

Factors Contributing to Low Performance of Boys in English Language at Ordinary Level: A Focus on Six Secondary Schools in Chegutu District, Zimbabwe

Dr. Wellington Samkange¹, Kudzai Jacqueline Fusire²

¹Senior Lecturer, Zimbabwe Open University; Faculty of Arts and Education; Department of Teacher Development. Box 1119MP Mt. Pleasant Harare, Zimbabwe

²Head of Department, Department of Humanities; St. Marks High School, Chegutu, Zimbabwe

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Wellington Samkange

Email: wshereni@gmail.com

Abstract: Issues of learner performance have remained central to many academics and scholars. Apart from the purpose it serves as an indicator of quality, learner performance justifies the extent to which resources are expended, at the same time assessment of learner performance acts as a mirror on the level at which educational goals are being met. Learner performance has now become a gender issue. When reference is made to gender issues in education focus has tended to be on factors that have disadvantaged the girl learner. However, there have been observations that the performance of girls has been much better than boys in a number of areas at both primary and secondary school. One such area has been the English Language O' level examinations in Zimbabwe. The purpose of the study was to analyze factors that contribute to low performance by boys in English Language at O' level. The study used the mixed methodology and the case study design. Data was collected from six purposively selected secondary schools in Chegutu district and 24 English language teachers, 200 O' level female learners and 200 O' level male learners who were randomly selected. Data was collected through the use of questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The major factors analyzed were the use of traditional teaching methods which most boys found boring; the verbal medium which tended to favour girls; gender stereotype and culture which promoted physical activity among boys; negative attitudes by teachers and boy learners; gender imbalances in the distribution of teachers which tended to disadvantage boy learners; lack of reading culture; and limited teaching and learning resources in schools. The study makes recommendations on the need for teachers to move away from relying on the traditional methods of teaching and incorporate modern educational technology. It also recommends gender balance in the distribution and allocation of teachers. It further recommends constant supervision of teachers and learners.

Keywords: Teaching methods; learners; English Language; Performance; gender; pupils.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

English language was first introduced in Zimbabwe during the colonial times. It was offered in most mission schools. English language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture; as such it cannot be ignored as far as the Zimbabwean school curriculum is concerned. In Zimbabwe the proportion of boys passing English has dropped conspicuously. The high demand and rhetoric for science subjects as key to human development has negatively impacted on the value of English as a core subject in the Zimbabwean curriculum. Such observations have been made by the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) reports on examinations for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013. Further analysis showed that though English language is written by the majority of pupils, the performance of boys is lower than that of girls in O' level final examinations. Failure of boys has become a

perennial crisis among boy learners or candidates who sit for the subject as evidenced by the ZIMSEC reports of 2011, 2012 and 2013. The same trends as observed by the reports have also been witnessed in the Chegutu District results analysis reports. The pass rate of boys in English as compared to that of girls in this district has been lower for five consecutive years as from 2009 to 2013. The percentage pass rates for boys in the Mashayamombe, Mubaira and Norton clusters were lower than those of girls as from 2009 to 2013.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The 2013 report for ZIMSEC results analyzed by education officers in Chegutu district noted that Mashayamombe, Norton and Mubaira clusters were among those schools with boy candidates failing English Language. ZIMSEC English district boys' pass rate was 17.5% whereas that of girls was 57.5%

respectively in 2013. Failure of boy learners in Ordinary level English language in Chegutu district is a real cause for concern for parents, teachers and researchers. The problem can therefore be expressed in question form: What factors contribute to low performance of boys in English Language at Ordinary level?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to examine the underlying causes behind the poor performance of boys in English Language at Ordinary level in Chegutu district.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ❖ What methods are used in the teaching of English Language at Ordinary Level?
- ❖ To what extent have the teaching methods contributed to low performance by boys at Ordinary Level?
- ❖ What are the attitudes of boys towards English Language?
- ❖ What are the attitudes of teachers towards the teaching of English language?

