



RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLICIES FOR GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN EFL TEACHING AT SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN BENIN/ POLITIQUES D'INTÉGRATION DU GENRE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS LANGUE ETRANGERE AU SECONDAIRE AU BÉNIN

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ABSTRACT

The primary concern of the study is to evaluate gender mainstreaming into EFL teaching at the secondary school level in Benin. This objective has been translated into the following research question: What are the policies in place for the promotion of gender mainstreaming into EFL teaching at secondary school level in Benin? To address this question, the mixed methods design was used, and a questionnaire was administered electronically to 180 participants but 153 responded. The findings of the study revealed that 85.6 percent of the respondents are male teachers whereas only 14.4 percent are females. Furthermore, most of the respondents (60.8 percent) reported that they have not received any training on gender equality whereas 39.9 percent of them indicated that they have participated in gender equality training initiatives. The respondents also reported that they make efforts to maintain gender into their instructional practices by providing equal opportunity and treatment to their learners irrespective of their gender. Concerning the gender equality laws, 60.8 percent of the participants reported that they are aware of the existence of such laws in the country. For effective gender mainstreaming into EFL teaching, it is recommended that the government should implement the provisions of law No 2011-26 of 9 January 2011 which requires collaboration among various ministries.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender mainstreaming within the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the secondary school level in Benin is a crucial topic that addresses the integration of gender perspectives into the teaching and learning processes. It aims to promote gender equality and ensure that both male and female students have equal opportunities to succeed in EFL education. This study of gender mainstreaming is situated within a broader global discourse on gender equality and its intersection with educational access, quality, and outcomes (Levtov, 2014). In Africa in general and Benin in particular, women and girls used to be confined to household chores. Their roles consisted in bearing children, taking care of those children and their husbands as well. Men grow crops, they go hunting and in general perform tasks that require strength. There is no doubt that the trend is changing and will continue to change in the years to come. That is the reason why girls are encouraged to go to school and many governments in the world are making efforts to maintain them in school. However, inequalities between boys and girls at school still persist in the society at large and especially in schools. This study has been chosen for better investigation because above all, gender is a relevant issue that is topical. Besides, it will be useful to EFL teachers because they are the pathfinders of the educational system in the country. In other words, EFL teachers are the primary beneficiaries of this research work as its findings will sensitize them on the importance of gender mainstreaming in EFL classes. The application of the

recommendations resulting from this work will enable them to reduce and even do away with gender inequalities in their classrooms, which will contribute to the establishment of more gender-balanced society in the country. The teachers' behavior change will have a stronger effect on secondary school female students as they will feel empowered and their academic results are going to improve significantly. The primary concern of this research work is to evaluate gender mainstreaming in teaching EFL at the secondary school level in Benin. In order to ease the investigations, the general objective has been split into one specific objective: to explore the arrangements in place to promote gender mainstreaming at the secondary school level in general and into EFL teaching in particular in Benin. Furthermore, the central question underlying this research work is as follows: to what extent is gender mainstreamed in the EFL teaching and learning process in Benin? This question has been explored through the following question: what are the policies in place for the promotion of gender mainstreaming at secondary school level in general and into EFL teaching at secondary school level in Benin? Finally, this study aims to evaluate the implementation of gender mainstreaming in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in public secondary schools in Benin. It covers EFL teachers' opinions about gender mainstreaming.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the Concept of Gender: Gender is a prevalent idea in people's daily lives. It is one of the least investigated issues in the realm of material evaluation. According to Dai (2016), "gender refers

to social and cultural values, practices, and roles that differentiate males from females; hence, gender roles are not natural but are acquired to meet society's expectations of gender identities." (p.152). In other words, gender refers to people's society and conventional ideals, how they behave and the roles allocated to men and women. Gender, however, is not a natural phenomenon, but rather the acquisition of behavior in the context of one's living environment. Gender refers to what people learn from the society in which they live. It is not an inner value. According to Bruegues & Cromer (2009), "gender is related to culture and the social division into "masculine" and "feminine". Gender, therefore, pertains to the qualities, tastes, aptitudes, roles and responsibilities associated with men and women in a society. It is tied to culture and the social divide into "masculine" and "feminine." (p.248). It signifies that gender refers to the talents, tastes, aptitudes, duties, and obligations that men and women in a community share. Through the aforementioned definitions, gender can be defined as the concept which studies human beings' culture, tradition, society and environment. It is also the concept that deals with people, attitudes and behaviors in their environment. Furthermore, some researchers work in order to expand and make people understand the different approaches based on gender.

