REDEFINING GENDER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR PRE-K EDUCATION

REDEFINIENDO EL GÉNERO EN LA PRIMERA INFANCIA: PRÁCTICAS INCLUSIVAS PARA LA EDUCACIÓN PREESCOLAR

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Redefining Gender in Early Childhood: Inclusive Practices for Pre-K Education

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on integrating gender inclusivity into Kindergarten 2 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Bogotá, Colombia. It explores how societal norms influence young children's attitudes, behaviors, and identities, highlighting how education can challenge stereotypes and promote fairness. Using Action Research, two cycles of activities were implemented to help students reflect on and question traditional gender roles, fostering a more inclusive environment. The findings show that including gender awareness in language lessons boosts empathy, critical thinking, and acceptance of diversity, transforming the classroom into a space where all identities are valued. This work emphasizes the importance of teachers as role models for inclusion and social justice. Ultimately, it shows that teaching English can go beyond language skills to address important social issues, helping students develop broader, more equitable perspectives from a young age.

Keywords: classroom equity, early education, english as a foreign language (EFL), gender inclusion, social change

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Redefiniendo el Género en la Primera Infancia: Prácticas Inclusivas para la Educación Preescolar

RESUMEN

Este estudio se centra en la integración de la inclusión de género en aulas de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) para estudiantes de transición en Bogotá, Colombia. Explora cómo las normas sociales influyen en las actitudes, comportamientos e identidades de los niños y niñas, destacando cómo la educación puede desafiar estereotipos y promover la equidad. A través de la Investigación Acción, se implementaron dos ciclos de actividades diseñadas para ayudar a los estudiantes a reflexionar sobre los roles de género tradicionales y cuestionarlos, creando un ambiente más inclusivo. Los hallazgos muestran que incluir la conciencia de género en las lecciones de idiomas fomenta la empatía, el pensamiento crítico y la aceptación de la diversidad, transformando el aula en un espacio donde todas las identidades son valoradas. Este trabajo resalta el papel crucial de los docentes como modelos de inclusión y justicia social, mostrando que la enseñanza del inglés puede ir más allá de las habilidades lingüísticas para abordar temas sociales importantes, ayudando a los estudiantes a desarrollar perspectivas más amplias y equitativas desde una edad temprana.

Palabras clave: cambio social, educación temprana, equidad en el aula, inclusión de género, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Aligned with UNESCO's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes inclusive education (UNESCO, 2018), Colombian educators play a key role in promoting human rights and sustainability. The *Currículo Sugerido* for English by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN, 2016) highlights the need for English Language Teaching (ELT) frameworks that meet societal demands while ensuring inclusivity across diverse contexts. This study aims to create ELT spaces where students can explore gender as a dynamic social concept during foreign language learning. However, efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in Colombia often face resistance due to strong religious and traditional norms. To address this, a critical approach helps ELT teachers recognize how gender and class shape language learning, fostering empathy, equity, and inclusivity (Given, 2009; Mojica, 2017; Mojica & Castañeda-Peña, 2017).

In Colombia, ELT is often seen as a path to career success, focusing on English's practical benefits (Usma-Wilches, 2009). However, critical approaches aim to use ELT to develop empathetic, reflective citizens who can challenge societal norms, including gender issues. Building on research by Castañeda-Peña (2008) and Mojica (2017), which highlight gender as a socially constructed phenomenon, this study incorporates gender awareness into early education. Conducted in a bilingual kindergarten in Bogotá, it focuses on fostering inclusivity, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging young learners to explore diverse identities while enhancing both their language abilities and social development.

This research challenges traditional gender norms, showing how language education can promote empathy, collaboration, and inclusivity in ELT classrooms to build a fairer society. It highlights the teacher's role in questioning restrictive norms and practicing critical self-reflection. As Castañeda-Peña (2008) and Mojica (2017) point out, English teachers must go beyond teaching language to address how hidden biases in the curriculum can reinforce inequality. Using a socio-critical approach, this study aims to rethink gender norms in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and support acceptance of diverse identities and behaviors. This leads to the central research question:

- How are the K2 students' and teacher's attitudes and behaviors transformed in order to understand, express and accept different gender identities within the English classroom inside a private school in Bogotá?

