

## How can we achieve gender equity in the classroom?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 1 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

teachers, gender, girls, women, gender equity, gender equality, classroom, school, British Council, students, giving, challenges, context, language, learners, textbooks, education, English, men, interviews

Welcome to **Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council**, the podcast for English language teachers around the world.

In each episode, we look at a critical contemporary issue in the world of ELT.

Some of the strategies that we shared with teachers are using colour-coded charts or colour-coded cards for teachers to assign to students and keep track of balanced participation in open discussion.

A mission this year for **International Women's Day**.

I have assigned readings of the stories of women and I tell them what would you have done in that situation?

When there are inequalities for anyone, it is a problem for everyone.

We also talk about the new masculinities that are emerging and that now it's OK to do these things.

Listen to their experiences, allow them to have the safe space where they can express themselves and learn. We're all humans.

Teaching English with the British Council.

This is episode one. How do we achieve gender equity in the classroom?

**Chris:** Welcome to Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council. Hello, We'am!

**We'am:** Hello, Chris!

**Chris:** How are you doing?

**We'am:** Very good to see you again.

**Chris:** You too. What's been going on?

**We'am:** Besides my **PhD**, which—

**Chris:** Is a big 'besides'!

**We'am:** Yeah, hopefully will not take six years. Well, besides my PhD, which I hope to finish very soon, I have joined the **Teaching English with the British Council team** as one of their social media coordinators. We have the Facebook page, Instagram and we also have the main website, free resources for teachers on different kinds of topics. We have a theme every month – you can follow our posts on Facebook and

Instagram for more information. But basically, it's a community for teachers to enjoy free resources and also to have a conversation with other teachers around the world.

**Chris:** Absolutely. And you can find the previous two series of Teaching English with the British Council there as well. And also the Facebook group, which is a fantastic community of practice, with thousands of teachers from all over the world sharing their ideas. And also, for this series, you can put your questions there. You can participate yourselves by asking questions in the Facebook group, and we will put some of those questions to our fantastic experts who will be joining us across the ten episodes of this series.

Teaching English with the British Council.

**We'am:** And what's happening with you, Chris?

**Chris:** Not that much.

**We'am:** Besides finishing a PhD.

**Chris:** Oh, besides finishing ... I didn't want to really talk about that.

**We'am:** Oh, he doesn't want to talk about it. But he brought the doctorate hat with him today.

**Chris:** You noticed the hat, did you, We'am?

**We'am:** Yes, I did.

**Chris:** The big, black hat on top of my head.

**We'am:** Well, everyone noticed that.

**Chris:** Oh, did they? I forgot I had it on to be honest. But across this series of Teaching English, we've got some fantastic guests lined up, we'll be talking about a whole range of issues of relevance and importance to teachers across the world. So from vocabulary and grammar, to artificial intelligence, to native speakerism, to critical thinking and much, much more. But in this episode, we will be focusing on ...

**We'am:** Gender equity in the English classroom.

**Chris:** So what kind of things are we looking at in this episode, We'am?

**We'am:** So, we are looking at how can we achieve **gender equity or equality** in the classroom? I like to use the term 'equity' more than 'equality', because equity means that you are looking at the environment. How do you improve the environment so that you can, you know, reach a more equal outcome? We will have some reflection on when did that expression come and a more general view on practical activities that can be used in the classroom.

**Chris:** We already did an episode on 'How can I make my teaching gender fair?' way back in series one, so you can go and listen to that again if you're interested. But it seems to me that while some progress has been made in this area, there's still a long, long way to go. So we're revisiting that topic in order to discover

more.

**We'am:** Not to mention that this area is always evolving. Because, you know, in today's world, people are becoming more aware of certain things. And there's also the definition of gender as a **social construct**. So lots of areas that we can discuss.

**Chris:** Exactly, old challenges remain, but new challenges are coming all the time, so we thought it would be a good opening episode to this series.

**We'am:** **Dr Aisling O'Boyle** is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Centre for Language Education Research at Queen's University, Belfast in Northern Ireland. She's also the author of ***Gender equality in English language teaching practice: A resource book for teacher education***.