Approaches to Gender: The interactionist approach emphasizes the social context of human interaction (Wharton, 2005), providing a useful framework for integrating behavior, social environment, and practical social work skills. Its core concept is the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society. In education, the interactionist perspective specifically examines interactions among students and between teachers and students by exploring concepts like labelling and relationships within schools.

Educational interaction can be viewed as a dynamic relationship among various educational stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and students. Typically, interaction refers to a reciprocal relationship, whether within or outside the school environment, where individuals collaborate to create a positive learning climate and produce qualified graduates (Ahmad, 2017). As Shuyadi and Achmadi (2000, p. 11) suggest, it is "a relationship between educators (teachers) and students that takes place in a teaching bond." Therefore, educational interaction between teachers and students is a communicative, intentional, planned, and goal-oriented process built upon a reciprocal relationship. The key components of this planned interaction are teachers and students.

Next, this approach posits that sociology examines how individuals interact with one another. Each individual contributes culturally to the definition and establishment of social institutions, shaped by shared socialization experiences and expectations. It emphasizes the understanding of individuals' perceptions of reality and their reactions to surrounding events and circumstances. It is also a process of self and other categorization based on group membership (race, ethnicity, age, ability) (Wharton, 2005). To sum up, the approaches to gender offer a rich tapestry of understanding. The next part is the concept of gender roles.

Gender Roles: The concept of gender role plays a significant and multifaceted role in the context of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It influences various aspects of the educational experience, from teacher-student interactions and classroom dynamics to the design and interpretation of learning materials and the learners' own engagement and motivation. In fact, gender role is defined as socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. In other words, gender roles are the tasks allocated to males and females by a community based on its culture and values. Furthermore, gender roles can be understood as a constellation of qualities that individuals in a given culture associate with males and females. These qualities encompass a range of attributes, including hobbies, role relationships, social position, personality traits, abilities, and behaviors. A person's gender role, therefore, is often defined by societal expectations regarding their potential achievements and appropriate conduct (Block, 1973). More broadly, gender roles deal

with the socially assigned sets of behaviors, roles, and responsibilities for men and women, which are reinforced through various societal institutions, such as political and educational systems, employment patterns, cultural norms and values, and the family. While some cultures, like that of Benin, primarily distinguish between masculine (attributes associated with masculinity) and feminine (attributes associated with femininity) gender roles, other societies recognize a more diverse range, including masculine, feminine, and neutral, among others.

Factors Determining Gender Roles/Stereotypes: Gender stereotypes are widely held beliefs that prescribe what men and women should be and are capable of doing. While these stereotypes can evolve, they tend to change slowly. Common gender stereotypes often portray women as kind, nurturing, friendly, warm, and focused on childcare. Several factors contribute to the formation and reinforcement of gender roles. Traditional gender roles often dictate that women should be responsible for domestic tasks such as cleaning, childcare, and cooking, while men are expected to handle finances, car maintenance, office work, and home repairs. This division of labor reinforces the stereotype that women's place is primarily at home, not in the workplace, whereas men's roles are predominantly situated in the professional sphere (McHugh & Frieze, 1997; Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Furthermore, occupational stereotypes often associate certain professions with specific genders. For example, some perceive teaching and nursing as predominantly female professions, while piloting, medicine, and engineering are often seen as primarily male domains. Next, regarding personality traits, women are often stereotyped as flexible and emotional, while men are expected to be self-confident and even aggressive, embodying the traditional warrior archetype. In fact, Soto (2018), defines a personality trait as "a characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, or behaving that tends to be consistent over time and across relevant situations" (p. 21). In other words, it is a typical way someone is, that you can expect them to be like most of the time, regardless of where they are or what they are doing (as long as the situation is related to that trait). Contrary to these stereotypes, research suggests that men often exhibit openness and conscientiousness, demonstrating inventiveness, intelligence, impulse control, and goal-directed behavior, while women are frequently judged based on appearance, emphasizing qualities like being well-groomed, beautiful, and appealing.