Accordingly, the objectives are presented as follows:

- Describe how we currently understand the different expressions of gender identities.

- Comprehend how we reconfigure oppressive behaviors and perceptions towards those conventionally perceived as "different."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding Gender Identity of Boys and Girls and its Relation to Educational Practices

Gender has been viewed as binary, grounded in the belief that "masculine" and "feminine" traits are natural, fixed qualities linked to male and female bodies. However, such a conception has grown to recognize gender as a complex social construct influenced by cultural, historical, and environmental factors (Butler, 1998). In addition, elements like social interactions, individual perspectives, life experiences, and personal choices all play a role in shaping gender identity, showing it to be a fluid concept rather than a simple biological fact (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Thorne, 1993; De Beauvoir, 2010). Furthering this point, Butler (2004) asserted that gender is continuously enacted and reinforced within social settings, making it a learned performance rather than an inherent trait. Thus, gender is not a fixed identity but an evolving one shaped by complex cultural and historical dynamics. In this way, there is an interplay of power dynamics in gender identity formation, making it essential to examine traditional gender roles in the identity development of boys and girls to promote equity within educational practices.

First, the process of socialization strongly shapes how boys and girls develop their gender identities. Often, traditional gender stereotypes are reinforced within early education. From an early age, children internalize societal expectations regarding masculinity and femininity, influenced by parents, caregivers, and educators. This influence manifests in distinct roles assigned to boys and girls; as described by Thorne (1993), girls are often labeled as delicate and emotional, while boys are encouraged to be strong, assertive, and independent. Such distinctions create traditional gender codes that may hinder emotional expression and assign acceptable social roles for children based on gender. For instance, Ruiz-Navarro (2019) indicates that from the earliest stages, boys and girls are socialized with stereotype-based behaviors, such as associating girls with princess-like gentleness and boys with warrior-like strength.

This early stereotyping shapes behaviors, preferences, and identities which are carried into adulthood, perpetuating established gender roles that restrict freedom of expression and individual development. Educational settings are critical in reinforcing or challenging traditional gender norms. Santrock (2014) notes that societal expectations of "successful masculinity" discourage boys from showing vulnerability, impacting their mental and emotional health. In schools, boys are often guided away from anything seen as feminine, leading to emotional suppression and rigid masculinity, while girls are encouraged to focus on nurturing and communication. These norms, internalized early, shape behaviors throughout life. Butler (2004) highlights how language and social practices reinforce these stereotypes, marginalizing those who do not fit traditional roles. Schools mirror this dynamic, influencing children's interactions and self-perception. Revisiting these practices is essential so educators can create supportive spaces that promote emotional growth and help students question and redefine restrictive gender roles.

Given these points, education should promote a more inclusive understanding of gender identity. In this case, promoting inclusivity within school context helps counter the limitations imposed by stereotyped roles, encouraging children to explore diverse identities without judgment. Additionally, recognizing gender diversity through language and representation enables society to accept and include nontraditional gender expressions (Butler 2004; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Stone & Farrar, 2020). In doing so, schools can promote gender-neutral environments where students can express a range of emotional and social behaviors beyond binary gender norms. This approach helps children who feel limited by traditional roles and encourages empathy and understanding among all students, building a learning environment that values diversity, equality, and the freedom to explore gender in an authentic way. Hence, promoting these values helps schools support children's gender identities and overall growth as empathetic and self-aware individuals

Gender Dynamics in EFL within the Framework of Critical Pedagogy

In current educational contexts, classrooms serve as dynamic spaces where ideologies are shared, identities are formed, and social interactions are guided. This complexity becomes particularly relevant when examining EFL, as language learning is not just a cognitive process but also a socio-ideological one. Gender, as a component of identity, interacts with language acquisition in ways that affect access to and engagement in learning opportunities. Within this framework, CP, an educational approach that

promotes equity and challenges oppression, provides educators with tools to address these dynamics, fostering classrooms that support identity expression and social justice. Accordingly, exploring the role of gender in EFL through the lens of CP, educators are better equipped to understand the barriers and opportunities that shape students' learning experiences, enabling them to cultivate more equitable and supportive classroom spaces.