**Chris:** Welcome to the podcast, Aisling.

**Aisling:** Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

**Chris:** So, Aisling, I'd like to begin just by asking you a question that you put at the beginning of this recent publication, which is when did you first hear about the expression gender equality? Do you remember the context in which it was used? And what did it mean in that context?

**Aisling:** Very interesting, thinking about my own experiences. I think I was, became aware at an early age about the notion of gender equality. My grandmother told me stories from a very early age about how she wasn't able to attend school, but her brother was. And so education always played a key role in my family upbringing, about how important it was. So whenever I first heard the term 'gender equality', it most likely was whenever I was in high school, and everyone else around me went: 'What's gender equality? What's gender equality?' And when the teacher began to explain what it was, it clicked a lot with me. And I thought, 'Oh, that's what my grandmother has been telling me for quite a few years'. She didn't use the term 'gender equality'. But what she used was her experiences as a woman, as a girl growing up in the world and seeing things that were not available to her that were available to her brother.

**Chris:** I think it's interesting, **one of the essays in the volume that you co-edited**, someone calls gender equality a buzzword that's been kind of around for 20 or so years. But as you're saying, the idea of that has been around for, well, for forever really has, hasn't it? But we've just got the language now to talk about this issue.

**Aisling:** Yes. And also I think one of the really positive things about both publications is it's not just about over time, but it's also about across geopolitical contexts, across different continents, different rural, urban settings. This is something that there's our notion on our understandings of gender equality, they permeate into every aspect of our lives, regardless of where we live our lives or how we live our lives. They're there, it's there, and it's there as a problem for everyone. It's not just a problem for women, it is a problem for everyone. When there are inequalities for anyone, it is a problem for everyone.

**We'am:** I kind of relate to the story when you talked about your grandma, because I always remember my grandma also talking about how she wished to pursue her education. She also had one brother who went to school, while she wasn't able to do that. In general, how do you feel **women and girls, including trans-**

women and girls, are disadvantaged in education?

**Aisling:** I think some people think that in the 21st century, gender equality has been fixed. People think that gender equality doesn't matter, but actually it is a significant issue. And that's one of the things through this project, the gendering ELT project, that on the one hand was interesting and positive to get lots of people talking about gender. But what we also find were young student teachers, young female student teachers reporting on their classroom experiences and knowing that they too have suffered gender discrimination. When we take sort of a global perspective, looking at global organisations like the United Nations, who will produce **annual reports on gender equality** and **measurements of gender equality**, and one of the stark, very stark findings recently from last year's report was that we are not at all we as a human population, we as a global population, are not at all on track to achieving the targets that have been set for equality for women and girls. Now, that's really frightening. And when we look underneath those discourses of 'Oh, no, gender equality has been sorted', 'Gender equality is not an issue any more. It's absolutely not'. So we have the rise of things like neosexism, where people deny the existence of women being discriminated against. And, to be really clear, women and girls, and people of all genders, do suffer discrimination. Some of the things include professional discrimination, some of them are very prominent in our news reports around violence and human trafficking, child marriage, early forced marriage, unpaid domestic care work, which predominantly falls on women and girls, lack of access to executive or decision making, whether that be in politics or whether it be in school leadership positions in schools. Across the world, we've got young people who are facing the very same problems that would have been faced a hundred years ago. Are we any further forward? We probably are a little bit further forward in that there's much more of an awareness of gender matters and an awareness of the inequalities, but are we there yet? No. No.

**We'am:** What do you think the role of language is in reinforcing or challenging these **gender stereotypes** in the classroom?

**Aisling:** Language education is super special because language education already has built into it the idea of sharing different perspectives, of people recognising that differences exist, and being able to talk through them, being able to agree or disagree if they like, but being able to recognise that they're there and have come to a joint understanding of a particular matter. To some extent, language teachers are already predisposed to being social actors and being kind of promoting social change. And I think language teachers can undertake some of those tasks.

**Chris:** Can I just follow up on that and ask, it'll be maybe helpful for our listeners, if you could just say a little bit about **the difference between gender and sex** and how we understand that, because that's a sort of fundamental distinction.

