

ELT Research Papers 17.01

An investigation into improved primary school English language learning in the traditional classroom: pupils explain what children and teachers can do to make progress

An Egyptian case study

Eleanore Hargreaves, Mohamed Mahgoub and Dalia Elhawary



978-0-86355-850-4

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10 Spring Gardens
London SW1A 2BN, UK

www.britishcouncil.org

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Abstract

This research set out to investigate the active voices of primary pupils in the government schools of a developing country (Egypt). Despite their traditional background in the classroom, the children had valuable insights about the classroom and how to improve it to enhance the learning of English.

The pupils in this study described learning two Englishes: the bookish English of the classroom, leading to university; and the spoken, evolving English which pupils acquired mainly at home and through the internet. Pupils desired to achieve both of these Englishes in order to belong to the 'imagined community' of global English speakers who both spoke conversational English and had the high status associated with bookish English (Norton and Kamal, 2003). These Englishes seemed to represent the two cultures referred to by Holliday (1994) as collectionist on the one hand and integrationist on the other.

Pupils believed that the teacher who helped their learning of both Englishes was the patient teacher who supported them, rather than punished them. As barriers to learning, pupils conveyed that teachers' harsh words and their tendency to beat pupils made pupils afraid, upset, angry and unable to learn fruitfully. Pupils blamed themselves and their peers for not behaving well or studying hard.

Pupils suggested that teachers should use more visual and audio stimuli in the classroom, including digital resources where native speakers could be heard. Teachers should support pupils to practise English together in pairs and groups. This way, the two Englishes would be supported more equally.

1

Introduction

If I say my opinion frankly and express my feelings this will pay back. It will be good for my children in the future. If we do not give our opinions, how will things improve? If teachers go on hitting pupils, how will pupils learn? How will they grow and learn to express themselves? The coming generation will not be good. How will teachers and other professions learn if we do not give our opinion? This is important. (participant pupil Carmen)

The value of listening to children's voices in this research

This paper describes a project in which three researchers – two Egyptian and one English – drew on the active voices of 394 ten year old Egyptian pupils about how they experienced learning and teaching during English lessons at school. We asked them what suggestions they had for improving these. We also asked their teachers to comment on these suggestions. This paper describes what the pupils recommended, recognising that, as pupils, they were in an exceptionally good position to judge. By asking pupils to activate their own voices in this research, we were encouraging them to move from being spectators to actors; followers of prescriptions to makers of choices; from silent to vocal participants (Freire 1972: 25).

The need to explore this topic arose from the depressing fact that, despite the legal provision of English language teaching for all Egyptian children, not all primary-aged children have gained English language mastery. The observations of our team as well as the few research studies available, suggested that many school teachers focused on written English skills rather than on English for communicative purposes. There was thereby a very restricted use of interactive/active learning approaches. In addition, there tended to be very little, if any, differentiation in teaching as teachers use the 'one size fits all' approach, taking little account of pupils' individual needs, feelings and backgrounds. The outcome has been that limited English is taught in government primary schools and limited English learned by pupils. These factors are potentially the start of a downward spiral which mitigates against pupils' personal development and Egypt's national development. The uncertain status of Egypt since the revolution of 2011 means that young people in

Egypt today, who comprise half of the 91 million in the population, urgently need the language skills – and the active voices – to lead Egypt towards the internationally respected status envisaged by the children in this study (OECD/World Bank Review Team, 2014).

Research design

The research question for this study was: *How do girls and boys experience the traditional classroom and what suggestions do they and their teachers express for making improvements to English language learning?* The aim was to elicit and understand in depth how primary school pupils perceived their experiences of learning in government schools in a developing country, in this case, Egypt. Our methodology was interpretivist whereby we valued and explored the interpretations and meanings expressed in individual pupils' narratives. We were not looking for generalisable patterns although our findings are of very widespread interest to educators both within Egypt and in the many other countries where pupils' active voices in learning tend to be overlooked.

We used four data collection methods in the two stages of the research:

First stage: November 2015

1. Observation of 18 lessons, including English lessons in three schools.
2. Written responses of 393 pupils in these lessons to sentence-starters.

