



TeachingEnglish

## British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers  
of English



# Episode 2: How can I make my teaching gender fair?

Transcript



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**Duration: 0:26:28**

**Chris:** Hello, and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council, a podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

**Chris:** I'm your host, Chris Sowton. In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways.

In the first part of each episode, we hear from a British Council project, programme or publication about something which is being done to address this issue. Across the 10 episodes of the series, we hear from teachers, trainers and researchers in a wide range of contexts, including India, Lebanon, Uruguay, and South Africa.

In the second part, a leading English expert and practitioner will provide practical solutions which you can immediately try out wherever you work. Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide additional information, a glossary of keywords and links to relevant websites.

**Chris:** In our second episode of Teaching English with the British Council, we ask, and try to answer the question: "How can I make my teaching gender fair?" For a complex range of reasons, girls often have to stop their education early. Others never have the chance to go to school in the first place. The Malala Fund estimates that there are 130 million school-age girls worldwide who are not in school. And those who do go to school are often directly or indirectly discriminated against. Furthermore, current academic research shows that COVID-19 has widened these pre-existing gaps even further.

First up, in our field report, we hear about a British Council online course called *Gender in Language Education* that can help teachers make their classrooms more gender fair places. The field report features contributions from four teachers who participated in the course first time round: Katherine, Fajar, Ekene and Isabela. Our thanks to them, and also to Saboor, who tells us all about the course.

The course runs from December 14<sup>th</sup> 2021 onwards, and you can register right now using by visiting [www.teachingenglish.org.uk/training](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/training). The 3-module, 12-hour course is free, and you get a certificate upon completion. Full details are available in the show notes.

**Anya:** When we generalise, people are more likely to live up to these expectations. I saw a similar thing in an exam. The seating was boy girl, boy girl, basically to stop the boys from copying.

**Male Teacher:** How's that similar?

**Female Teacher:** Isn't there an assumption that boys copy and girls don't? It's like saying girls are well-behaved and boys cause trouble?

**Anya:** Yes, exactly. And things like having a boys team and a girls team.

**Male Teacher:** That's just fun! It makes them competitive.

**Anya:** True, but we've created this us and them mentality. We've got to be careful not to emphasise gender when it isn't necessary.

**Saboor:** Gender equality in education is becoming a global priority. There's no question that education systems in which girls and boys are treated equally are good for the learners, for schools and for society in general. And research shows that girls' education leads to stronger economies, more stable societies and reduced inequality. There's been some progress towards this kind of equality, but it's still true that worldwide, more boys than girls go to school, and there are clear differences between how well boys and girls do within the education system.

To try and solve these issues, around the world, teachers, schools, governments and intergovernmental agencies are all taking action to promote gender equality. And one method of doing this is to focus on what actually goes on inside our classrooms when it comes to gender. To try and help teachers make their teaching more gender fair, the British Council has developed a free-to-use MOOC – a massive open online course. In this episode's field report, we look at three topics which are covered in this course: gender-biased textbooks, tasks and classroom language and, firstly, groupwork and seating arrangements.

**Ali:** Separating boys and girls and reinforcing the idea that there's something different about the two groups.

**Anya:** If it makes you feel any better, you're not alone. And what's interesting is that doing it just seems normal to us.

**Ali:** Hmm. Interesting or worrying?

**Anya:** Both, I suppose. The research also said that when we say things like 'good morning, boys and girls' or organise students into groups according to gender, that's enough to encourage gender bias. Because we draw attention to it, we almost encourage stereotyping.

**Ali:** Hmm. Something to think about for sure.

**Saboor:** This extract from the MOOC features a conversation between two teachers, Ali and Anya. Its aim is to help you recognise the importance of issues like:

- how teacher-learner interactions are often influenced by gender
- how females and males perform – or are expected to perform – differently in group work
- how gendered seating arrangements can affect learning

We asked some of the teachers who participated in the MOOC to explain what they learnt, and some of the things they do to make their classrooms a positive and effective learning environment for all, regardless of their gender.

**Teacher:** Actually, I learned so much when I took the MOOC from the British Council, how I realised after all this time, that unconsciously, I always been put boys or men first. I always put before he before she

**Teacher:** Getting boys and girls to work together in my class requires that to allow them to play old roles. For example, activities that suggest you put any gender as superior to the other is not usually encouraged in my classroom.