Influence of Gender in EFL Classes: Gender equality and women's empowerment remain central themes in global treaties, covenants, and declarations because they are now recognized as catalysts for people-centered development strategies that focus on poverty reduction, improved living standards, and good governance that gives men and women equal voices in decision-making and policy implementation (Fatile and Ejalonibu, 2016). For this reason, promoting gender equality is now widely recognized as a development strategy for improving health and living conditions while also increasing the efficiency of public investments. Gender equality is viewed not just as a goal in itself and a human rights issue, but also as a precondition for creating a safer society (Fatile & Ejalonibu, 2016). It influences our interests and views about our own skills, dictating our course of studies and, eventually, employment choices. In secondary school, boys tended to study mathematics and sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology, while girls focused on humanities like English, history, and fine arts like dance, drama, and music. These gendered patterns in education and career paths often reflect and reinforce traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Efforts to promote gender equality in classrooms are increasingly recognized as essential, particularly in light of events like International Women's Day, which serve as a reminder of the ongoing need for progress. Encouraging collaboration between male and female students in projects can foster understanding and respect as well. Exploring gender norms and roles across different cultures can broaden students' perspectives. Finally, raising awareness of gender bias through exercises, discussions of historical events, analysis of relevant laws, and exploration of cultural changes can empower students to recognize and challenge inequality.

through the following quotations: "I sensitize boys about the importance of female in the society when they go further in their studies. So, they have to be a support for them nor an obstacle for.>"; "To promote gender equality in my classes, I use inclusive gender language, I cite people Who have broken gender barriers, I use inclusive gender texts, books, I also use equal gender participation.>"; "By making my learners develop some topics showing that boys and girls have the same rights". The sensitization consists in encouraging male students to be supportive of their female counterparts, talking about woman role models to the students, encouraging female students to study hard, and especially showing the female students that they can do whatever their male counterparts can do. It is also worthwhile mentioning that the respondents take advantage of the content of their lessons to carry out sensitization on gender. Some respondents even try to use gender-sensitive materials in their lessons to promote gender equality with their learners. This group of respondents have the same gender perspectives as the ones that reported that they do not give differentiated treatment to boys and girls.

Gender Equality Laws

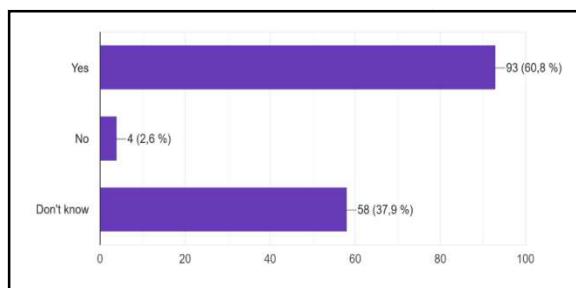


Figure 4. Existence of Laws on Gender Equality Promotion
(Source: Filed data, 2025)

