

PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN ENHANCING FEMALE STUDENTS ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS AT FIRST CYCLE LEVEL: THE CASE OF FOUR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SIDAMA ZONE

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted in four schools demarked with in the technology villages of Hawassa University, namely: Hagere Selam, Melga, Leku and Wondo Gennet Primary Schools. The study required one academic year. The major objective of the study was to investigate the practices and challenges in enhancing female students' performance. The research was designed in conformity with the principles of mixed approach. The main reason was to fill in the gaps in both research designing models. The major research tools used to collect the data were classroom observations, semi-structured interviews conducted with both English teachers teaching the language from Grades 5_8 and female students learning at the same grades level in each of the school. Moreover, as ample test scores achieved by female students in English test in each school were analysed and interpreted in comparison with the achievements attained by male students Accordingly, the results from the observations showed that the performance of female students was less than males. As the data further indicated, only 26.31% of the female students raised up their hands to answer the English teacher's question in the class in contrary, among male students, 43.5 % of them were willing to answer the same question. During group discussions, similarly, the participations of female students were not as active as males. Many more female students were reticent while various group discussions were going on in the class. The results both from the semi-structured interviews and the analysis of sample test achievements, by the same token, revealed that most female students performed less than males. Nevertheless, the overall effort and performance of female students was not disappointing.

KEYWORDS: Achievement, Gender, Performance, Special Support

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Throughout history we observe that the biological differences between men and women have given rise to two main dichotomies: different aptitudes in the two sexes and the establishment of different roles, norms and behaviors for each of the sexes, which frequently are disadvantageous to females. In this context, the word gender refers to the different types of beliefs, attitudes, patterns of interaction and motivations towards both sexes in the teaching/learning of foreign language.

Every discipline is subjected to gender issues directly or indirectly. That is why Sunderland (2000:207) in her research study states the case in a single sentence: "All teaching takes place between gendered subjects." When we examine recent studies conducted in the area, most of them give more attention to the context of language classes since

language is the main tool to transfer knowledge from one source to another. It is both an instrument of communication and knowledge of the world around us. By means of language, we shape our view of society, we organize our knowledge, we learn new things and, above all, we assimilate the norms and social patterns of our community. In its nutshell, language has a strong connection with gender and other social issues in any society.

In our contemporary world, gender has become an overarching principle of a large number of foreign language instructions across the world though it is still a painful challenge which has not yet been uprooted altogether. Due to the ever growing severity and complexity of the issue, a number of international and national organizations are mushrooming at an unprecedented rate to negotiate gender in English Language teaching/learning contexts.

Foreign language teaching/learning achieves its goal when a strong foundation is laid at lower grades level. The belief is that when the teaching/learning is properly carried out at the lower grades level, it is easy to enrich the students' thinking capacity and make them effective learners later at higher level learning institutions Stromquit *et al.* (1998). As contemporary studies report, a large number of female students, especially in rural areas, learn the English Language being with in difficult situations though some governments in different developing countries including Ethiopia are taking various remedial measures to reduce the degree of hardship. The studies further reported that the severity of the problem often aggravates more severely when we go down to lower grades as there are many more factors which affect their English Language performance. Owing to this, female students at these grades level, need special support from the school management, the community and the English teachers to cope with the challenges and succeed in learning the language.

Consequently, the present researcher is determined to conduct a study which investigates the practices and challenges in enhancing female students' English Language skills with particular reference to four primary schools at first cycle level in Sidama Zone, namely: Leku primary School, Wondo Gennet Primary School, Melga Primary School and Hagere Selam Primary School.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Failure or success in second/foreign language learning is not only determined to a great extent by the quality of teaching methodology or competence of the teacher but also by other factors such as attitude towards gender, the social context in which the learning takes place and the teaching materials used in the teaching/learning process. If, for example, an English teacher relegates the role of gender-fair expressions to lower rank, then there will not be doubt that female students show less motivation to learn and develop their English Language skills.

As we understand from various literatures, foreign language learning and gender have not yet achieved a settled pedagogy. The field itself is still young. Moreover, it is extremely fast-moving and vast thus it is challenging to confine the scope of gender in language pedagogy. In this regard, Ehrlich, (1997) remarked that gender is not fixed but a dynamic construct, which is always in progress, and, as a consequence, it may be challenging to control individual variables, the contexts and situations.

