the teacher, this task was truly successful for vocabulary learning, as there was an intrinsic motivation to find a way to say what they wanted to express.

Finally, we went to the computers room and we worked with the webpage www.storyjumper.com. This webpage is a very interesting digital resource because you are allowed to create an account as a teacher and then assign the project to your students. Through your account, you can upload their names (I only used first names for privacy protection) and then they can log in from different computers and work on different books simultaneously.

One of the groups wrote the following story:

Picture 5



There is a boy called Peter, he is short.
He lives in Los Angeles.



2

He likes wearing lipstick and dancing. He'd like to be a model.



3

Picture 6

Children at school bully him.
-You are a girl.



4

And a child says:
-Stop bullying.



5

Picture 7

And the other children say:



6

Picture 8

Conclusion

Working with projects that are based on unfocused tasks like the one described below might be challenging, because we are unable to plan a specific outcome and we cannot predict what our students will do or create. However, I was pleasantly surprised to see how well they managed to express their ideas and opinions. The stories they wrote exceeded my expectations, not only from a linguistic point of view, but also because of the level of maturity of their reflections and their understanding of gender equality issues.

Although it is true that for the UN and ESI goals to be reached and have a real impact on society governments and the private sector have to do their part, it is paramount to remember that the civil society also has to take action because it is a powerful agent of change. As educators, we play a crucial role, since Quality Education and Gender Equality mean freedom to make informed decisions about our own lives, to choose qualified and effective leaders, and to pursue and fulfil our dreams. Including the Gender Mainstreaming in our teaching practice leads to a transformative effect in our communities, which is the commitment we embraced when we decided to become teachers.

Recommended

Other books that could be used in class to work under the Gender Mainstreaming approach are:

- Princesses can be pirates too - by Christi Zellerhoff
- Pearl Fairweather Pirate Captain – by Jayneen Sanders
- Princess Smartypants - by Babette Cole
- Not All Princesses Dress in Pink" by Jane Yolen and Heidi E.Y. Stemple
- Ballerino Nate - by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

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