ASSUMPTIONS

The study was based on the assumptions that:

- ❖ Both boys and girls in Chegutu district at Ordinary level do English Language.
- ❖ Boys' attitudes towards English Language have contributed to their low performance.
- ❖ Strategies used in the teaching of English Language have impacted negatively on the performance of boys.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research study is important to different stakeholders. Heads of departments and teachers will benefit from the study as they will be made aware of the factors that cause low performance of boys in English Language. At the same time, appropriate strategies identified by the study will assist to improve the performance of boys in English Language at Ordinary level. Parents and guardians will be aware of what is behind their boy children's poor performance in English Language. Although the research is a case study, it is thickly described such that other schools will benefit from it as they can infer the findings from this setting to their situations. The curriculum development unit will benefit from the study through development of the national curriculum. It will also assist policy makers and policy planners come up with policies that improve language teaching at different levels.

DELIMITATIONS

The study used Chegutu district as its case study. The rationale for this was to make sure that the researchers focused on a workable case. The research

included pupils from six secondary schools from three clusters in Chegutu district. The behaviours of teachers and pupils which contribute to failure of boys were analyzed and only formally registered pupils were considered.

LIMITATIONS

The research adopted a case study design. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to other situations. However, the use of a case study did not compromise the credibility of the study as it allowed the phenomenon of low performance in English Language to be explored in-depth. Also, since schools are scattered, it was possible for the researcher to cover more than four visits to each school as to discover methods used during teaching and learning.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This theoretical framework explains in a narrative form the variables that were studied. This investigation was based on the behaviourist theory which was first developed in the 1920s and 1930s by psychologists such as Skinner, Pavlov and Thorndike. According to Muijis and Reynolds [1], this theory emphasizes change in behaviour as the main outcome of a learning process. Muijis *et al* [1] further explain that the behaviourist theory is also concerned with how external stimuli affect learning. Using experimental methods, behaviourists looked at how behaviour can be conditioned, for example, by providing rewards and punishments.

The research was based on the belief that learning is marked by changes in behaviour as the main outcomes. As a result, the study was concerned with addressing factors that contribute to failure of ordinary level boys in English Language. As stated by Muijis *et al* [1], the following are some of the variables that can bring out desired outcomes in any learning area according to the behaviourist theory: external stimuli, provisions of rewards and punishments, thinking, planning and activation. They further argue that the learning process must also have motivation, interest and assessment.

Some of the factors that bring out the contribution in learning are external stimuli [1]. These stimuli may include the environment. The behaviourists argue that behaviour can be conditioned by either rewarding it or punishing it [2]. Rewarding and punishing a piece of work may refer to marking and providing feedback to pupils. Such marking contributes to effective learning which should go with forethought, planning and activation. Planning refers to use of schemes of work. Schemes of work are the guidelines designed to make teaching more manageable. The schemes of work also form important documentary evidence about what is to be taught. Motivation also

brings out goal setting by the pupil and monitoring activities by teachers to find out if the learning is on target. The other variable is interest, which denotes the degree of liking that pupils have for the content area or topics being learned. The attitude of the teacher towards the content area is also of great value.

The factors discussed above constitute the general aspects of all learning processes. When these are translated into summary, the theory states that English must be taught and learnt since learning involves a change of behaviour. It is failure to deal with the above variables which has contributed to the poor performance of the boys in English Language.

Apart from the behaviourist theory highlighted above, the different teaching and learning methods are some of the factors that contribute to performance in English Language at Ordinary Level. One of the major problems appears to relate to the English Language's nature as a foreign language in most developing countries. The teaching and learning approaches are to a large extent influenced by the skills that are supposed to be developed. Such development does not start at Ordinary level, but has to be promoted in early years at school. Skills that have to be developed in the teaching of English Language include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Activities to promote these skills include grammar approaches, aural approaches, English-only approach, and translative approach among others.

In most developing countries English is taught as a second language or foreign language. There are arguments in terms of the stage children have to be introduced to a second language. Some scholars have placed emphasis on using the indigenous language as a medium of instruction in the early stages of schooling. Another school of thought holds the view that children acquire and develop language better and faster when they are still young. There has been advice to the effect that African teachers should stop using foreign languages on pupils of lower levels like form one and two as such a practice negatively impacted on pupils' performance. On the other hand, computers can support learning by supplementing pupils with synthesized sources of information relevant to a particular academic subject. Pupils who use computers enjoy active engagement, participation in groups and feedback as they communicate with computers. This in turn generates interest and boosts their learning abilities. Through drill and practice, pupils can learn spelling; vocabulary and other language skills which help them acquire knowledge.