These days there is an axiom which has got wider acceptance that unless female students are provided with special supports in foreign language classes when they are at lower grades level, it will be cumbersome for them to work hard and improve their language skills when they join secondary schools or colleges.

The present researcher, as instructor of various courses at Hawassa University and other higher institutions, he repeatedly observes that female students who come from the country-side (rural areas), under most circumstances, have

very limited participation in the class. Furthermore, based on his investigation on the continuous and final achievement test results of various courses that he offered to students of various departments, mostly female students those who come from the rural areas are less achievers than their male counter-parts. Even after he motivated them relentlessly to work more and achieve better results, most of them were in a position not to produce a word freely either orally or in written form. When he sometimes asked them the factors which were responsible for their reservation, majority of them responded that they did not get sufficient support and encouragement at lower grades level to freely express themselves in the class.

Thus, it is with this view that the researcher is triggered off to conducting this study which aimed at investigating the practices and challenges in enhancing female students' performance in English classes at Grades 5__8 in Sidama Zone in the above four schools selected for this study. Accordingly, this research attempts to answer the following basic research questions:

- How is the performance of female students in Grades 5__8 in English classes as compared to their male counter-parts?
- Are there tangible supports (affirmative actions), which target at scaling up female students' learning performance in English classes at lower grades level (5-8)?
- What are the major factors, if any, that contribute to female students' lower performance as compared to their male counterparts?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The findings of this research will help specifically teachers who are teaching the English Language from Grades 5__8. After they go through each finding in the study, they can examine their strengths and weaknesses so that they will take remedial measures that they think are appropriate in further enhancing female students' performances. The second beneficiaries who can make use of the findings of this study are English Language textbook writers. When they revise the current textbooks in use or when they develop new ones, they can give more attention to gender-biased language items and contents. Thirdly, the findings might help instructors at colleges of teacher education by further alerting them to give serious attention to gender issues in their curriculum and lectures. Finally, the study may help as a kick start to other researchers who have interest to conduct further studies in the area.

1.4 OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 General Objective

The major objective of the study is to investigate the practices and challenges in enhancing the performance of female students at Grades 5-8 in English classes.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- examine the performance of female students in English classes as compared to their male counter-parts
- explore tangible practices (affirmative action), if any, which target at supporting female students in their English language performance at lower grades level (5-8)

- identify the major factors, if any, that contribute to female students' lower performance as compared to their male counterparts

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Description of the Study Area

Four of the schools are found in the districts of technology villages demarked by Hawassa University.

2.2 Study Subjects

The major subjects of this study were Grade (5-8) English Language teachers who are teaching the language in the aforementioned schools located within Hawassa University technology villages and female students who are attending their education in the same schools, grades and geographical location mentioned above.

2.3 Study Design

This study is designed, by and large, qualitatively. The main reason was that in the contemporary social science research studies, while studying practices, meanings, classroom behaviors and experiences, qualitative research paradigm is more preferred to other research models. For the sake of triangulation, however, quantitative data were collected from sample scores students achieved in English tests in each school.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

There is no fixed way to determine the sample size of the population in qualitative study. These days, however, most qualitative researchers follow the widely accepted model of data sampling known as data saturation Saumur and given (2008). In determining the number of schools which were used as research site, however, simple random sampling technique was used. Accordingly, four schools were selected among those schools demarked within Hawassa University Technology Village.

2.4 Study Methodology

After the researcher had decided on the number of schools which involved in this study, he conducted observations for a fortnight in one English teacher's class in each school, totally 4, when they were teaching English in Grades 5__8 .Furthermore, 4 of the English teachers whose classes had already been observed and other 4 English teachers who were selected through data saturation model, totally 8, were invited for semi-structured interviews. In the same way, 3 female students from each school, totally 12, were selected and an interview was conducted with each of them.

The major research tools used to collect data were: observations, semi-structured interviews and sample scores female students achieved in English tests.

The major reason for using observation was that it is the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for the study. Thus, it enabled the researcher to capture the existing situations in various classes in the form of written photograph.

As a result the researcher developed 12observation check-list items which helped him as guiding framework and observed each event in each selected English teacher's classes. During the observation sessions, each of the activities was tape-recorded as this could make the data analysis simpler.

The rationales for analyzing the female students' English test scores was to examine their level of performance as compared to their male counter-parts. In like manner, the researcher randomly selected one sample test scores from one of the schools and analysed the performance of female students viz-a-viz the performance of male students.