The relationship between gender and EFL highlights how identity is shaped within specific social contexts, including the classroom. Identity in language learning is flexible and shaped by interactions with others. Norton (2000) explains that identity impacts access to important interactions in L2 learning, often influenced by social power dynamics. This is also shaped by, socialization, the learning experience and identity markers such as gender, race, and class, which, in turn, impact learners' self-perception in the language acquisition process (Pavlenko, 2001; Castañeda-Peña, 2008). Understanding the classroom as a space that reflects and reinforces these societal constructs, it emphasizes the importance of viewing gender as a core factor in the language acquisition process. Consequently, recognizing the classroom as an environment that reflects and reinforces these societal constructs, educators are enabled to see gender not as a peripheral issue but as a central aspect of language acquisition.

Critical Pedagogy (CP) guides educators in addressing social issues, promoting equity, and challenging oppression. It encourages viewing schools as spaces where students shape and express their identities, turning education into a collaborative tool for social change rather than just passing on knowledge. (Sexton, 2008; Carreño, 2009; Rojas-Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2024). Also, Schiro (2013) describes CP as a tool for social reconstruction, arguing that education can facilitate critical examination of societal structures that perpetuate inequalities. Giroux (1990) echoes this view, emphasizing that schools are spaces where cultural norms, including gender dynamics, are reinforced or contested. Ultimately, Brady (1995) introduces the concept of critical literacy within CP, advocating for pedagogical practices that help students understand how power and identity are constructed in language. In essence, this critical literacy enables students to critically examine their own and others' identities, fostering inclusive classroom dynamics that reflect diverse perspectives.

CP views students as active participants in learning, empowering them to question and reshape societal norms. While traditional teaching often reinforces gender stereotypes, CP encourages reflective

practices that help students critically reevaluate these constructs (Millan & Estrada, 2004; Schiro, 2013). By bringing their diverse backgrounds into the classroom, students contribute to a shared understanding of language, gender, and identity. CP creates spaces where students can challenge societal expectations, promoting inclusivity, respect for diversity, critical thinking, and empathy, while deepening their understanding of themselves and others. Together with the former, for teachers, the implications of CP extend beyond content delivery to the cultivation of inclusive and socially aware classrooms. Freire (2012) contends that educators should embrace their roles as transformative intellectuals, using education as a platform for fostering critical thinking and social awareness. This approach shifts the focus from economic or instrumental purposes to a vision of education that equips students with the tools to question and reshape societal structures. Brady (1995) emphasizes that literacy processes can support critical thinking by allowing students to reflect on the identities and power dynamics that shape their educational experiences. In fostering such literacy, educators can create environments where students learn to navigate complex social identities, including gender, and actively contribute to a more equitable society. As can be seen, implementing CP principles, teachers provide students with opportunities to reflect on their own identities, challenge conventional perspectives, and envision inclusive futures.

METHOD

This research, focused on understanding and addressing issues of gender and discrimination, used Action Research (AR) to link education with social change through analysis, reflection, and transformative actions (Kemmis et al., 2014). AR's cyclical process involves four main steps: Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect (Burns, 2015). In the Planning stage, systematic observations and recordings were conducted in a Kindergarten 2 English classroom at an elite, private, bilingual Catholic school in Bogotá, including 20 participants to identify discriminatory behaviors toward minorities and examine teaching practices related to gender stereotypes.

Hence, the following graph (Figure 1) was proposed to guide the action research, incorporating the concepts and steps fundamental to this research project.

Figure 1. Research plan organization
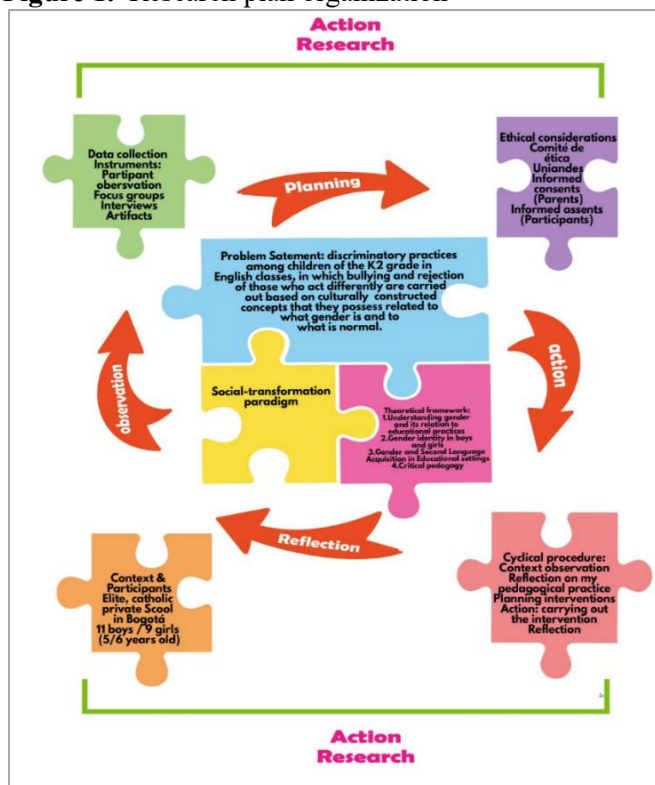
Note. Figure taken from Alviar (2020).