There was need for pupils to be motivated to study English. The increase in motivation can make boys change their attitude towards learning. The more

motivated pupils are, the better their attitude towards learning. Motivation and attitude go hand in hand in increasing work output. This means that if boys are motivated and have a positive attitude they are likely to do well in their studies. The opposite is also true as the less motivated tend to perform poorly in school.

Brown [3] observes that schemes of work help teachers to organize their work so that course delivery remains on target and in accordance with the syllabus content. Brown [3] also advises that the schemes of work ought to be flexible in order to take account of local teaching needs and resources. A scheme of work has to contain the definition of objectives, teaching activities, and skills to be acquired by learners, description of teaching resources to be used and definition of learner outcome. Though these vary from school to school, they should contain the basic information that makes lesson delivery possible. Teachers need to vary their methods of teaching from individual, group work, pair work and debate such that pupils enjoy learning.

Crawford [4] notes that teaching and learning materials include books, worksheets or readers; non-print materials such as cassettes or audio materials, videos and even materials that are not designed for instructional use, such as magazines, newspapers and TV materials. Teaching materials provide the basis for the content of lessons, the balance of skills taught, and the kinds of language practice students take part in. Crawford [4] further argues that materials may provide the major source of contact for pupils with the language apart from the teacher. The types of teaching and learning materials have a bearing on the performance of the pupils.

O'Bannon [5] advises that English skills are introduced to pupils in stages. The teacher may start with the listening skill. The pupils may be required to find titles for paragraphs, followed by what they heard. This would develop the speaking skill. There are other skills that have to be developed. These areas are presented in stages of the order in which English may be approached. These include providing possible titles to given short passages and choosing the best summary and explaining why others are inadequate. It also includes answering questions with a word, phrase or sentence as required by the questions. Another skill is filling in the blanks while the teacher is reading a passage and completing a table using information from the passage read to them. There are also the skills of giving single sentence summaries, listing the main points in a given passage and making own notes. In this case teachers would be expected to draw up a scheme of work that tabulates the diverse skills.

Several school environmental factors have generally been identified as influencing academic performance. These include availability of instructional materials, school location and quality of the physical facilities, class size and pupil-teacher ratios, teacher qualification and experience, and supervision. Instructional materials provide information, organize the scope and sequence of the information presented, and provide opportunities for pupils to use what they have learned. Students usually perform better when they have books or study aids to foster their learning. These study aids or material resources could be textbooks, teachers' guides, wall pictures, maps, atlases and other learning aids. The availability and use of teaching and learning materials improve the effectiveness of a teacher's lessons. Learning has to be interesting thus if the environment is not conducive, it affects the performance of pupils.

Class sizes have also been identified as determinants of academic performance. Studies have indicated that schools with smaller class sizes perform better academically than schools with larger class sizes. Fabunmi, Brai-Abu and Adenji [6] indicated that three class factors which are class size, student classroom space and class utilization, when taken together, determined significantly students' academic performance. Similarly, Salfi and Saeed [7] found a significant correlation between school size and student performance in Pakistan. They revealed that small schools performed better than medium and large schools.

There are arguments that class sizes inversely affect achievement, especially for children in early grades. There have been suggestions to the effect that class sizes above 40 had negative effects achievement. Furthermore, schools with effective supervision of teaching and learning activities have high performance rates. There is a positive correlation between supervision and performance of learners. If educational managers and supervisors were more regular in schools, this would put teachers on the alert to be more regular and early in school. This would forestall teacher absenteeism and improve teaching in the schools. If teachers are present always, following regular visits of circuit supervisors, pupils would be challenged to change their attitude towards school.