The principal purpose for conducting the semi-structured interviews with English teachers was to verify the data secured through observations and analysis of female students' sample test scores. Furthermore, it helped the researcher to probe into the deep inside insight of the respondents about the real practices and challenges faced in enhancing female students' performance in English classes. When the interview was going on, though moving to and fro was possible, the researcher used interview guide which helped him as compendium or topical trajectories in collecting the required qualitative data.

Conducting semi-structured interviews with female students was essential because firstly they are the first addressees of the problem; thus, it is they who can give the real information about themselves. Secondly, they have their own experiences and insights into the teaching/learning of any subject as teachers have. Consequently, conducting interviews with them helped the researcher get further information that would not have been easily secured through observations, scores analysis or teachers' interviews otherwise. To achieve this, the interview items were first designed in English and then were translated into Amharic. Where the students were thought to have difficulty in understanding Amharic, the items were also translated into Sidama Language as well.

2.5 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

2.5.1 Discussing the Observation Data

In analyzing the observation data, the researcher first transcribed the data that had been recorded into the audio-tape-recorder onto blank sheets of papers. Second, the lessons that were conducted in each period were divided into different categories following the qualitative description model suggested by Seidel and Kelle (1995). Each category was then subdivided into various themes and sub-themes. Finally, the researcher described, interpreted and discussed the implication of each theme in line with the research questions stipulated in this study.

2.5.2 Discussing the Semi-Structured Interview Data

To discuss the interview data for this study, the first step was transcribing the responses from the tape-recorder onto blank sheets of paper. After the data were properly transcribed, the next step was coding the responses to identify the emerging major and sub-themes. Finally, each theme was discussed in the light of the research questions designed in the study.

2.5.3 Discussing the Scores Students Achieved in English Tests

First, the scores were grouped into different categories, that is, the number of both male and female students who scored <5, 5_7 and 8_10 out of 10%. The researcher then counted the number of students in each range and recorded it into the table. Having done this, the number of both female and male students in each range was converted into percentage and finally the result of both genders was compared and explained.

RESULTS

On the basis of the results obtained from the observation data, almost all English teachers, teaching the language

from Grades5_8, were treating female student courteously and motivating them as much as they could to scale up their classroom performance.

When the performance of female students during group discussions was evaluated, a few of them were freely participating with their group mates. A large number of them, however, preferred reticence. As the researcher continued his observation, he saw female students who were sitting alone and the English teacher was also grouping them based on their sitting arrangement without mixing them with males to discuss the tasks given to all groups. Besides to this, the same teacher was observed using few gender-sensitive expressions while he was treating one female student who arrived late for class.

Most English teachers were giving special support to female students to enhance their class performance though it was not sufficient. For example, when one of the English teachers gave a lot of homework, he asked the students, especially, female students, whether they had sufficient time to do it. When the response of some female students was “no”, he was advising them how to manage their time and do every activity on time before coming for class. Moreover, few English teachers were giving tutorial classes to female students through consultation with the management body of the school and the female students’ parents.

As the data from the sample test indicated, female students’ performance was lower than males.

Most English teachers except one did not use gender-unfair expressions while they were explaining various lessons in the class.

On the basis of the results from the interview, though majority of them believed that giving special support to female students was essential, they could not implement it due to time-constraint.

Most teachers reported that they did not have sufficient awareness how to avoid gender-sensitive expressions either from their oral or written English.

The educational status and the economic status of the parents had serious impact on the overall performance of female students in English classes.

Most female students had the belief that their class performance in English class was lower than males as a result of lack of support from both their English teachers and parents.

All females were of the belief that getting special support from their English teachers, management body and their parents is of paramount significance in enhancing their English skills until the existing socio-cultural concept of the society changes.

The major factors which affected the performance of female students were: the attitude of female students towards themselves, attitude of some male students, lack of access to affirmative actions, family background and time-constraint.

Depending on the results obtained from the results of observation, sample English test scores and semi-structured interviews the performance of female students, by and large, was lower than males though there were some promising efforts which marked the improvement of the existing scenario.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Discussion of the Observation Data

4.1.1 Performance of Female Students

The first criterion that the researcher used in evaluating female students' performance was their level of classroom participations during questioning and answering in the classroom. In this regard, as the data showed, their performance was lower than males though there are promising efforts to ameliorate the situation. As the observation data further indicated, more than 90% of the English teachers were treating female students courteously and motivating them relentlessly to help them perform better in the classroom.