The first cycle was carried out over five weeks from October 22 to November 26, 2019, following five stages across two weekly 40-minute classes. This phase began with a reflection focused on gender awareness, examining stereotypes related to children's clothing and toys. In the Planning stage (1), a didactic unit titled "We're all different, and that is OK" was developed, featuring ten structured activities. The Action stage (2) implemented this plan, collecting data on gender practices and fostering reflection. Observation (3) included systematic records and discussions, revealing shifts in perspectives on gender norms. Finally, the concluding Reflection (4) assessed classroom changes, providing insights for creating a more equitable learning environment.

The second cycle ran from December 13, 2019, to March 13, 2020, with one or two 40-minute classes per week, In the Reflection stage (1), data from the first cycle revealed ongoing gender stereotypes, prompting further reflection on creating an inclusive environment for diverse gender expressions. Planning (2) involved creating the second unit, "We Are All Superheroes," with ten structured activities aimed at addressing these stereotypes. The Action stage (3) engaged students in activities that encouraged them to challenge gender-based assumptions and reduce discriminatory behaviors.

Finally, in the Observation stage (4) all the data previously gathered namely; field diaries, interviews, and class artifacts were used to record diverse perspectives, personal experiences, and tangible evidence, enriching the analysis of gender and the changes in attitudes, accompanied by ongoing reflection on personal and societal biases affecting minorities (Buriro et al., 2017; Bagherpour et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell 2015).

Data analysis

This research analyzed how K2 students and their teacher shifted attitudes and behaviors to understand, express, and accept diverse gender identities in an EFL context. Based on Grounded Theory, the analysis followed three stages: initial coding to identify key segments, focused coding to refine categories, and axial coding to connect them. Data from interviews, observations, a field journal, and classroom artifacts were triangulated for depth and quality. A multimodal approach examined textual and visual elements, including representational, interactive, and compositional aspects, to explore how meaning was conveyed (Flick, 2008; Guijarro & Pinar-Sanz, 2008; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell 2015).

In the initial analysis stage, data excerpts were segmented and assigned two or three basic codes representing key topics, such as "gender stereotypes," "socialization process," and "doing gender." Critical reflection guided this process through reflective questioning, helping to interpret and categorize events and behaviors clearly. The table below outlines the guiding questions used.

Table 1. Guiding questions for coding

Questions
How do I interpret key words from the data in light of the theory?
How did this process develop?
What did the participant think, feel, and state while being involved in this process?
What might our observed behavior indicate?

Note. Self-elaboration

In the second stage of focused coding, conceptual and refined codes were developed by synthesizing the most significant and frequent initial codes into broader categories through a color-coding process (Charmaz, 2006).

The term "HOW" emerged as a key focal point, enabling the analysis to trace and describe the ways attitudes and behaviors related to gender were conceived, deconstructed, and transformed.

Table 2. Focalized Codes

Codes
How we discriminate
How our gender identities have been built throughout our life trajectories.
How we see others based on gender stereotypes
How non-stereotyped behaviors are performed
How we deconstructed our gender stereotypes
How we started performing empathetic behaviors

Note. Self-elaboration

At the final stage of analysis, the 'How' categories were reviewed and organized into two main macro-categorical themes: (1) Acknowledging the sociocultural background concerning gender (2) Transformative actions towards equitable English learning scenarios Each macro-category directly corresponded to one of the two cycles of the action research process, reflecting its progression from reflection to action.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We shape our gender identity through socialization, often reinforcing discrimination against non-conforming gender expressions. In the EFL classroom, it's crucial to promote inclusivity and equity. This analysis highlights two key ways the classroom can serve as both a space where gender roles influence dynamics and relationships and as a transformative setting for challenging and redefining restrictive norms, ensuring equitable education for all.

