

*The Transformative Role of the English Teacher in Deconstructing
Gender Stereotypes in EFL*

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Abstract

One of the most relevant challenges for Chile is to become a more inclusive country, especially when it comes to gender issues. In fact, the current Chilean government has designed most of its public policies mind the sustainable goals of the United Nations, including achieving greater gender equity by 2030. In fact, the Ministry of Education has highlighted gender equity as one of the cornerstones of teacher training programs nationwide. The objective of this paper is to present the outcomes of a study that examined the graduation theses formulated by 14 English pedagogy students in Santiago, Chile in the years 2021 and 2022 in relation to gender stereotypes. The employed methodology was qualitative, as a thematic analysis was conducted. The results revealed that gender stereotypes such as the following are still prevalent in Chilean schools: female teachers are expected to take on roles as caregivers, which is not required of their male colleagues; female teachers are perceived as less capable and often need to demonstrate their knowledge; male teachers are perceived as more rational and serious, while female teachers appear to be kinder and more emotional. To conclude, the students who took part in the study assumed a critical position regarding gender stereotypes allowing them to perceive themselves as transforming agents called to make changes, through the language and attitudes used in class to deconstruct stereotypes that harm both men and women in their professional development.

Keywords: Inclusion, Gender, Stereotypes, Pedagogical Practice

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Introduction

In Chile, gender stereotypes still prevent girls and women from gaining full academic and professional development. These stereotypes arise from the idea that genders have inherent differences in abilities, interests, and appropriate behaviors. Proof of this is that even today, there are university programs such as mining where the presence of women is low (Salinas et al., 2020). The data provided confirms that although mining is a significant economic activity in Chile, the female workforce only accounts for 7.5%, compared to 19.6% in countries such as Canada and Australia. This uneven ratio is quite visible in other realms too, including the percentage of women enrolled in different academic institutes. As an example, only 22% of these CRUCH universities researchers holding a tenured-track position are female, while male researchers reach 78% of the total real-headcount at the same position. To this we must add that currently women hold only 36% of the leadership positions in the private sector, while men hold 64% (Ministerio de Ciencia y tecnología, 2022).

Research suggests that teachers are the key part of the success of combating stereotypes in order to contribute to the concern of gender equality in terms of advancement in the field of science and business for women. In recent studies in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), female teacher typically tends to provide feedback differently according to the gender of a student and significantly affect girls' motivation to study as well as girls' perception of stereotypes inside the classroom (Gong, et al., 2018). So we also need to think about how textbooks, which, though improved to some extent, are also known to represent gender in ways that typically reinforce more traditional, sex-segregated forms of representation of men and women, insofar as we generally make some association between activities and the sex of the people carrying them out (Aydnolglu, 2014). Therefore, English teachers have the ability to break these patterns and challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom.

The aim of this research is to enhance education in our nation by offering insight into the significance of teacher preparation, within the educational landscape. This involves linking concepts with teaching approaches to equip aspiring educators with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of today's educational environment. This study particularly focuses on the analyze the results, conclusions, discussion as well as pedagogical implications of four graduation dissertations produced by English teacher trainees in their fourth or fifth year of studies. All these works have the particularity of addressing gender issues due to preliminary research carried out during the professional practice in different schools in the Metropolitan area in Chile. The English teacher trainees' positions in their work are crucial as they will have a significant impact on the elimination of gender stereotypes in their future teaching careers, thereby providing hope for children and adolescents to develop in less stereotyped educational settings.

Objectives

To examine the effects of gender representations embodied in 4 graduation papers produced by English pedagogy students.

Specific Objectives

To analyze results, findings, conclusions, discussion and pedagogical implications in four graduation papers produced by English pedagogy students.

To make suggestions as how teachers can become active agents of change from a gender perspective.

Definition of Gender

From a culturalist perspective, gender is understood as a construct that arises from and is shaped by culture, rather than being solely determined by biological factors. This perspective highlights the idea that gender roles, behaviors, and identities are learned and reinforced through cultural norms and practices. De Lauretis (2015) defines gender as a “semiotic construction, a representation or, rather, a composite effect of discursive and visual representations of personal identity, aligning with Millet's (1970) view that there is no necessary direct correspondence between biological sex and gender. Simone De Beauvoir (2019) also emphasizes that one becomes a woman through cultural relationships, distinguishing biological sex from gender, which is culturally attributed. From a similar perspective, Judith Butler (1999) argues that gender is performative, enacted through continuous social performances, and not inherently linked to biological sex. This view opposes essentialist positions based on gender as biological sex that restricts individual freedom by enforcing gender stereotypes. Finally, Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1986) describes gender as a socially imposed division of sexes, a cultural product meant to establish power asymmetries. In patriarchal societies, masculinity is valued over femininity, leading to expected roles such as men being “strong, independent, and competitive” while women are considered “passive, dependent, and submissive” (Moreno, 2015, para. 8). These stereotypes result in the sexual division of labor, marginalizing those who do not conform.