**Teacher:** They said like oh Teacher, why do you always put the boys together. I was like, oh, I'm sorry. It was not, you know, a choice. And I thought that was very interesting because I think for a kid, it's still okay to work boys and girls together, they don't really mind but I think as soon as they are, you know, developing and getting into the teen years, they become a little bit more self-conscious and avoid working together. So I feel like right now I'm mixing them up a bit. With the breakout rooms thing and I think I will be doing that in the future.

**Teacher:** I think I kind of surprised you all with the fact that I'm a transgender educator and that I'm an ELT, you know, teacher trainer, if you assign them roles that are specific towards specific genders. I mean, I think that's where you know, things kind of get lost.

**Anya:** Hi, Ali. How are you getting on with that coursebook? I'm going to start using it next week. It would be great to hear what you think of it.

**Ali:** It's okay but the boys in my class are finding it really boring.

**Anya:** Oh, why is that?

**Ali:** Well, there are so many girls topics at the beginning. I don't blame them for being bored.

**Anya:** What do you mean by girls topics?

**Ali:** Well, we started with families. And then unit two was food and cooking. And we've just finished the unit on shopping. Luckily, we've got some boys topics coming up next. There's a unit on sport next week, and then one on jobs and work. And then crime and then technology. It's the girls who are going to be bored!

**Saboor:** In many countries, textbooks and learning materials often contain gender stereotypes – for example related to the roles of males and females in the family, or in terms of what jobs they do. There are often clear suggestions in books – and more widely in schools, the education system, and society more generally – about what women can and can't do, or what they should or shouldn't be interested in. As classroom teachers, we can help our students challenge these unfair opinions and stereotypes.

**Teacher:** I'm really passionate about course books and you know, after taking the course I started paying attention because I use many different titles and I see this gender bias in mostly all of them. What I tried to do is to question students. Okay, so why do you think here there's a why the girl is playing with dolls and why is the boy playing football? Couldn't it be the other way around?

**Teacher:** I mean, for example, you might see a female nurse okay, because this is how they are usually displayed in illustrations. However, it's up to the teacher to have the class understand that nurse can also be referring to a man or that, you know, fireman is also called a firefighter. So upon seeing these illustrations or this specific

vocabulary, it's up to the teacher to add more vocabulary. And you know, explain that you know, this is not specific towards one gender and that it would be better to use this word even though you know, the ELT material presents something else.

**Anya:** We were doing conditionals and I gave them prompts like: 'If there were more female politicians' and 'If men did more of the housework' and 'If there were more women in leadership positions' and 'If boys were encouraged to play with dolls'. Things like that.

**Ali:** OK, I see what you mean. I can see that would fit into the curriculum.

**Anya:** And, if we're doing sport, I include examples of male and female athletes. Or if we're doing famous inventions, then I'll include female inventors.

**Saboor:** If the textbooks you use don't highlight the contributions made by women, use additional materials which do. If classroom language is male-dominated, make sure you use a range of different pronouns (for example he / she or they) when talking about 'people in general', rather than just masculine ones. There are lots of small things which we can do in our classrooms to make them more gender-fair places.

**Teacher:** Sometimes I want my students to just create the dialogue to practice the speaking in a conversational situation. So I don't refer to all the men use the men dialogue, the woman use the woman dialogue, I just tell them, please use this dialogue. You use this dialogue. You can change the name for example, and you can change the role, so I'm trying my best.

**Teacher:** Well, to be gender-fair place in the classroom does seem like an unachievable quest because of the country we're in, as a Nigerian. However, one way I will try to do this is by bringing in other learning materials that promote gender equality. Resources such as flashcards, that show a man and the woman doing the same jobs or use other visuals that promote both sexes playing equal roles in society and so you teach the learners

**Teacher:** It would be best to actually use things that everyone's aware of, you know, YouTube, images on Google. Resorting to material that is found online, it should be handled with cautiousness because sometimes some material might be too provocative, but it would be you know, ideal to try to integrate some elements from online and show the students that you know, there is potential and there are so many other variations of what is being taught in the book.

**Teacher:** While I try to be a very conscious person and try to change the world, I feel like these are things that I still have to think about. Because I feel it's very important. It's amazing, actually, and it's so inclusive and it's so wonderful for the kids and teens to learn that. But I still need to police myself and okay, it's not a businessman, it's a business person. So that's something that I've learned and I have been trying to do that switch not only in my teaching, but in my mind as a person.