Second stage: April 2016

3. Individual interviews with 38 pupils.
4. Focus groups with English teachers in each school.

We gained access in Alexandria, Egypt, to three government-funded primary schools of three different types: one Islamic school; one 'official language' school; and one 'mainstream' school. All three schools were in areas of relative poverty. The first two schools charged minimal fees (£30–£80 per year) while the mainstream school was free of charge. The official language and mainstream schools accommodated class sizes of around 70 pupils, while the Islamic school had smaller classes.

Altogether we had the following participants:

Participants:	
Islamic school	88 pupils (27 boys; 61 girls)
Official language school	196 pupils (92 boys; 104 girls)
Mainstream school	110 pupils (61 boys; 49 girls)
Total pupils	394 pupils
Girls	214
Boys	180

However, one girl declined to complete the sentences so the total number of sentence-starter tasks completed was 393.

Observation

In each school, we observed three classes of Year 5 pupils (aged 9–11 years). To familiarise the pupils with ourselves, we firstly observed each research class during a lesson in a subject other than English. The three of us next observed and made field notes about an English lesson for each class. After each observation, the three of us compared our observations and collated our notes.

Sentence-starters

After the observed English lesson, the three of us worked together to present sentence-starters to pupils. We took time to explain to pupils in detail what the purpose of the research was and what we would do with the findings. We also answered their questions about the purpose of the research, its stages and expected impact. We explained that pupils' individual names would never be revealed in any publication of findings (pseudonyms are therefore used for pupils and teachers in our published writing, below, without reference to their schools). We gained the pupils' face-to-face consent before carrying out any activities with them. We also gained the teachers' and principal teachers' written consent. This research, both in its theoretical design and fieldwork, therefore adhered to the BSA ethical guidelines (2002).

In every classroom, as children completed the sentences, the two Egyptian researchers in our team went around the class giving support where necessary, but without putting any answers into pupils' minds. The sentence-starters explored pupils' views on what pupils did in English classes that benefited them most and least, which kind of teacher helped them learn best, why they wanted to learn English and how they felt about being included in this research. The responses to sentence-starters were immediately translated and checked by our two Arabic-speaking team members.

Individual interviews

We selected 38 interviewees by reading through the sentence-completions and selecting those who appeared to be most engaged with the topic of research. We were careful to select both those who could write well and those who could not, as well as those who were outspoken and those who were withdrawn, in order to get a good range of perspectives. We presented the list of names of the pupils we wished to interview to the school principal when we arrived at each school in April 2016. We asked each school to provide us with a quiet, private room in which to carry out the interviews where possible. All the interviews were audio-recorded. Each child gave their specific permission to be interviewed and also to be audio-recorded in every case. Only one pupil declined to be interviewed. Interviews lasted between nine and 51 minutes. Seven girls were interviewed in each school, six boys in two schools, and five boys in the third. We asked the children about their aspirations, their experiences of learning English and their recommendations for change.

Teacher focus groups

We led focus groups with all primary English teachers in each school:

Focus groups	
Islamic school	one hour 53 minutes; nine teachers
Official language school	one hour 30 minutes; six teachers
Mainstream school	one hour; four teachers

The aim of the focus group was to hear the perspectives of the teachers about pupils' responses to the sentence-starters. In each focus group, we presented one pupil sentence-completion at a time. For example, we took the sentence-starter 'the teacher who helps me learn best is...' and we invited the teachers to predict how the pupils would have responded during the sentence-completion exercise. We then fed back to them the actual responses from the pupils across the three schools. Finally, we invited the teachers to reflect on and comment on all the pupil responses and make suggestions.

Analysis

As a team, we analysed responses using inductive approaches whereby we tried not to impose our own categories on the pupils' (or teachers') responses but rather attempted to let themes emerge. In our presentation of themes that emerged, we have aimed both to indicate dominant trends and to illustrate insightful special cases.

2

Findings

The traditional classroom and the pupils within it

The classrooms we observed were traditional classrooms. By this we mean that the teacher presented the lesson by writing English grammar rules and vocabulary on the board for children to copy down into their exercise books. The teacher then read out what they had written and asked children to chorus in repetition. Occasionally the teacher asked a question to everyone and would select one pupil to answer the question aloud. The pupils therefore mainly sat silently, listened and copied work down into their books. Despite the seemingly passive nature of these lessons, pupils seemed to take the responsibility on themselves to keep up with the lesson.