There are other factors that have impacted on learner performance in schools. Chakanyuka *et al* [8] assert that gender difference between teacher and learner affects teacher-pupil interaction. A female teacher may not understand learning difficulties of a male student. Clark [9] postulates that the shortage of men in the staff rooms could be one reason for the under achievement of boys. At the same time, she goes on to say female teachers tend to give boys lower marks

than they deserve and boys are unlikely to work hard in their classes. The relations that exist between the teacher and learner are crucial in determining learner outcome. The issues that are raised above are important in our attempt to explain the major causes of differences in performance between boys and girls in English Language at Ordinary level. However, the views appear to suggest that boys would improve their performance in classes that are taught by male teachers. If this view is to be accepted, how then would we explain poor performance of boys in classes that were taught by male teachers? This therefore shows that there may be other factors beyond the issue of gender.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The researchers used the mixed methodology and the case study design. The researchers used a case study as it allowed an in-depth study of factors contributing to failure of boys in English Language in Chegutu district. The use of a case study enabled the researcher to obtain views and experiences in the six selected secondary schools. Data was collected through the use of open-ended questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and observation of English language lessons in the selected secondary schools.

SAMPLE

The sample comprised six secondary schools in Chegutu district which were purposively selected. The respondents who were randomly selected comprised 24 English Language teachers, 200 O' level boys and 200 O' level girls from the six selected secondary schools.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was coded and analyzed qualitatively based on themes that emerged from the research questions and responses. In some instances descriptive statistics were used to explain data.

FINDINGS

From the data collected from teachers and learners, the study came up with the following factors that affect the performance of boys in English Language:

- Teachers' personal characteristics
- Learning and teaching time
- Methods of teaching and learning
- Pupils' attitudes
- Teachers' attitudes
- Resources and facilities

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The sample comprised twenty four English Language teachers. In terms of gender composition, it was noted that 30% were male and 70% were female. This showed that there were more female teachers than

male teachers for O' level English Language. If the views by scholars such as Clark [9] were to be considered one would argue that gender composition of teachers in the selected schools had the possibility of affecting the performance of boys much more than the performance of girls since the gender composition was skewed in favour of female teachers. Clark [9] postulates that the shortage of men in the staffrooms could be one reason for the under-achievement of boys as female teachers tend to give boys lower marks than they deserve and as such boys are likely not to work hard in their classes. On the other hand, the extent of teacher-pupil interaction is affected by gender. Chakanyuka *et al* [8] note that gender differences affect the learner as there is less teacher to pupil interaction. A male teacher understands better the learning difficulties of a male student and the reverse is equally true for female teachers.

When it came to age and experience, 65% of the teachers were below 40 years of age and 35 % were above 40 years of age. In terms of working experience, 70% had been in the teaching service for less than 5 years and 30% had been in the teaching service for more than 5 years. As for qualifications, 45% of the teachers indicated that they had a Diploma in Education and teaching degrees and 55% had non-teaching degrees. The data on age, experience, qualifications showed that the teachers were of different ages and had varied experiences that were crucial to the study and also possessed relevant teaching qualifications.

When learners were asked to indicate the factors that contributed to low performance by boys, pupils gave a variety factors. These factors included the following: inadequate teaching and learning time; inadequate preparation by teachers; lack of suitable teaching and learning materials; lack of motivation by teachers; absenteeism and late coming to school; poor teacher-pupil rapport; loss of reading culture; unfriendly school environment; large classes and the difficulty nature of English as a language.

LEARNING AND TEACHING TIME

Most teachers contented that the main contributing factor was inadequate time to learn and teach English language. One teacher noted that they had four to five periods of English per week and one or two periods were lost every week to other school programmes such as assembly. This was supported by another teacher who noted that they only had four and five periods to teach English Language at Ordinary level because the school offered many subjects in the curriculum. This showed that less time was being given to the teaching and learning of the subject. As such pupils did not have enough time to grasp the necessary concepts in English language. While reduced periods have a bearing on the performance of learners, the

major question remains why such arrangements would affect boys much more than girls. The responses appear to be advocating for increased teaching and learning time. However, while it can be noted that increased learning time can be beneficial to different groups of learners, it did not always produce positive results. A study by the Institute of Education, Science, Regional Educational Laboratory Program [10] made a number of conclusions which highlighted the following:

- ❖ Learners performing below standard tended to benefit through improved literacy;
- ❖ Learners with special needs benefited in terms of an improvement in social-emotional skills; and
- ❖ The qualifications of the teacher and the use of traditional instructional style had a bearing on learner achievement in Mathematics and Literacy.