**Aisling:** Absolutely, and it is fundamental to understand those differences. So when we talk about gender, we talk about gender as something that's socially constructed. It's a representation of the values, the social values or cultural values, attributed to identities of, for example, men and women. Sex, in this instance, when we talk about differences between sex and gender, is physiological. The problem arises, I think, that when we have this particularly **essentialist binary view**, composed of these two sort of exclusive opposites, is that sex and gender become blurred. Ideas about sex and gender become blurred. We have things like sexual theory, which states that there are certain roles and tasks which are 'more suitable', in inverted commas, to men, and there are 'more tasks' associated to women. Now, when we follow that through, what

happens is that when men don't do what they're expected to do, and women don't do what they are expected to do, they are often punished for it. And this appears on a very simple scale in **the way, for example, that professions are represented in English language textbooks**. Have a look at the roles in which those men and women are being portrayed as carrying out in the textbooks. A recent sort of diachronic study over 50 years looking at textbooks, it shows us that although we may have equal numbers of men and women represented in textbooks, how they are represented, it's incredibly different. Men are represented as having highly skilled professions. Women are those who are either perceived to be carers in low-skilled jobs. That's a very simple thing to do to look at, in your own textbooks, looking at how women and men are represented, and why should they be associated with particular roles?

**Chris:** **There's one really interesting essay in the collection called 'Anyone can carry chairs'.**

**Aisling:** Yes, I mean, that I would really encourage people to have a read through those essays that are in our teacher education resources books. If you are looking for examples of discrimination, it is unfortunately full of examples there. And they are everyday classroom examples. So it not only speaks about, you know, only the boys are allowed to move the chairs, when we think about younger age groups, that distinction between sort of physical qualities, it's just not there. In the essays, there's other examples of where a girl who has been described as she, she talks a lot, but her fellow male students are, they're, they're very opinionated. She talks a lot, she's talkative, but her male classmates are opinionated. So we can see how, yes, it appears in our adjectives, it appears in the way that we talk about our students, but also in how we interact with them as well.

**We'am:** How can we improve the role of parents to support gender equity or equality in the classroom?

**Aisling:** As part of this Gendering ELT project, we interviewed parents across the ten countries who were involved in the project. Obviously, the interviews were voluntary, so we had parents who agreed to participate in the interviews, who clearly were happy to speak about the topic about gender in English language teaching. What is particularly striking, I find, in looking through the interviews and going over the interviews, was the value that parents put on English language education, throughout all of the different countries that we were engaged with. And they spoke about how important it was, they also spoke about how important it was for their daughters. If I could give one example, from a father who was interviewed, who was very annoyed because the English teacher wasn't giving his daughter opportunities to speak. He went to the class and he went to the English teacher and, you know, was very firm about giving his daughter the opportunities to practise her English because it was seen as something that was very important for her. His imagined future for his daughter was something that was, for him, included high levels of English language.

**Chris:** The challenge is how we turn that example – that, that father who had that view – into something more systemic, how we kind of draw on that and actually make it embedded in the system.

**Aisling:** Yes. And I think that was some of the things that we noticed across different countries. There is a context sensitivity around the issue of gender in different countries. And sometimes the parental views do not match those of the particular geopolitical context. The example that I gave there, that was from a particular country which hasn't signed up to particular conventions on gender equality. So we have stakeholders within the educational environment who can be very positive, very willing to take risks to put forward equality onto agendas. And I think that's why if we're talking about any kind of systemic change, or

if we're talking about change over time, that was part of what was included in the project was about taking this multiperspectival approach, where it wasn't just listening to teachers, it was also listening to young people themselves, but listening to school leaders, to student teachers, to educators and to those involved in policy as well, because I think it's such an issue that permeates all of our lives at every level, that it is important that we gain support from everyone at every sector at every point in time.

**Chris:** Absolutely. Aisling, thank you so much for your time today. We'll put the links to your, the two volumes that you co-edited in the show notes so people can access and hopefully use them in the classroom. But thank you very much.