In English teacher₁'s class, for example, there were 19 female and 32 male students. In the middle of his discussion, when he asked a question, 5 female and 14 male students raised up their hands to answer his question. After he had gazed at the whole class, he gave chance to all female students to answer the question and 3 of them answered it correctly. Among the 14 male students who raised up their hands, he gave chance only to 3 of them and two of them answered it correctly.

As the above data demonstrate, the English teacher was giving more attention to the participation of female students. Moreover, he had never been stultifying the effort of the female students even if their answer was wrong. When we examine the above teacher's approach to feedback provision, it confirms with the principle of modern humanistic approach to foreign language teaching. According to this approach, students (especially female students), learn better and improve their skills when they are motivated for everything that they do, including the errors they commit.

When we look at the same data with some details, it is easy to realize that only 26.31% of the female students raised up their hands to answer the English teacher's question. In contrary, among male students, 43.5 % were willing to answer the same question. This implied that most female students were still suffering from xenoglossophobia to participate freely in the class. Of course, it is difficult to conclude that all students who remained silent were not capable of answering the question asked. The argument is that at least feeling free, raising up hands and saying out something in the class confidently is one of the indicators of good performance.

The second type of activity the researcher used as female students' performance evaluation was group discussion. In four of the schools, the researcher observed frequent use of group discussions as one means of teaching methods. When the present researcher was moving around each group and observing the performance of female students, though a large number of female students preferred reticence, few of them were freely sharing their ideas to the other group mates. Each English teacher in each school was also moving through each row and giving help to any group which required his assistance. Nevertheless, one thing that the researcher identified as pitfall was that in one of the schools, the female students were sitting alone and were made to form heterogeneous groups to discuss the task provided to the class.

Regarding this point, as language teaching pedagogians advise us, mixing the sitting arrangement of males and females is of several advantages. One of them is the familiarity that they develop with their male mates. Secondly, they can have opportunity to share experiences and understand each other's' problems. Hence, though giving freedom is commendable, considering the other side of the consequence is a non-negligible matter.

4.1.2. Giving Additional Support to Female Students

Regarding the English teachers' Endeavour in enhancing female students' performance, one of the best citable examples was the event observed in one of the schools selected as research site for this study. At the end of his class, the English teacher gave out the corrected test papers to the whole class by calling their names. He then called the name of few female students and asked them to meet him in the staffroom right after class. As he left the room, I followed him and asked him to tell me the reason why he needed those female students. He first chuckled and then answered my question by asking me another question: "After either the results of a test or examination have been distributed, why do you think can a teacher invite certain students for discussion separately?"

No sooner had he paused his question, all students requested to report to him at staffroom came and surrounded him. He immediately began to ask them the reasons why they could score least marks in the test. Eight of them gave him their own reasons. After listening to their answers attentively, he asked each of them to come with their parents before the next class time. When the present researcher asked him the reason why he decided to make the students bring their parents to him, he answered saying, "I will show them the results of their daughters and discuss the way they get support from me and the parents as well. Then, I will prepare myself to give them supplementary classes by arranging convenient time." From the above practice we perceive that the English teacher was determined to give special support to female students and improve their English Language skills. This practice implied that there is really bright feature to our female students who are living and learning in rural area of the zone.

The other worth mentioning practice the researcher observed in Teacher 2's English class was that when he gave a lot of homework, he asked the students, especially, female students, whether they had sufficient time to do it. When the response of some female students was "yes", he was advising them how to manage their time and do every activity on time before coming for class. Moreover, as he personally informed me, when some female students were in desperate situation to handle their lessons due to over housework, he called their parents and conducted discussions with them placing himself just like one of the family members. Through such effort, he said, he achieved observable and measureable results.

In the same teacher's class what the researcher observed as limitation during the second round lesson presentation was that he was giving the responsibility of coordination only to male students during group discussions. There were six groups to discuss the lesson entitled, "Historical Events", on page 65. In each of the group no female student was assigned to chair the group discussions and report the results to the class. Even if sometimes male students were by far better performers than their female counterparts, giving the opportunity of chairing the discussions helps female students exercise leadership. Though some of them show shyness and in confidence, the teacher needs to encourage them and follow up their progress from time to time because school is the first place where foundation is laid for every long life career in the future.