Gender Stereotypes

A gender stereotype is a widely held but simplified and generalized idea about characteristics, behaviors, and roles that are appropriate for individuals based on their gender. These stereotypes are culturally constructed and perpetuated through socialization processes, media, education family structures, and other cultural institutions. In this sense, we can distinguish at least four aspects that still operate in our culture and can be considered stereotypes. Of course there are many others, but for the purposes of this paper and in line with their impact on education, we will refer to the typology described by Uribe et al. (2008) regarding gender stereotypes in advertising, but which in our view is fully valid in education.

1. **Private versus public:** This stereotype gives the female gender a greater connection to the world of home and family. In other words, women are socially conceived as the nurturers of children and husbands. Public life associated with professional development and leadership are more characteristic of the male world. The reason why the public world is more valued is because for a long time, private and small home life and domestic problems were long associated with slaves and not free citizens (Cadahia, 2022). The home environment also evokes the warm atmosphere of the mother/wife always available to others except herself. This stereotype is associated with the classic "angel of the house" that gives a central role to the woman completely devoted to her home, with a huge capacity to give other comfort and care.
2. **The female gender is subordinate to the male one:** This stereotype suggests that women are often relegated to secondary roles and positions of lesser importance in the workforce, rather than being seen as capable leaders in high-ranking positions such as directors or managers. It implies that roles of significant authority and decision-

making are predominantly occupied by men, thereby reinforcing gender biases and limiting opportunities for women to attain leadership roles in professional environments.

3. **Women are dependent on men:** A rather obvious stereotype is the one that shows women as dependent on men, unable to manage themselves. The reliance here goes beyond professional to emotional as well. The stereotype, in question suggests that women's existence is tied to men. According to Salinas et al. (2020) the subjugation and dependency of women are evident in perceptions of their fragility and inability to operate machinery and, in their perceived insecurity compared to their male counterparts.
4. **Men are more rational and intellectual:** Men are often seen as logical and analytical with the belief that they excel in intelligence and cognitive abilities while women are commonly perceived as being more emotional and caring. Salinas et al. (2020) shed light on this stereotype in their research pointing out that in engineering programs women may not always be considered as knowledgeable or capable conversational partners. This bias can lead to the marginalization of women, in professional environments limiting their impact and perpetuating gender gaps in fields predominantly occupied by men.

The Role of Teachers in Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes

Teachers opinions, about gender and stereotypes have an impact on how students grow and learn. For example, if teachers think that girls are better at languages and boys are better at math it can lead to opportunities for boys and girls in science programs at universities. According to an UNICEF study, from 2022 when teachers support gender roles students are more likely to follow those beliefs. For this reason, language plays a crucial role in deconstructing stereotypes. Maturana (1995) emphasized that language is a mechanism of social interaction that shapes and modifies reality. To transcend gender stereotypes that position women as subordinate, society must start with language, critically addressing statements like "men are more rational" or "women are dependent" (Maturana, 1995, cited by Urrejola, 2021, p. 168).

In alignment with this perspective, Van Dijk (2010) underscores the role of language in reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating power imbalances, similar to the way racist language can elevate one group at the expense of another. Similarly, gendered language serves to entrench a subordinate perception of women, thereby maintaining their marginalized status. Consequently, educators bear a critical responsibility to employ transformative language within the classroom, as recommended by Oxford (2013) in her research on the language of peace. This approach is essential for deconstructing entrenched stereotypes and fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Methodology

The method used to carry out this research corresponds to a qualitative textual analysis that uses as a corpus of analysis the results, conclusions, discussion and pedagogical implications of 4 undergraduate English pedagogy students from two universities in the Metropolitan area in Chile. Table 1 below shows the individual graduation papers.

These theses were produced by 14 students (12 women and 2 men) between 2021 and 2022. All of them considered the issues of gender and stereotypes that can be found in the school environment.

Type of university	Name of thesis	Assigned no.	Authors	Year
Private	<i>The Effects of Female teacher's stereotypes on students' classroom performance.</i>	1	Aravena, E., Arraño, I., Ramírez, A.	2022
Public	<i>My Shadow is Pink: Fighting Gender Roles by Using Children's Books</i>	2	Caballero, C., Palma, P., Silva, C.	2022
Private	<i>Gender stereotypes and their influence on career choices at co-educational schools.</i>	3	Concha, N., Godoy, D., Díaz, T., Parra, A	2021
Private	<i>The impact of gender roles in the personal development and social environment in 11th grade students</i>	4	Cuevas, M., Jimenes, M., León, P., Figueroa, R.	2022

Table 1: Corpus of Analysis

Main Findings

Regarding the first stereotype analyzed, private versus public, associating femininity with the private sphere, such as the home and maternal roles, is still deeply ingrained in the school context, particularly in papers 1 and 4. Female teachers are often perceived as calmer and more maternal than their male counterparts. For example, in one survey from thesis 1, 87% of students preferred female teachers, seeing them as motherly figures. Thesis 4 similarly finds that female teachers are viewed as "protectors." Gender stereotypes also influence dress and behavior; one female student felt pressured to wear colors like pink and assume motherly roles. Contrarily, male and non-binary students believe household work is equally distributed, whereas female students see women as bearing the greatest burden (UNICEF, 2022; Maturana, 1995; Van Dijk, 2010).