**Saboor:** The best way for a society to become gender-fair is to create education systems in which everybody is treated equally. In some situations, there needs to be major reforms, for example in terms of access to education. In other situations, however, there is a lot which we as teachers can do in our own classrooms. This

might mean asking your students to challenge the textbook contents, ensuring that you include everyone equally in tasks and give equal roles, or in thinking more about the language you use. And it's not just the job of female teachers to do this, it's everybody's responsibility. If we work alongside our students, we can make our schools places where positive change can happen.

**Anya:** And they're creating posters around women's rights. Look

**Ali:** Oh dear, 1 in 5 schoolgirls is 'unhappy to be a girl'. You know, we should talk to the other teachers about creating a gender–equality campaign for our school.

**Anya:** Great idea – Let's do it!

**Chris:** Once again, if you would like to join this course, please register at [www.teachingenglish.org.uk/training](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/training).

For this episode's interview, I'm delighted to welcome Bhavna Gupta. Bhavna is an experienced English training consultant with the British Council, based in Mumbai, India. She has a keen interest in promoting equitable and inclusive education, and has designed and delivered a range of programmes in which gender has been a central focus. One such programme addresses menstruation through the lens of body positivity and gender sensitivity. She is also the founder of *Learning Sutra, Lifelong Learning* through which she runs courses on the topics mentioned above and many more thematic language courses. Bhavna, welcome to Teaching English.

**Bhavna:** Thank you Chris

**Chris:** Perhaps we can begin Bhavna if I could ask you about your reflections on the field report we just heard and what you think are some of the key aspects of gender-fair teaching?

**Bhavna:** I think it made me realise that things that we may not think are creating a bias are the ones probably creating a bias. Something as innocent as addressing a classroom as girls and boys could be reinforcing the idea of gender within the classroom. It's not something that has been thought over earlier, but that once you start thinking about it, we are creating that binary or the division where they start thinking of girls and boys and even other genders really, for that matter, as a binary and as two opposing groups. I think we do it quite innocently, because we as teachers, I think we don't know how to address this problem. We do train teachers on a lot of skill, some hard skills some soft skills. But there needs to be explicit and sufficient training and support given to teachers to understand how to make this process smoother. Because more or less teachers don't know how to do it, they want to do it, but they don't know how exactly and what activities or what strategies can be used in the classroom to make their classroom gender fair.

**Chris:** And if you were designing a pre-service teacher training course or an in-service teacher training, cause what would be some of the things that you would want to include in that training in order to support teachers being more gender-fair in their classroom practice.

**Bhavna:** They may talk about a lesson which is based on something like a gender stereotype or some lesson that we want them to think, I think it's important to include questions. We do focus on the language aspect because as language teachers

because that's our experience and our expertise. But I think it's also important to make them think about, for example, if you're giving them a text to read, let them think about what the writer wants to convey through that passage. And whether they agree with that, how would they want to change things there? Is there something that they could probably suggest that could change the situation that's happening? So yes, there is a lot of scope for having questions that make them think a little more deeply.

**Chris:** I think that's a really interesting point Bhavna as well because in many education systems around the world, teachers have to teach the materials they are given. And very often those materials will have been written by men and men with a particular view or outlook on society. So we can even if we have to teach those materials, there's still things we can do with that to make our classrooms more gender-fair. So for example, asking to write the story from the perspective of a female character or to say what assumptions are there in the writing of this story?

**Bhavna:** Look up situations, so it's very simple to give them a little situation and they write a solution to it for example, maybe okay, to think of a situation where somebody is walking on the road and there's an accident, somebody falls down, so what you do and ask them to write. So by default, it will most of the time it will happen that they use the default pronoun, which is a male pronoun, and that's where you can highlight the fact that why are we doing this? Why can't we use a gender-neutral pronoun like 'they' and rewrite the entire thing? So the more they are exposed to these types of activities, the more they'll realise that language is evolving to that extent. So it's not just about being gender-fair, but it's also about the evolution of language. So it is to prepare them for the real-world context. So if you're preparing them for that, I think it needs, they need to use language like that because if they go out into the outer world today and use words like probably 'chairman' or 'policeman' might not be taken well, so let them think about some gender-neutral alternatives to these words. That's one way.