In T4 English class, the teacher was motivating the female students to perform well. However, he was a bit impolite while he was treating one female student who came late for class. Here below is the real situation that took place on the scene.

T: Where were you? You are too late.

ለምንትርብኸኛለሽ; አርፍዶ መምጣት ከልክልኝ ወ አላልኩም፤ መጽምዳሴ ትልጅ ነገር አይሞላም፡፡ ቤት ስትጠርጊኝ ወ ወይስ ከብቶ ስታስወጧል

Why do you disturb us? Haven't I said late coming is prohibited? Of course, for females the hours of the day are not enough: Were you cleaning the house or deriving the cattle out from their pen?

S: *After a long time of silence... አባቴልኮኝነው • My father sent me somewhere.*

T: በይግባይ! *Get in! Annoyingly*

When we observe the above teacher's way of treating the late coming female student, he was not careful in selecting gender-fair expressions. In further analyzing the data we see that the teacher was of the attitude that being busy with house activities is a gift given only to female students. Moreover, he was of the conviction that cleaning the house and deriving the domestic animals out of the house are conventionally accepted female's duties. From the above classroom episode we understand that the English teacher did not give due respect to the late coming female student. Here, what is heart-breaking is that if the educated person (the immediate role person of the students) thinks like this, what is expected from the large section of our society which has had no so far sufficient modern education? Still a lot is expected from all us concerned.

In the same teacher's class, the researcher observed another mistreatment when he was giving feedback to female student's oral answer to the question he raised. For more clarity, let us see the following classroom episode:

T: *What is the past tense form of "draw"?*

S: *drawed*

T: *no, no... oh, ስንቴነውይህንየተማርነው: አታጠገኝምማለትነው*

How many times did we learn this? This means, you don't study!

The above data showed us that the English teacher was not courteous in giving feedback to the female student's attempt during the questioning and answering session in the class. As it is known, a teacher should not always expect correct answers from his/her students. Whatever errors are committed, the best approach to feedback provision is respecting the students' attempt (especially female students), motivating them to learn from their errors and improve the status of their learning from time to time.

4.1. 3usinggender-Fair Expressions

Based on the observation results, majority of the English teachers, except one of them, did not use expressions that offend females. Nevertheless, one of the English teachers used the following discourse which might not be comfortable to female students. He used the discourse when he was teaching simple present tense. He wrote it on the blackboard as follows:

"I live with my sister. She always makes delicious food for me. She is also very good at cleaning the house and washing clothes." When we look into the above discourse, the content is on the housework share of his sister. She is responsible to make delicious food, clean the house and wash clothes. This implied that females are always responsible to discharge responsibilities which have connection with house chores. This type of attitude can develop the understanding that females are always needed to give housework service to males.

4.2. Discussion of the Sample Scores the Students Attained in English

Table 1: Female Students Viz-A-Viz Male Students' Sample Test-Scores in English

| School Code | Grades | Female Students' Results out of 10% | | | Male Students' Results out of 10% | | | | |
|--------------|--------|---|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------------|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | | Total no. of Female Students in the Class | <5 | 5--7 | 8-10 | Total no. of Male Students in the Class | <5 | 5--7 | 8-10 |
| 01 | 5 | 14 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 29 | 10 | 13 | 6 |
| 02 | 6 | 19 | 7 | 8 | 4 | 29 | 9 | 12 | 8 |
| 03 | 7 | 11 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 32 | 11 | 14 | 7 |
| 04 | 8 | 14 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 31 | 12 | 11 | 8 |
| Total | | 58 | 23 | 23 | 12 | 121 | 42 | 50 | 29 |

The above table showed that 39.65% of the total number of female students scored < 5 in the test rated out of 10%. Among 121 total number of male students, however, 34.71% of them scored < 5. This result implied that the number of female students who scored below pass mark exceeded male students by 4.94%. When we examine the second range of the scores, 39.65% of females scored 5_7. In contrast, 41.32% of the male students was within this range. This result revealed that the number of male students who scored 5__7 exceeded that of females by 1.67%. When the third category of the scores, (achieved between 8__10), which had been considered, very good, was analyzed, 20.68% of the female students were within this range whereas the number of male students with in the same range was 23.96%. These data again take us to the conclusion that female students' performance in the sample test was less than males.