Acknowledging the sociocultural background concerning gender

Gender norms often assign softness and delicacy to girls and strength and boldness to boys, shaping their choices of toys, activities, and colors (Thorne, 1993). Boys are often encouraged to play with toy cars and superheroes, while girls are steered toward dolls and kitchen sets. These patterns reinforce binary gender roles and marginalize those who deviate. In classrooms, such dynamics appear in children's preferences and interactions, reflecting how early socialization can either perpetuate or challenge stereotypes. This discussion explores ways to promote inclusivity, reflect on societal norms, and create a more equitable educational experience.

Traditional gender ideas often limit acceptance of diverse behaviors from an early age. In the classroom, most children chose items or colors tied to their gender, like soft tones for girls and bold tones for boys. Some, however, preferred non-stereotypical options, leading to three main responses: acceptance from most girls, rejection from most boys, and indifference from some others. The following excerpts illustrate these attitudes in the classroom.

Table 3. Excerpt 1: Gender and color preferences

Date 11-09-19
As I walked around the classroom, I could observe how the majority of girls were coloring the pictures with the same palette of colors: pink, purple, yellow, light blue; and boys used colors such as: red, green, blue, black, and even draw themselves as superheroes. At the end, 99% of girls filled the gaps saying pink and purple were their favorite colors; and boys' answers varied among red, blue and green, except in two cases: Esteban and Andrés, who stated their favorite colors were pink and purple.

Note. Field notes 160

Table 4. Excerpt 2: Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Date 27-08-19
At the moment of taking the painting out of the closet, a pink can of paint came out and I told them we would use that one (it was a coincidence, but I thought it was a good chance to observe what their reactions were towards using color pink). Three boys yelled they didn't want that color, and before I said anything Esteban -the one who likes unicorns- screamed out loud: "Colors don't have gender" Boys reacted saying those were colors for girls, but Esteban yelled one more time that "colors don't have gender
03-10-19
When we were reading Luis walked by and told Esteban that he had a book for girls with a disapproving look…

Note. Field notes 65 and 268

While observing how most boys in the class rejected peers with unconventional gender-related preferences, I also witnessed a striking response from one student who actively challenged these discriminatory attitudes. Whenever criticized for associating himself with pink or purple, he confidently argued in front of the entire class that "colors do not have gender." This moment became a fundamental aspect of the intervention, highlighting how deeply gender performativity is shaped by early socialization (Ruiz-Navarro, 2019).

Boys are often taught to like blue and girls to like pink even before they are born, creating a form of programming that influences their preferences and behaviors (Banegas & Evripidou, 2021; Thorne, 1993). From a young age, boys are steered toward toys and traits tied to strength and violence, while girls are directed toward softness and traditional roles through activities like playing with dolls or princesses. However, one student resisted these norms, realizing that colors and objects do not define gender. This highlights the potential of non-traditional parenting and inclusive teaching to challenge stereotypes, encourage self-expression, and foster empathy and emotional intelligence. Gender roles, ingrained early on, enforce behavioral norms that marginalize those who don't conform, perpetuating societal inequalities.

Transformative actions towards equitable English learning scenarios

Teachers are key in creating equitable learning environments. Their actions can either reinforce stereotypes or challenge them, fostering spaces where all students feel valued and respected (Florez, 2008; Krishnan & Pathan, 2013; Norton, 2013). By designing activities that celebrate diversity and encourage questioning of societal norms, teachers promote critical thinking and empathy. Validating students' experiences and encouraging open dialogue further reinforces acceptance and inclusivity (Giroux, 1990; Goehring & Whittington, 2017; Rojas & Escobar-Alméciga, 2023). The didactic unit in this research aimed to empower students and showcase English learning as a tool for equity and social change. The following discussion explores the results of these practices.

