

Gender Stereotypes in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The paper Gender Stereotypes in the EFL Classroom deals with stereotyping and in particular gender stereotyping in EFL. It researches whether gender stereotyping exists in EFL, in what way and how to overcome it. In the beginning it describes stereotyping, sexism, gender roles and how they are present in the EFL classrooms. It furthermore discusses why this is a problem, the relevance of gender stereotypes and the period of middle childhood in terms of the development of self-image and how to overcome it. The central part of the paper focuses on ways of overcoming stereotyping and gender stereotyping 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 research method as it describes previous findings on the topic and comparative research method when comparing professional and scientific findings of different authors. The article is also based on the author's personal work and activities in the classroom in her 20 years of teaching English.

Keywords: middle childhood, gender, stereotypes, sexism, teachers

1. Introduction

Gender stereotypes are (over-)generalised views or conceptions about characteristics that women and men have or the roles that they should perform. Stereotypes inhibit the capacity for people to develop their own characteristics and skills and to decide what they want with their life. These are two important reasons why it is important to try and overcome gender stereotyping and thus promote positive self-image in the classroom. The paper Overcoming gender stereotypes in the EFL classroom examines the issue of gender stereotyping and offers some suggestions on how to overcome it.

According to Bian girls begin to feel less intelligent than boys from the age of six.¹ This fact alone speaks volume on the fact how powerful stereotypes are to children's self-image and another reason why gender stereotypes are especially important in schools and even more so in primary school. The paper begins with exploring the period of middle childhood between the ages of six and ten, because it is a period crucial in developing self-image and stereotypes have a powerful impact on self-image. The paper also explores the EFL classroom in terms of stereotypes and in the end focuses on how to overcome stereotyping and gender stereotyping and emphasises the role of the teacher.

¹ Bian et al, 2017

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, the 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.² This is when the children's self-image is formed, because they are able to test for the first time really for instance are they good at Maths, Science, etc. and 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. In middle childhood is when our 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 social demands and the benefits that come, if they follow 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 up to the outside world.³ 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.⁴

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 the 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 Hazel and Nurius, 1984

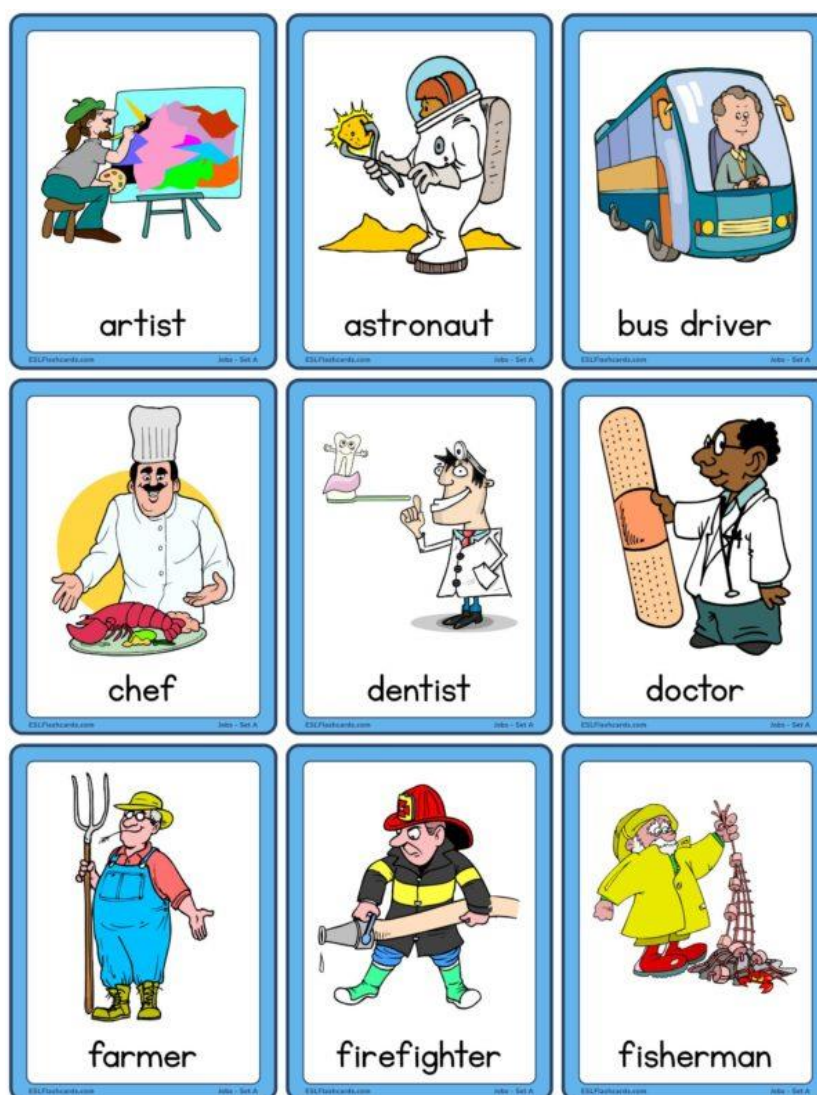
³ Freud, 1959

⁴ Erikson, 1959

3. Gender stereotypes in the EFL classroom

In language learning, especially in early teaching and that middle childhood period, students learn about everyday life around them in a foreign language. They learn about topics such as time (the seasons, months of the year, days, how to tell time, daily routines, etc.), animals, living (homes, rooms of a house), food, jobs, professions, clothes, etc. They are learning how to communicate in another language about common, everyday things and life situations. Here, there is plenty of room for (gender) stereotyping, from clothes, professions, sports, toys, daily routines, family, etc. Below are just a few examples on the gender stereotypes easily found all over the internet. In terms of jobs, the doctors on the flashcards are typically men, the nurses women, the fire fighters men, the teachers women, etc.