**We'am:** Thank you so much.

**Aisling:** Thank you, thanks very much.

**Chris:** So, We'am, I was very interested to hear about the similarities of your personal experience with what Aisling was saying, even though you are from very different countries, different ages, different backgrounds, and so on. But what she was saying echoed very much with what your grandmother has said to you when you were young.

**We'am:** Yes. It always kind of broke my heart that my grandmother wanted to go to school but wasn't able to, because back in the days they, women weren't allowed to go to school. Others were but, I mean, it depends on the family and context.

**Chris:** It's that idea that knowledge and skills and ability can be distributed evenly, but opportunities aren't. You know, your grandmother didn't have those opportunities. But you have had those opportunities, or you've made those opportunities, and you've ended up doing a master's degree at Oxford, now doing a PhD at Cambridge. So things can change over time. It can be difficult – that improvement rate may be slower in some places compared to others – but there is opportunity for that.

**We'am:** Yes, and the Palestinian context, we have like the highest percentage also of literacy rates in the MENA region – which is the Middle East and North Africa. And it's something we take pride in, although we have separated schools, for girls and for boys, if you look at government schools, we have separated sets. And this is very common, actually, in Arab countries, in Muslim countries to have separated schools. And one of the things I was thinking, how can we also think about gender equity when we are teaching in not a co-ed school, kind of separate context where girls are maybe exposed to certain material and then later they are exposed to the world, so they face maybe a different reality? And then that kind of causes some sort of dissonance. Especially for teenagers, it can be a little bit difficult.

**Chris:** Yeah, it can be the sort of thing whether your lived reality within the schools of how you are seen in a textbook, or how you see each other with your friends and colleagues and, you know, strong female role models, as teachers, head teachers, etc. But your everyday reality might be something very different. You know, in your household it may be that girls are expected to do household chores, while their brothers aren't. So the messages which they're getting at school and the messages which they're getting at home or in society are very different. And that can lead to, like you say, that dissonance, that confusion, which can be really challenging to process as a teenager.

**We'am:** Yes. And there comes the teacher role in recognising these challenges and bringing awareness in the classroom. But also, beyond awareness. What we want to actually see in the classroom is more of trying to implement these things in real life, not just to be aware of it, and that makes the real change. But it also needs for everyone to be on the same page, kind of, parents, school administration, also students, so it's not very simple to achieve in reality, but it's doable

**Chris:** And sometimes it's that having that awareness, but a lack of ability to do anything about that, can actually be much more problematic, because you recognise the challenges, but it's very, very hard to do anything about them.

**We'am:** That's why we need to think of the teacher's role as more of guiding and bringing awareness of these different issues and putting activities or material that can capitalise on the knowledge that students have, whether in at home, whether outside home, or whether something they are exposed to, from social media or from TV or other outlets. I think there's plenty of opportunity these days to talk about gender equity.

**Chris:** And it's actually maybe, like you say, about social media and so on, it's sometimes a tendency might be to ignore those things that are out there, if they're, you know, offensive or degrading to women or whatever it may be. But actually, what a good teacher could do, or a confident teacher can do, is to present that kind of information and then work with their students to, to criticise it, to look at it, to try and understand why this thing has been written, to look at what could be done about that.

**We'am:** One example you can, that I like to do with my students is asking them what do they want to be in future. And, for some girls, sometimes it's also difficult to articulate what you want to be because this is more of a male-dominated job, like lawyers, engineers. I'd say there are more engineers, female engineers now, but IT engineers, let's say, are rare. When we talk about the IT industry, it's more male dominated. One of my friends pursued that, and I know that it was difficult for her to be the only female in a faculty full of males. So one thing that I like to do with secondary-level students, when they are preparing to go to university, is to think about that and to try to convince them to pursue what they want, rather than what the society thinks is suitable for them.

Teaching English with the British Council

**Chris:** For our next interview, we're delighted to welcome **Araceli Salas and Grazzia Mendoza, teacher educators from Latin America.**

**We'am:** So if you can tell us what strategies can be used to encourage equal participation among all genders in class discussions?