This research introduced a didactic unit using literature and language to explore diverse gender expressions and challenge stereotypes. A key activity, creating superheroes with "superpowers of the heart," promoted acceptance, empathy, and non-stereotypical traits. Students began normalizing diverse preferences, creating safer spaces, and forming meaningful connections while rejecting gender norms. The following excerpts highlight this shift.

Table 5. Exploring Gender Perceptions

Date 07-02-20
During today's class students were asked to practice some free drawing time. Victoria decided to draw a boy wearing a dress. Fernanda came closer and asked her why she was making a girl, to what Victoria replied: No es una niña, es un niño que usa vestido.
Fernanda replied: *Oh! Tienes razón, voy a hacer a un niño también con vestido*. (Ah, you are right, I'm drawing a boy wearing a dress)
06-02-20
In the class discussion, students debated strength. Some linked it to boys, while others shared examples of strong women, concluding that strength can apply to anyone. All of them placed love in the girls' circle.
I asked them why they did so, and Victoria explained*: "porque los niños no son tan cariñosos como las niñas"* (Because boys aren't as affectionate as girls) Immediately all girls agreed, and boys disagreed.
Fernanda said that that was true because some boys were rude to girls, and they started arguing. Joaquín said he disagreed with Victoria because "*Some boys are loving. No solo las mujeres son cariñosas"* (Not only women are affectionate) I reminded them that the goal of the exercise was to express feelings and understand each other.

Note. a. Field notes 521 and 478

b. *Students worked in groups to sort superpowers into categories for boys, girls, and both.* Some placed strength with boys and love with girls, but after adding traits like friendship and care, they started reconsidering their choices.

Figure 2. Non-Stereotyped male superhero 1

Note. Figure taken from Alviar (2020).

Figure 3. Non-Stereotyped male superhero 1

Note. Figure taken from Alviar (2020).

In one drawing (Figure 2), the superhero's power is love, portrayed as a short-haired boy wearing a pink flowered dress, headband, and necklace, radiating happiness. This combination of traditionally feminine elements with a male figure challenges gender stereotypes and symbolizes openness to diverse identities (Butler & Lourties, 1998). The oversized head represents emotional strength, while its off-center placement suggests humility (Guijarro & Sanz, 2008). In another drawing (Figure 3), the superhero's power is expressing feelings, depicted as a short-haired boy in a superhero suit with a heart-shaped cape, a facemask, and an OK hand gesture, emphasizing care and the creation of safe emotional spaces. This blend of masculine traits with emotional openness demonstrates that boys can express feelings without compromising their identity, with the superhero's large figure further highlighting emotional strength. Together, these drawings defy traditional gender norms, encouraging children to embrace and express their identities freely.

This aligns with Castañeda-Peña's (2007) argues that while kids are taught gender roles early on, EFL learning can help create friendships based on equality for all genders. In this activity, students used class materials to question gender stereotypes, expand their understanding, and build more inclusive relationships.

In short, this unit showed how literature and language learning can help students rethink gender norms. By creating superheroes with unique traits, they challenged stereotypes and embraced acceptance, empathy, and inclusivity.

Students moved from linking traits to specific genders to adopting a more open mindset. This approach shows how education can foster diversity, understanding, and more equal relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

This study looked at how attitudes and behaviors changed in an English classroom in Bogotá, focusing on understanding, expressing, and accepting diverse gender identities. Using action research, the process involved reflection, planning, action, and observation. The results showed two key outcomes: participants began to see how gender is shaped by culture and started adopting more inclusive behaviors. This highlights how classrooms can challenge stereotypes and expand views on gender.

The research highlighted how societal norms learned early in life shaped participants' views on gender. Reflective activities and class discussions helped students critically examine traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity (Banegas & Evripidou, 2021; Stone & Farrar, 2020). Male participants were more resistant to changing stereotypical behaviors, while female participants and boys with non-stereotypical preferences were more open to change. This highlights the strong impact of social expectations and the challenges of addressing gender roles in the classroom. (Bollas 2021; Page, 2017; Tarrayo & Salonga, 2022).

This study shows that L2 classrooms can do more than teach language—they can address social issues too. By talking about gender in lessons, educators help students think critically, build empathy, and create a more inclusive classroom. Language learning becomes a tool for social change.

Future research should explore how language learning shapes views on gender and how things like toys, media, and everyday items influence behavior. This could help design more inclusive teaching methods.

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