Based on results obtained from the three of the evaluation areas, that is, participation in the classrooms, participation in group works and scores achieved in classroom tests, the performance of female students was lower than male students though the difference was not that much alarming. The final implication is that female students still need more support from all bodies concerned.

4.3. DISCUSSION OF THE INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH ENGLISH TEACHERS

4.3.1 Performance of Female Students in the Class

Among 8 respondent English Teachers, 3 of them (37.8%) had the opinion that the performance of female students is not less than their male counterparts. In their opinion, these days it is hardly possible to find a timid female student who refrain from expressing herself in English in the class despite scarcity of language. One of the respondents, for example, expressed his view saying: "The tradition has completely changed. Sometimes, as I see in my class, females are more courageous and fast in responding to various oral questions and other class discussions." The above opinion revealed that female students did not have a problem of heebie-jeebies in participating in the class, so their performance was almost equal with male students; even under some situations, as they further explained females were more courageous and performers than their male counter-parts. The other 5 respondents (62.2%), however, were of the opinion that still in the contemporary English classes; female students are the victims of xeno-glosso-phobia. One of the respondents, for example, forwarded:

To tell the truth, nowadays, there is improvement with regard to female students' performance in the class. However, due to cultural domination established for long years across the country, most female students have not yet emancipated from the stumbling block. When their participation is compared with male students, still there remain a lot to be done. As I can see from my every day experience, they are not willing to discuss in groups in English. Even when I encourage them at least to say out whatever they feel, mostly they are not willing. They bend their necks down and prefer

to remain silent.

This opinion disclosed that still the performance of female students in English classes is constrained by lots of challenges. Thus, much more work is still required to change the situation.

4.3.2 Especial Support Given to Female Students

Based on the data obtained from the respondents, 3 of them expressed that they attempted to support female students to improve their learning performance. For example, one of the English teachers said, "In everything I do either in the class or outside, I take the issue of female students into account because it is me who should be vanguard in combating the problem." Majority of them (5 of them), however, had the view that though they were of the belief that giving special help to females is essential, they could not do it for various reasons. This data disclosed that majority of the English teachers were unable to give special support to female students. Thus, it is possible to deduce that female students had problem in competing with their male counter-parts.

4.3.3 Using Gender-Fair Discourse

Each of the respondents had his/her own difference in responding to the item. Resp₁, for example, forwarded that he did not have ideas how to avoid gender-biased expressions. As he further explained, he often teaches lessons which have already developed in the textbook. Whether the materials have deficiency in treating both sexes equally or not was not his concern. Resp₇ was of the view that it is not the expression which should be taken as a point of argument but the perception of every citizen who believes in justice and equality. In his detailed explanation he said "...even in bible, most expressions are represented in masculine form."

Resp₂ in contrast was of the opinion that he knows how to avoid some expressions which are gender-biased. His problem is sometimes it becomes boring to use neutralization. As an example, he cited the following example: Every teacher should appear in the meeting place on time. If **she/he** comes late, it will disturb the continuation of the meeting. Hence, for everyone, punctuality should be **his/her** personal quality. If, however, **he/she** has faced a personal problem, which is beyond **his/her** capacity.....The above responses suggested that using gender-fair expressions in various discourses is still a challenge for many of the English teachers.

The Major Factors Contributing to Female Students' Performance

A thorough analysis of the data identified the following major constraints as hurdle to the successful performance of female students in English class.

4.3.4. Family Background

Most respondents had the belief that the cultural, economic, and educational status of the parents has strong influence on the overall performance of female students. In their detailed explanation they stated that under many circumstances, those female students who come from economically high strata and educated families are mostly competent, free and active to express themselves in the class. The reasons are, as they further explained; when the economic status of the family is high, female students get more free time to concentrate on their academic activities because their parents can hire house workers who cover the activities around the house. In the same way, those female students who come from educated family grow up with in fair and free family management policy so that they become

confident to involve actively in different participatory activities. As the teachers witnessed from their personal and practical observation, most female students who suffered from anxiety and low level of performance were those who come from families who have not yet got modern education and economically at lower status.