**Araceli:** One of the things that I like to do is to ask everybody to tell us about their stories, the females in their families, so that the boys know what's going on and from the voices of the girls. I think that's really important that boys know how their peers feel, what they go through, and they can apply some of these things in their daily lives. That is what I usually do at the beginning of the courses. So I usually ask them to tell them how they feel, what they have gone through. Of course, of course, we have to be careful because the classroom, the English classroom also has to be protected.

**Chris:** And how do you manage that with the boys in terms of their reactions to that? Because I imagine some are very sympathetic and want to listen, and for others it's really surprising and they maybe didn't have any understanding for that. But maybe some are more aggressive and kind of critical of that. How do you cope with those different reactions that can come?

**Araceli:** I haven't really faced any situation where boys get aggressive. They are, most of the times they are surprised. In some times they relate what the girls say to their moms and sisters. Yes. For example, like, yes, that used to happen in my home, when my aunt or my grandmother asked the girls to serve the food and to iron the clothes for the girls. But these things don't happen any more. Or I would never ask my partner to do this for me.

**Chris:** And for you, Grazzia, it's similar experiences?

**Grazzia:** I used to work for **USAID Honduras**, and we've worked where there's a lot of high violence, high crime, which prevents sometimes children from going to school in general. And then it comes to how scared children might feel about going to school because there are gangs and there are opposing gangs, in the communities, in the neighbourhoods where they live, and then they might go into schools without asking any permission and might recruit the boys. And then the girls will be abused in different ways. And then families decide 'Well, I'm not going to be sending my children to school because this is not a safe place for them'. So the work that we did with USAID Honduras was exactly creating safe spaces for learning for children in general. But we also worked on having this discussions and creating the spaces for gender and social inclusion, equal participation and encouraging that in the classroom.

**Araceli:** Just following what Grazzia was saying, in my context is the public university, in Mexico. And what happens with these students is that some of them come from very little towns, and that is where things happen, sometimes. Probably in the cities, things are starting to change. But what I want is that these students take those experiences or these experiences and these stories to their little towns and tell their moms, tell their elders, what is going on and what has changed.

**Chris:** And in terms of sort of practical classroom strategies that can be used, what kind of things do you do? We have teacher listeners from all over the world. What different techniques could be used in order to achieve that gender equity?

**Araceli:** We don't use really textbooks, but when we encounter an image on internet, or what I take images with some gender roles, and I ask them: 'What do you think of these? Who does this at home?' And we even talk about the clothes and the attitudes and the faces on people. Is she happy? Is he happy? Or a man carrying a baby, and, and I ask them, 'Would you like to do that?' So I tried to talk about their, their attitudes, and then realise that it is, that these are only gender roles that society assigned to each gender.

**Grazzia:** Another strategy that was used, we would teach the teachers in how to rotate leadership during teamwork activities and during projects that they were doing. So rotating those people who lead a presentation or who lead a project also ensured that the teacher was giving that equal participation, because sometimes teachers unconsciously, and because of our own biases, we can be the ones that are preventing that equal participation, right? Another useful way that we found a help to teachers was letting the learners make those decisions, like as Araceli was saying. We shared information about how they can build agency, how they can become empowered and how they can make decisions on how to participate



equally. So giving the learners that possibility not only develops those higher-order levels, thinking skills and competencies but also empowers them. And I think when we're thinking about this book that we have been editing and the series that have been being edited, we were thinking precisely about giving voice to people who usually are not given a voice in publishing. Because we have, we always see the big names, the usual names, the famous names, but we don't see the voices of teachers in the classroom telling our stories and talking about their challenges, talking about the things that are happening in their context and how they have navigated those. So it's a whole mind shift, I would say, and changing our mindset in terms of what equal participation and being inclusive means in our classrooms.

**We'am:** If you could just give us one advice for teachers.

**Grazzia:** Not giving up! I think teachers and advocates for equal participation and gender and social inclusion should find strategic ways to navigate these circumstances. Speak up, never be afraid to do it. There might be instances in which you will be heard, there might be others in which you will be told to be quiet. But we should never give up finding allies in the community to support us.