METHODS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING, MEDIA AND SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Learners through questionnaires showed that most teachers came ill prepared for English lessons. At the same time, there was use of old or outdated textbooks. Teachers also tended to use traditional methods of teaching which learners found boring, especially boys. Some of the traditional teaching methods identified by learners included lecturing, teacher-centred teaching, chalk and talk methods and regimented classrooms. On the teaching methods, 80% of the boys indicated that they had problems with the teaching methods as they were teacher-centric and only 20% did not have problems with the teaching methods employed. When it came to girl learners, 60% of them noted that they did not have any problems with the methods used and 40% noted that the methods were teacher-centred. This appeared to suggest that boys were affected much more than girls by the traditional methods of teaching that were used in the teaching of English language in the six selected secondary schools.

Another factor that was noted related to teaching and learning materials in the schools. One teacher noted that they were relying on outdated books. Teachers noted that apart from the books donated by UNICEF, they needed magazines, televisions, computers and other technological equipment for pupils to learn easily. These items were not available in the schools. Some teachers attributed poor performance to outdated books, shortage of books, large classes and shortage of teaching and learning media. Right [11] and Rwambiwa [12] agree that teaching without media is a distinct handicap to learners. As such the teaching methods employed may lead to a negative attitude by pupils. Crawford [4] posits that teaching and learning materials such as books, worksheets or readers and other reading materials provide the major source of contact for language learning apart from the teacher.

Teaching and learning materials therefore have a bearing on the performance of learners.

PUPILS' ATTITUDE

Another contributing factor was the attitude of boys to the subject. The attitudes can be attributable to a number of factors. One of the factors is related to gender stereotyping. As children grow within the home, physical activity is encouraged within boys and girls are expected to be passive within most African societies. As such, boys' attitudes are guided by the need for learning through mechanical tasks and physical activities. Child *et al* [13] made a number of observations about the performance and attitudes of boys towards the learning of language. Child *et al* [13] observed that the boys culture tended to be less study-oriented as they did not spend much time on their homework and that information in terms of lesson delivery and examinations was often communicated through the verbal medium which favoured the girl learners.

As observed by one teacher, when teachers reported that boys were not writing their work, some school heads tended to blame the teachers for lack of commitment to work and further alleged that the attitude displayed by boys was a reflection of how teachers handled them. Another teacher further alleged that boys viewed Mathematics and Science subjects as of more importance than English. Some teachers as gathered from interviews showed that few boys wrote their work as compared to girls. Learners' attitudes influenced the way they did their class work. Responses by teachers indicated that only 25% of the boys wrote their English exercises whereas 95% of girls wrote their class work. This can be a contributing factor why girls seem to perform better than boys. Other factors noted were that girls tended to be better listeners than boys, have a long attention span, whereas boys concentrate less when frustrated or upset. Another factor noted was lack of a reading culture. One education inspector said that today's generation especially boys had lost the reading culture and technology particularly the television and computer had replaced the books that the older generation used to read. The statement by the education inspector appears to suggest boys have been affected by technology much more than girls.

Another issue worth considering was people or factors that motivated boys to study. Responses by boys in the sample tended to suggest that they were motivated by a number of factors. 29% of the boys indicated that they were motivated by their parents, 8.5% by the teachers, 45% by the school environment and 17.5% by their friends. Similarly, most of the boys indicated that they studied English Language because it was a requirement by the schools. Otherwise given a choice they would opt out. Despite schools making it a

requirement for learners to study English Language at O' level, the school environment had a significant role in developing a positive attitude towards the learning of English Language as a subject. The school environment has to be learner friendly by providing learning resources that support quality education, at the same time providing skilled human resources that have the competencies that facilitate learning across gender. Within this context gender balance among teaching staff has to be a prerogative for all schools.