Regarding the second stereotype, the female gender is subordinate to the male one, all four graduation projects highlight the subalternity of women in relation to men. Thesis 1 reveals that female teachers are considered less capable in leadership and assertiveness, often needing to prove their knowledge, unlike their male counterparts. Thesis 2 critiques the patriarchal system limiting women's opportunities. Thesis 3 echoes these findings, pointing to wage disparities. Thesis 4 discusses how girls are restricted from physical tasks, reflecting the belief that boys are inherently stronger. However, all thesis students adopt a critical stance, advocating for deconstructing these stereotypes in education (Oxford, 2013).

In relation to the third stereotype, women are dependent on men, three papers (theses 1, 2, and 4) challenge the stereotype of women as emotionally and physically fragile. Thesis 1

describes how female teachers struggle more than male teachers to gain respect due to perceptions of fragility. Thesis 4 highlights physical fragility stereotypes, where boys are expected to perform strength-related tasks. The studies reveal persistent perceptions of women as weak and dependent (Moreno, 2015).

Finally, the fourth stereotype, males are more rational and intellectual than females, all four theses explore the stereotype that men are more rational and intellectual, while women are emotional. Thesis 1 shows students describing male teachers as “serious” and female teachers as “nice.” Thesis 2 discusses the conflict between rationality and emotionality, using color symbolism. Thesis 3 contrasts male competitiveness with female cooperation. Thesis 4 associates the idea that men do not cry with rationality and strength. Despite these stereotypes, thesis students argue that intelligence is not gender-specific and emphasize the role of education in nurturing talents in everyone (Van Dijk, 2010).

Implications

The results obtained reveal a series of implications for teachers who should incorporate transformative language in their daily practice. Such a language should aim at deconstructing gender stereotypes to address issues that can perpetuate inequality in the classroom, leading to biased expectations. For instance, if EFL teacher unconsciously believe that girls are better at languages and boys are better at logical subjects, they may inadvertently encourage girls more in languages learning giving less attention to boys.

Stereotypes may also influence students’ interactions among themselves. Boys might feel forced to take the leading roles while girls might assume a rather passive behavior just observing what boys do. On the other hand, stereotypes might have an impact on the way teachers interact with their students. Because of social and cultural expectations, female teachers may feel it is natural to adopt a rather maternal approach while male teachers might feel they must comply with the authoritarian type. The implication this has on students is huge because they perceive that traditional gender roles are transmitted by their teachers.

In the EFL classroom selecting the teaching materials is truly important. Research indicates that certain resources may have the potential to perpetuate gender stereotypes thus making it vital for teacher to examine the didactic material avoiding textbook that reinforce traditional gender roles. To effectively deconstruct stereotypes teachers should emphasize awareness and critical thinking. On the other hand, it is an absolute must for teachers to examine their own beliefs regarding gender and consider how these preconceptions influence their teaching approaches. One way of doing this, is keeping a journal where teachers can record their own thoughts on gender inclusivity and reflect on their own practices inside the classroom.

Making sure that every student has opportunities to actively participate in class is another way to organize inclusive classroom. Teachers should encourage everybody to express their opinions regardless of their gender and social expectations. Using approaches such as cooperative learning can effectively promote individual accountability regardless of gender. Fostering teamwork motivates students to share thoughts and engage respectfully with their classmates.

Limitations

Like every piece of research, this study also faced some limitations, especially regarding the interpretation of its findings. Firstly, it is important to consider the sample size of four graduation papers. Although the results are interesting and confirm most of the studies on the topic, there are some restrictions in terms of generalizability of the results. Moreover, as the study focused on the findings in four graduations papers, some of the conclusions the authors arrived at might have some of their own biases.

One limitation is that the four examined graduation papers focused on short term interventions implemented in schools, within the study area. These quick interventions might not fully reflect the long term impacts and ongoing effects of efforts to combat gender stereotypes.

Although the afore mentioned limitations, the results of the study confirm existing research on gender stereotypes in Chile highlighting the role of teachers in deconstructing these stereotypes. The study highlights the importance of teaching approaches in promoting gender equality within classrooms suggesting that brief interventions can effectively challenge and alter gender stereotypes.

Conclusion: Closing Reflections

While some important progress has been made, traditional perspectives and biases based on gender still persist in our country. It's essential for teachers to integrate examples and stories that challenge gender stereotypes into their language and teaching materials to make educational content more engaging and relatable, for all students. By selecting resources that portray a variety of gender roles and experiences educators can promote a deeper understanding of gender. This approach not addresses and dismantles stereotypes but also cultivates thinking skills among students encouraging them to reassess their own beliefs about gender. Ultimately by embracing these approaches educators contribute to eradicating rooted prejudices thus creating a richer and educational environment that embraces diversity and promotes mutual respect.

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