**Chris:** I think as well, it can help in terms of, again, one of the challenges we often find in English language teaching is where the teaching is very grammar focused or on acquiring vocabulary and all those sorts of things. The very idea of telling students that we can use 'they' as a singular pronoun to mean he or she can be quite a radical thing in itself. The grammar is somehow not fixed. It's not something that cannot change. So this can also perhaps influence pedagogy positively as well.

**Bhavna:** For that matter, actually, we've already been using 'they' as a singular, for example, if we sort of just look we're going out and we see some we do say statements like, okay, somebody left their book. So we don't know whether the 'they' is for singular or plural, but we've been using it when we don't know who the person is. So why not apply to apply it to when it's not relevant? Also, do we need to specify the gender at all if we can make it more gender-neutral?

**Chris:** And then in doing that, we are seeing language as something which can support and be progressive within society rather than something which is, sort of, holding society back?

**Bhavna:** Yes, a lot of a lot, of words which, which need I think, even at school level, there are so many words that once you start the thinking process within the learners, they will themselves begin to notice these words because once I started educating myself, there was so many words that came to my notice, which I had probably not noticed earlier. So something like the nomenclature for degrees as well. It's always called 'bachelor of', 'Master of', so why that, why is it so male-oriented? So other alternatives to that maybe we can just have, okay, 'learner of Arts' or 'learner of Science'.

**Chris:** Exactly. And it's something very instructive as well I've done before with a class which is just to say, go through the book and add up the number of male characters in the reading comprehension and the number of female characters and just, that's without even looking at the quality of the exchanges or what they are saying, but just the sheer number there. And that in itself was a really, really instructive thing to do.

**Bhavna:** Even images in the coursebook for that matter. So what do the images portray? Do they show women as always being caregivers of the family or attending to household chores? Is that it or is there some way where we can show images where the men are also contributing. Even for primary classes, in fact, there is a lot of animals that are a lot of animals used in primary lessons. So the idea there is even there as a stereotype it's always been the lion being associated with a male and probably a fox or a rabbit or some, some gentle creatures sort of being relegated to the female gender. So maybe that's something that teachers can rethink, have them interchange these roles, give them roles, which make them take up the full gender roles. So that's something again, that can be changed at the primary level too.

**Chris:** Exactly. Starting it early and then allowing children that space where they can raise these issues with you that you create a feeling of trust in the classroom where they can say, you know, Sir or Miss why is the lion male here or why is, you know, the fox female.

**Bhavna:** So maybe the lesson says, okay, the lion is a male character, maybe reverse the role play and make it, make them do it in a different way.

**Chris:** Exactly. So I think for teacher educators, it's an important message as well, isn't it that we should be trying to encourage teachers to do this, to create that sort of positive atmosphere in the classroom to be more radical or daring and not to be feel constrained by doing these things?

**Bhavna:** And even for colleagues, I think this is for learners but even within their colleagues, they can teachers can raise an awareness about how classroom language can be changed because very innocently, sometimes in a classroom if you want to spoil that girl, we might end up saying, okay, are you dreaming about the boy? You're, putting these ideas in their mind. Why do we want to do that? So for young children, okay, let's play family. So you will be the mother, you will be the



father. So why do we always pick up based on the gender so as the child, have the male try to play the role of the mother for once maybe they could get a different perspective there

**Chris:** Exactly, so that's another technique that could be used isn't it, the idea of roleplay there and again, if they're using roleplay then they are using different language, they're thinking in different ways. So they're developing skills like empathy and all those sorts of other really useful life skills as well.

**Bhavna:** And as teachers, it's very common to tell your learners okay, tomorrow is Parents Day or tomorrow, some sort of celebration in the school. Please get your mother along to help with the celebration. So why not, why not the father as well? If it's a Maths exam, okay, please tell your father to help you with your Maths. So why are we assuming those things? Why are we assuming those stereotypes? So we need to rethink the language that we use in our classroom, not just the learners.

**Chris:** Bhavna, thank you very much for your time today.

**Bhavna:** Thank you, Chris

**Chris:** Thank you to Bhavna for sharing her thoughts and ideas about how to make your classroom a more gender-fair space. As we have seen throughout this episode, there are many things – big and small alike – which can positively impact the experiences of all our students in the classroom. Together, there is much that we can do so that everybody feels welcome and everybody has equal opportunity.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Teaching English with the British Council. We hope you enjoyed it. Please do like, subscribe and review. And please remember to download the show notes and transcript.

Join us next time, for episode 3, where we will try to answer the question: *How can I ensure that my teaching is inclusive?* Until then, goodbye.