Figure 1: Jobs flashcards




Source: (ESL Flashcards, 2021)

A family is typically a family of four with a son and a daughter, if the text or image is describing what they are doing at the moment in the house, the mom is usually cooking or cleaning and the dad is watching TV.

Figure 2: What are they doing?

WHAT IS ELISA'S FAMILY DOING?

Instructions: Watch the image and fill the gaps with the words given in the box.



reading – eating – playing
– doing homework –
taking a shower –
newspaper – cooking

kitchen - bedroom –
baby's room – living room
– bathroom

1) The grandma is _____ with the baby. They are in the baby's _____.

2) The dad is _____ in the _____.

3) Lisa is _____ in her _____.

4) The grandpa is _____ a _____ in the _____.

5) The mom is _____ and the brother is _____ in the _____.

ISLCollective.com

Source: (ISL Collective, 2021)

Pictures of girls often depict a girl dressed in pink colours, whereas a boy is usually dressed in blue. The clothes that girls wear are typically pink or red, whereas the boys wear other colours, typically blue. The girls' school bags or toys are typically pink and the boys' blue. Pink is for girls and blue is for boys. In the author's own experience in first grade the girls' favourite colour is in about 70% pink and the boys favourite colour is about 70% blue. This is not a coincidence, as the colour pink is attributed to girls since birth and blue to boys. There are so many examples of these two worlds – boys' world and girls' world that most of the time people do not even notice it, it seems natural.

Children learn about gender roles and stereotypes in their environment, in their family and when they enter school also in school. In school they learn about gender roles and stereotypes from their teachers, classmates and in different subjects. The author suggests that because of the nature of early language teaching, children learn about gender roles and are especially exposed to stereotypes in the FL classroom. This is why it is extremely important that teachers are aware of this and pay attention to it.

4. Teacher's role

In class, the teacher's role in overcoming stereotypes is especially important, because of two reasons. In primary school and in early teaching, teachers must be aware that they are helping shape the children's self-image, which is only developing at that time. After the period of middle childhood, children already have a certain self-image, whether it is positive or negative and it is difficult to change it. The other reason is especially significant in the EFL classroom, because as it was mentioned earlier in learning a language, one is learning about the world, about everyday life in a foreign language, about family members, jobs, clothes, etc. Here, there is a lot of room for stereotypes, but also plenty of room for inclusion and individuality. The teacher has to act sometimes as a filter and make sure that they are not supporting stereotypes and that they are including the children's different personalities. Therefore, the teacher is essential in providing quality and gender-neutral education. Below are some ways on how to overcome gender stereotypes in the EFL classroom.

4.1. Talking about stereotypes

Teachers should avoid stereotypes in the first place and include different examples, flashcards, pictures for their lessons. For example, when teaching about clothes, teachers should avoid using flashcards with girls wearing only pink dresses, skirts, etc. Teachers should also point out and challenge stereotypes when they are faced with them. This ranges from simple questions like 'Why is she wearing pink?' to discussing potentially sexist reading texts.

4.2. Work in class

It is easy to use gender and divide children into teams or groups based on gender (boys vs. girls), but this constantly stresses their gender and reinforces stereotypes, as well as accentuates the importance of being a girl or a boy. 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, alphabet, etc. They should use a different technique every so often, so that children learn to work and cooperate with everyone in the classroom.

4.3. Representation and role models

Because of 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 people they read about, learn about and the images they see. Therefore, representation is important. Foreign language classrooms should be places where students learn about the world beyond their immediate surroundings, country, it should be a place where students learn about other cultures, nationalities and certainly a place, where stereotypes should not exist. Representation is especially important because representation equals possibility. Possibility during a time when self-image is only developing is the difference between being a little girl and imagining herself as a doctor or a nurse one day.

Teachers and especially foreign language teachers should be aware of sexism, when selecting learning materials, when making or selecting flashcards that they use, texts that the students read in class, examples that they give, etc. Teachers who teach in primary school and have students in that middle childhood period should be aware that they are also significantly contributing to their self-image, as it is only developing at that time. Teachers should use real photographs for flashcards instead of cliparts, drawings, etc. They should challenge stereotypes, show boys who are wearing pink, who have a pink school bag, girls who are wearing black jeans, who are playing football, dads cooking, moms watching TV, policewomen, male teachers, etc.

5. Conclusion

The paper **Gender Stereotypes in the EFL Classroom** presents the issue of stereotyping and in particular gender stereotyping in the EFL classroom, especially that in the period of middle childhood and early language teaching. The author was interested whether gender stereotyping exists in EFL and in what ways. The author has found that gender stereotypes are common in the EFL classroom and that they can inhibit the capacity for people to develop their own characteristics and skills and to decide what they want with their life. The author has also found that the period of middle childhood between the ages of six and ten is crucial in developing self-image, which is another reason why it is so important to overcome gender stereotypes in this period. In continuation the author presents the 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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