The study also checked on areas of preference within the components of the English Language. This was made to assess the extent to which areas of preference between boys and girls influenced their performance in English Language. Responses indicated that 35.5% of the boys preferred listening comprehension compared to 19% of the girls. For boys listening comprehension did not involve much. Only 20% of the boys against 37% girls favoured the reading and writing comprehension. This can be attributed to the methods teachers use when teaching. O'Bannon [5] advises that English skills have to be introduced to learners in stages if teaching is to achieve the desired results. The senior secondary school syllabus gives areas to be taught and the stages to be followed. Stages in teaching contribute to pupils attitudes. As such boys tend to enjoy the listening comprehension as it has few hustles for them. Reading comprehension which requires inference is favoured by a few boys. Few girls find reading comprehension difficult as compared to 26% of the boys. When it came to compositions 40% of the boys preferred them compared to 58% of the girls. It can therefore be observed that when it came to preferences in English Language components, the girls' preferences were higher than the boys' preferences. Such preferences were most likely to influence the performance of learners in many respects.

TEACHERS' ATTITUDE

From the responses gathered from questionnaires and observations, the teachers' attitudes also contribute to the poor performance of boys in English language. Such attitudes can be seen through ill preparedness of lessons, absenteeism, and coming late for lessons. An English language specialist linked the poor performance by boys to lack of adequate preparation by teachers. One teacher noted that most English teachers do not adequately prepare for lessons because they are occupied with other personal business. Such behaviour by teachers was attributed to low wages, large classes and low morale in schools due to poor working conditions. On class size some teachers indicated that they at times handled classes with more than 60 learners. This tended to negatively impact on their attitude and morale.

Responses from learners showed that some teachers provided written work and attended lessons frequently while others did the opposite. Some teachers as noted by learners did not provide adequate work, while others absented themselves from lessons. Such practices affected the performance of learners in English language. In response to the frequency of attendance of lessons and providing written work by teachers, 12.5% of the learners indicated that teachers very often gave written work, 33.3% noted that teachers often attended lessons and gave written work, 54.2% of the learners said that teachers rarely attended lessons and rarely provided written work for them. The responses by learners appeared to concur with an evaluation conducted by the World Bank [14] which observed that teacher absenteeism at secondary level in Zimbabwe was about 13 percent of teachers in a particular month.

CONCLUSIONS

The study came up with the following conclusions:

- ❖ That the traditional methods used in the teaching of English Language did not promote learner participation and most boys found them boring;
- ❖ The verbal medium used to communicate instruction tended to favour the girl learner since girls excel in verbal tasks;
- ❖ Gender stereotype has contributed to boys developing a negative attitude towards English Language, since culture promotes physical activity and mechanical tasks among boys;
- ❖ Teachers' attitudes towards their work had an influence on the learners' attitudes and performance. As such some teachers had a negative attitude towards their work as characterized by absenteeism; lack of preparedness; and not providing learners with adequate written work;
- ❖ The gender imbalance between male and female teachers which was in favour of female teachers tended to disadvantage the boy learner much more than the girl learner;
- ❖ Lack of a reading culture and lack of technology have affected boys much more than girls;
- ❖ Lack of resources and limited learning time had affected the performance of boys much more than girls;
- ❖ Lack of supervision had negatively affected the performance of teachers and learners; and
- ❖ Large class sizes have negatively impacted on the attitude and morale of teachers which have a bearing on the performance of learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above conclusions the study makes the following recommendations:

- ❖ There is need to move away from the traditional methods which are teacher-centred to the use of

modern technology which promote learner participation. This can be done through the use of computer assisted instruction in the teaching of English Language. There is need for staff development;

- ❖ There is need for a collective effort between the community and schools in order to improve the teaching and learning resources in schools;
- ❖ English Language examinations have to be guided by different facets of language so that learners are tested on aspects that promote language development;
- ❖ There should be a gender balance in the distribution of teachers; and
- ❖ There is need for constant supervision of teachers and learners. At school level such supervision should be done by the heads of departments, deputy school heads and school heads.
- ❖ There is need to reduce class sizes.

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