Figure 4 indicates the levels of awareness of the respondents on the existence of laws that protect gender equality within the educational system. 60.8 percent of the participants know about such legislation whereas a small minority of 2.6 percent explicitly reported that they do not know about these laws. Besides, a significant proportion, 37.9 percent stated that they have no idea about the existence of laws on gender promotion. This data in general indicates that more than half of the participants possess accurate information concerning gender equality laws in the education system in Benin.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What are the Policies in place for the promotion of gender mainstreaming at secondary school level in general and into EFL teaching at secondary school level in Benin?: The demographic data show that 86.6 percent of the respondents are male teachers and only 14.4 percent are female teachers. This implies that female teachers are still limited in number at the secondary school level in Benin. Even though the sample selected is not representative of the EFL teachers' population in the country, the feminization of the teaching profession has not yet reached the secondary school level among EFL teachers in the country (Griffiths, 2006). Further, most of the respondents (68.8 percent) have been teaching for at least ten years. Consequently, some of them are likely to have heard about gender mainstreaming in EFL teaching during their career. That is certainly the reason why at least, 39.9 percent of the respondents reported to have received a training in gender mainstreaming into EFL teaching. Therefore, there are no systematic policies implemented at school level to ensure gender mainstreaming at secondary school level. The initiatives reported by the respondents look like isolated initiatives are taken by inspired leaders. Even though all the schools do not have gender focal points, the respondents reported a number of activities and policies to promote gender equality. The first policy identified in the study is the sensitization of secondary school stakeholders including EFL teachers and students on the issue of gender. According to the information

provided by the respondents, before the sensitization, the relevant NGO is first identified. Participants also indicated that they promote gender equality in the classroom by making sure that both male and female students' voices are heard in the classroom. They also indicated that they provide equal opportunity to girls and boys in the classroom. This is what transpires through the following statements which underscore efforts made by the respondents to ensure gender balance in their classrooms: "I give the same chance to my students both boys and girls to answer to my questions..."; "I give equal opportunities and chances to both boys and girls.>"; "I call both girls and boys in turn to take the floor.>"; "I choose a girl after a boy and vice versa"; "To promote gender equality in my classroom, I let all my learners have the same talking time during collective work".

However, a close analysis of the above statement shows that the language used is discriminatory and biased against female students because it is dominated by "male firstness" (Sunderland, 1994). In fact, the content of the statements show that the participants mostly mentioned male students before female students. What can be inferred from this situation is that even though the respondents are willing to promote gender mainstreaming, their language is biased against the female students who are considered inferior to the male students. The persistence of the male firstness is a manifestation of gender stereotype. The findings are in line with those of a study conducted by Brodin (2017) in which he showed that boys always come first when it comes to attention paid to students in EFL classrooms.

Another gender mainstreaming initiative worth underscoring is the involvement of EFL female teachers in the sensitization of female students on gender issues. The following two statements are used to highlight this involvement: "As I am a woman myself, I just tell them not to disgrace me. I ginger them up by telling them to show the boys they are up to the task, I kind of challenge them.>"; "This IS a group of female teachers called" femmes battantes" who often advise schools girls on the ways they should behave to avoid contracting undesirable pregnancy and STDs." The importance of the involvement of female teachers cannot be overemphasized. They serve as role models for their female learners because their presence indicates that it is possible for girls to succeed. The message they convey is more relevant as it comes from experience. In fact, Ugla and Jaafar (2023) found that role models are very important in EFL education. For them, role models are a source of inspiration to their learners, especially for same sex learners. The fact that the female teachers have organized themselves into an association called "Femmes battantes" shows that they are going to have a far-reaching impact on female students in the future.

Apart from the sensitization ideas developed above, affirmative action is another strategy used to promote gender mainstreaming given that women and girls in general have been victims of all sorts of injustice for many years. Some respondents reported that they take specific measures in favor of female students in the classroom. The female students receive words of encouragement when they give good answers, they are encouraged to work hard and be disciplined, to participate in classroom discussion. In addition, they are protected against bullying and any form of discrimination and any other forms of threat while the teachers encourage them to compete for leadership positions in the classroom. According to Chowdhury et al. (2020), affirmative action is "a set of ethically driven policies aimed at providing special opportunities to a historically disadvantaged group in order to make the members of this group capable of competing with their privileged counterparts in the society" (p. 2). In most African societies including Benin, women and girls have always been marginalized and attend school in lower numbers than men and boys. As a consequence, the respondents are founded to resort to incentive measures likely to help the female students to compete with their male counterparts in school. Furthermore, from a different perspective, the respondents also indicated that measures are taken in the schools to protect female students against sexual harassment so that they can study in a safe environment. The first measure taken in this regard is sensitization. The government, NGOs, and school administrators are involved in the sensitization which covers not only female students