4.3.5. Attitudinal Problems of Some Male Students

The other constraint mentioned as one factor for female students' low performance in English classes was the attitude of some male students towards female students. One of the respondents, for example, explained his experience with a substantive example as follows:

Still there is a problem to accept the equality of females with males. When, sometimes I assign my students to do an assignment in groups, some male students do not like to work with female students. Their main reason that they give me is that most of them do not contribute significantly in solving the problem. All the burdens fall on male students' shoulders. Thus, mostly I force them to work together by advising them strongly.

From the above data we see that the problem of gender- disparity is a critical problem which needs further awareness raising effort so as to enhance the performance of female students.

4.3.6. Time-Constraint

Almost all the respondents strongly explained that they carry 25_30 periods per week along with tests, examinations, assignment items preparations, corrections and participations in various co-curricular and manage mental activities both in the school and in the community. In their detailed responses they stated that to give special support to female students along with the above duties, time is the most crucial requirement. In their final statement all of them consentaneously remarked that giving special support to female students without time is unthinkable. Here, the researcher wants to suggest that reducing the number of periods to 20 per week is one way of facilitating situations for female students to get special support from their English teachers as every activity is dependent on time availability.

4.4 DISCUSSIONS OF THE INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH FEMALE STUDENTS

4.4.1. Academic Performance of Female Students

Based on the data, 8 of the female respondents (67%) admitted that they were not academically performing equally with their male counter-parts. In their detailed explanation, they stated that in most cases it is males who scored highest results. The other 4 respondents (33%) had the opinion that their performance in English class was equal or better than males.

4.4.2. Attitude and Access to Special Support

All of the respondents believe that special support (affirmative action) is an important practice which can help them cope with various challenges they have been facing for long period of time. When the present researcher asked them about its disadvantage in curtailing their own commitment to struggle and catch up with males, they responded unequivocally that it does not reduce their struggle until the situations are ameliorated for them. In link to this, one female student explained its significance as follows:

Among all athletes, who have got equal training, if one of them could not succeed, the decision of the couch is undebatably to give especial further support to that athlete and make him/ her equal with others. In so doing, no one

complains against the support provided to the athlete. In like manner, we females need such kind of support until we are fully self-sufficient.

From the above data we see that female students learning in the grades mentioned above need affirmative action until the dominations they have had undergone liquidate and build their own capacity.

4.4.3. Attitude of the Family towards Females

Three (25%) of the respondents explained that they did not have as such severe gender-discrimination at home. Their fathers and brothers were of level-headed attitude towards females. The other 9 (75%) of the respondents, on the other hand, were of the view that still they are in problem with regard to fairness in treating both sexes. Most of them disclosed that the duty of cooking food, carrying small babies and arranging the house furniture are most frequently the duties given to females. One female student, for example, expressed her complaint saying:” After we had finished our house work, males had right to go out and play outside until it gets dark. We females, however, are mostly allowed to talk with females in the homestead or females living very close to our house.”The above data showed that majority of female students had more housework burden than their male counterparts, especially in the rural areas.

4 5. CONCLUSIONS

- Based on the observation data, most English teachers were encouraging female students to participate actively in the class. Nevertheless, most female students were not performing well in the class due to socio-cultural dominations and classroom constraints.
- Almost all English teachers had interest to give special support to female students despite time scarcity.
- In some schools, English teachers did not consider the moral value of female students while organizing the whole class into groups for various class activities.
- Majority of the English teachers, except one of them, did not use expressions that offend females while they were explaining lessons in the class or ask questions.
- When the scores the female students achieved in the sample test are examined, male students were better performers than females.
- Many of the English teachers disclosed that they did not have sufficient knowledge how to avoid gender-sensitive expressions either from their oral or written English.
- The major factors which affected the performance of female students were: the attitude of female students towards themselves, access to affirmative actions, family background and time-constraint.
- Finally, based on the discussions of the data from each research instrument, the performance of female students was lower than their male counter-parts though there were promising efforts to change the existing situations.

4 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings in this study, the following basic recommendations were forwarded.

- The school management should always consider the hardship of a large number of female students and include it

as one of the top agenda of the school management in its action plan. To this effect, it should continuously follow the performance of female students and hold discussions with English teachers and the parents of female students to enhance their performance in English Language.

- The school management needs to reduce the number of periods English teachers hold per week at least to 20—25 and look for mechanisms in which they can get remuneration for the support they give to female students at their spare-time to augment their performance in the language.
- English teachers need to come together at department level and hold discussions at least twice a semester to come up with the remedial solutions that help female students increase their performance in English classes.

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