**Araceli:** Yes, exactly. And I would tell teachers, you know what is going on in your classroom. You the teachers are usually very intuitive and they know when something is wrong. Just pay attention to what is happening. Sometimes things are happening in front of our eyes, in front of teacher's eyes, and just because we want to avoid problems or to avoid something that can be uncomfortable, we don't say anything. That is not what teachers should do. As Grazzia was saying about these networks and support, and who can be the support of students who don't feel confident to talk if that's not the teachers? And English teachers, I don't know why because of language, but we are all always there, sometimes the students feel confident with us, because we teach language, at least through language, that we get that connection with the students. So take advantage of that; teachers can pay attention to what your students say, without saying.

**We'am:** Lots of diplomacy for English language teachers. What I really appreciate about English language teachers is their openness, usually English language teachers are very open. You've provided us with really some practical ideas and wonderful thoughts on this topic. Thank you so much.

**Chris:** Thank you so much again.

So, We'am, I was interested in what you were saying about the different kinds of deprivation that women can face.

**We'am:** Usually, these things are very much multilayered, and that speaks about that intersectionality of injustices. So if you're a woman, for example, with a lower socio-economic status, you are more at a disadvantage. And if you're a woman, you're already at a disadvantage. But if you're a woman with disability, that's even more so. Those kinds of layers, sometimes, and what I specifically liked about activities that Araceli and Grazzia, or the strategies that they are following, is that they are trying to make things relatable. So the experiences of those girls are relatable to others in the class, to their male counterpart, who also can relate to the experiences of their mothers, their aunts.

**Chris:** Exactly. And sometimes even just talking about those things, even if one girl may not be able to, if she hears another girl sharing her testimony, then that can be very empowering for her, because she can

feel somehow that she is also benefiting from hearing that or knowing that other people are facing similar challenges.

**We'am:** Yes, and it's more of like a participatory approach to things. So you involve learners, but at the same time, you play the role of raising awareness to the maybe administration or to parents, if you are kind of in touch with parents.

**Chris:** Another area I was interested in was this idea of subconscious bias. And even if you as a teacher think you are taking an equitable approach to education, there may be just some things that you do, without knowing it, which favour boys over girls. I know, for example, I worked for a long time in Nepal, and in many Nepalese schools, certainly, sort of upper primary and secondary level, boys and girls, they're mixed classes, but boys sit on one side, girls sit on the other side. And I did some observations where just to see where the teacher was talking, in what direction the teacher was talking. And there was a significant majority of the time, they were talking more to the boys' side of the class than the girls' side of the class. And in many cases, I genuinely don't think this was deliberate. It was something that was really deep set and it was something that was subconscious. And when I mentioned this to them, they were often very surprised, the teachers. So I think there are these biases, which are very kind of difficult to shake, and sometimes we may not even be aware of them.

**We'am:** Yeah. And sometimes it can be culturally embedded, for example culturally, like when you see a man, you kind of put your head down or you avoid staring eye to eye. It's sometimes cultural. So a lot of these things can be unlearned, but it can be also challenging for the teachers.

**Chris:** Absolutely, I think those subconscious biases can often find their way into coursebooks, textbooks, curricula, and so on as well. And I think, as was mentioned in the interview there, the importance of doing discourse analysis with those things, so actually looking at those texts and seeing who is represented, who is not represented, how they are represented, how often they're represented. All of those things, really looking at those texts can be a really illustrative example of that. Because those biases can be found in teachers, they can be found in administration, but they can be found in textbook writers as well.

**We'am:** So maybe we can make it more of a mission this year for International Women's Day to empower our learners and give our female or any learner the chance to express themselves and listen to their experiences, allow them to have the safe space where they can express themselves and learn from each other, regardless of their gender or of their socio-economic background or their disability. We're all humans.

**Chris:** Thank you for listening to episode 1 of Teaching English with the British Council, Series 3.

**We'am:** We hope you found the tips from our teachers useful in helping you make your class or institution more equitable.

**Chris:** If you're interested in finding out more about gender equity in the classroom, or accessing some of the excellent British Council resources, please check out the show notes.

**We'am:** In our next episode, we'll be looking at how to make vocabulary and grammar teaching more communicative.

**Chris:** Until then, goodbye.

**We'am:** Goodbye.