but also all the other stakeholders in the schools. The sexual harassment reporting channels are also made available to female students and any other stakeholders in some schools. The laws on sexual harassment, especially provisions on the punishments likely to be inflicted are disseminated during the key subjects discussed during the sensitization sessions. It should be noted that 60.8 percent of the respondents reported that there are laws to promote gender equality in Benin and 37.9 percent were not sure. For example, the law No 2021-11 of 20 December 2021 relating to the specific provisions on the repression of sexual offenses and protection of women in the Republic of Benin. Article 548 defines sexual harassment and article 549 provides that any form of sexual harassment is an offense and 550 provide that sexual harassment is punishable by a fine from CFA 500 000 to CFA 1 000 000 and a jail term of one to two years or either of these sanctions. Article 551 provides that when the harassment is perpetrated by a teacher, the fine is from one (1 000 000) to five million (5 000 000) CFA and the jail term from three (3) to five (5) years.

The law No 2011-26 of 9 January 2011 on the prevention and repression of violence against women has a whole chapter devoted to education. While article 3 of this law provides a definition of harassment, article 5 of chapter one on education provides that the struggle to achieve gender equality is a national priority. On the other hand, article 7 provides that the ministries in charge of education need to collaborate with the ministries in charge of social affairs and health to mainstream gender equality in the training of secondary school teachers. The above laws are part of the legislation intended to operationalize the provision of the constitution of the Republic of Benin on gender equality. These are certainly some of the laws on which NGOs and school administrators conduct their sensitization activities in the secondary schools. These laws are also part of the implementation of international agreements ratified by the Republic of Benin. One of these agreements is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which provides State Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure equality of rights in education for men and women and for "The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education" (Article 10 (e), p. 4). This article is more specific to education as it focuses on the elimination of stereotypes in the field of education in general and in language education in general. This is going to make language education more gender sensitive.

Suggestions and Recommendations: The government should implement the provisions of article 7 of law No 2011-26 of 9 January 2011 which requires that the ministries in charge of education, social affairs and health should collaborate to mainstream gender equality in teacher education at secondary school level in the country. Here, teachers should be trained on gender mainstreaming in education in general and in their specific subjects in particular. For the purposes of gender mainstreaming, the training should cover not only teachers but also teacher supervisors and material developers. Furthermore, the government should make the appointment of gender focal points mandatory at all levels of education from primary school to the university including vocational education. This will make it possible to conduct gender equality sensitization actions in a systematic way at secondary school level in general and in EFL teaching in particular. The appointment of gender focal points for each subject will also facilitate the gender mainstreaming into the teaching and learning of those subjects. Moreover, as far as teachers are concerned, they should play a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions and experiences. It is essential that they treat both female and male students equally and develop a classroom environment where every student feels valued and empowered. This involves encouraging equal participation by avoiding gender-based assumptions, and using inclusive language and examples (Otlowski, 2003). Teachers should ensure that all students have access to the same resources and opportunities, whether in academics, leadership roles, or extracurricular activities. By modeling respectful behavior and challenging stereotypes when they arise, teachers should help dismantle harmful norms and promote a more equitable learning environment to their students.

CONCLUSION

This study has been conducted to explore gender mainstreaming into EFL teaching at secondary school level in Benin. The study has been guided with one specific objective: to evaluate gender mainstreaming into EFL teaching at the secondary school level in Benin. The study used the mixed methods approach. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered electronically to the participants. The findings revealed that only a small proportion of the respondents received training on gender equality but most of the respondents reported that they make efforts to promote gender equality in their EFL classes. Besides, a sizable percentage of the respondents are aware of the existence of gender equality laws in Benin. On the basis of the findings, some recommendations have been made for more effective gender mainstreaming in EFL classes.

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