When we interviewed pupils, we found that these children had very high ambitions for their futures and for the future of their country. For example, in order of popularity, the following careers were aspired to: doctor (n=10), engineer (n=6), footballer (n=3); teacher (n=3) and interior designer (n=2). Police officer, vet, military nurse, translator, architect, military pilot, computer scientist, actor and tourist-guide were also nominated. These aspirations were spread quite equally across the three schools. Favourite subjects included English, maths and science, followed by Arabic and Quran, among others.

We were very struck by the children's high ambitions, in particular because they did not reflect their own parents' jobs. For example, ten pupils told us that their mothers were housewives but not a single girl pupil suggested that she would become a housewife. In contrast, there were no parents described as doctors, vets, footballers or interior designers and only two as engineers. Parents' semi-routine or routine work included factory worker, taxi driver and hotel worker. What we noticed, in other words, was that these pupils were seeking social mobility and to improve their future careers over those of their parents. Learning English featured in their responses as one way to make this move.

Pupils had a rich capacity for critical reflection on learning and teaching

Teacher in focus group: *The students have a very good level of awareness. They know what they want and what they need and they are right.*

Like the teacher quoted here, we were very struck by the authority with which the pupils expressed their insights about learning and teaching, especially given that many of them had never been asked to reflect critically on these before. They had keen awareness about which factors affected their own learning processes and how these influenced their achievement. They were also able to separate out learning from teaching, recognising what they themselves could do to learn, in addition to what the teacher could do to help them with this learning. This idea of different pupils' diverse responses to teaching was alien to the dominant discourse of 'one size fits all'.

Pupils felt valued by being asked their views about learning and teaching

Sabreen: *We want to change something and we want our voice to be heard.*

When we arrived at the schools for the interviews, six months after administering the sentence-starter exercise, pupil Riham referred to the sentence-completions she had written previously:

I wrote these lines and hoped someone would hear my voice... When a long time passed, I lost hope. But when the Miss called my name [to be interviewed by you], I got excited... As far as I'm concerned, the majority of pupils want to talk...

Out of 366 pupils' sentence-completions, 243 children described feeling pleased to be asked to contribute to the research (one class did not complete this sentence). For example, Yulia wrote:

I'm very, very joyful as this is the first time someone has come into our classroom and asked me about my opinion. I am REALLY joyful. I am almost flying. I LOVE YOU (heart).

Many of their responses during sentence-completion reflected a genuine appreciation for being consulted. The children found it valuable to express their opinions and feelings without fear of being reprimanded, even if they wrote criticisms (n=106). This suggested that many of them did not always feel able to say what they thought without fear. It was perhaps shocking that some pupils (n=22) wrote that this was the first time they had ever been asked to contribute their ideas. Ossama put this perspective clearly:

I feel (now) that someone appreciates our opinions. Our teachers do not care about our opinions: they just pay us lip service and that's it. Thank you very much! You put a smile on my face (smiley face). I hope you will come again. I feel this is important. You made me feel as though I am unlocking my potential.

Quite a few children (n=45) explained that they were happy to take part in the research because they believed that they could have a good impact on the education system within and beyond their country. Despite being ten years old, they seemed to know and care about these processes. For example, Nermine said:

I feel joyful and happy because I am helping to improve education more and more. This is something that makes me very happy.

Hania wrote:

This is the first time someone has asked me my opinion about something important. This possibly will change education completely.

Their teachers were amazed at this. For example, one teacher during the Focus Group interview exclaimed:

I imagined that the student will feel that they are important as an individual but I did not think that they would have the ambition to change the educational system!

Related to this sense of power to make improvements was the pupils' sense of importance. They seemed to feel valued by being included in this project conducted by universities in Egypt and the UK. Riham expressed her hope that it was indeed serious research. She wrote:

I am full of hope that someone will read it [my response] and know what I need and the way I want to learn. I hope you don't throw my paper away and say it's children's talk. Please take what I say seriously as I am hoping that education will improve.

And Anas hoped he would now be able to advise his teachers: 'I feel wonderful because I will tell teachers how to teach us!'

However, at the same time, Anas's teachers were themselves grateful to have had the chance to talk about their own needs in a non-judgemental situation. For example, teachers felt that our visit indicated:

Someone cares about the teacher, how they teach and what they need. Someone cares to learn about our problems and what we suffer from. It is not the usual thing of people coming to sign a paper and then run away and disappear.

Another teacher requested:

Those who come [to the classroom] must come to support and provide guidelines but not to spot mistakes. They need to understand our context and the challenges we face in school and with pupils.

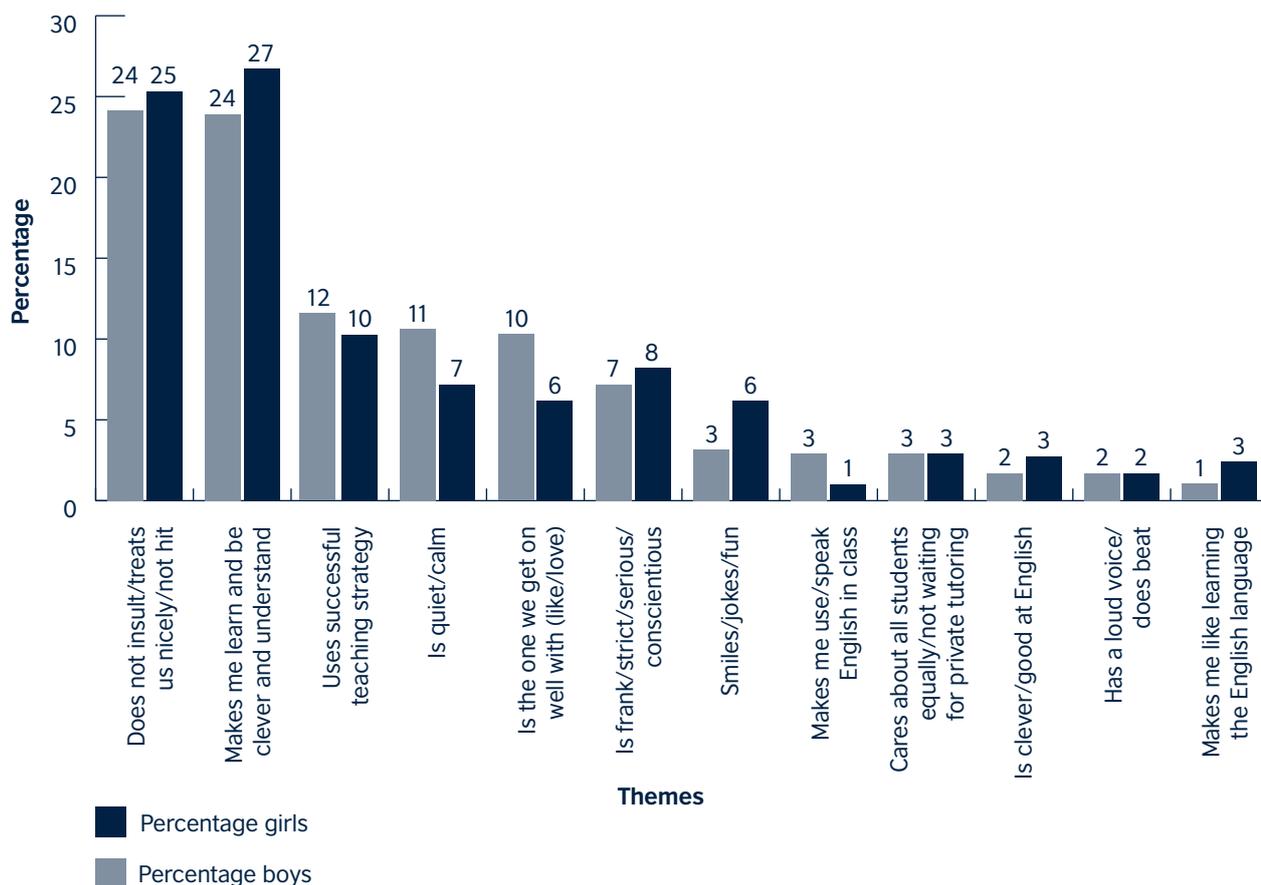
Pupils advised teachers how to improve English learning during lessons

Pupils described the teacher who helps children learn best

As shown on Chart 1, the 393 pupils who completed sentence-starters told us that the teacher who helped children learn best was, in order of importance, the one who:

1. Treated them nicely.
2. Helped pupils to learn and understand.
3. Used particular teaching strategies.
4. Was calm.
5. Had a good rapport with pupils.
6. Was conscientious.
7. Was humorous.
8. Made pupils speak English in the classroom.
9. Did not give preference to pupils who took private lessons with them.
10. Was good at English.
11. Had a loud voice and had good discipline.
12. Made pupils like English.

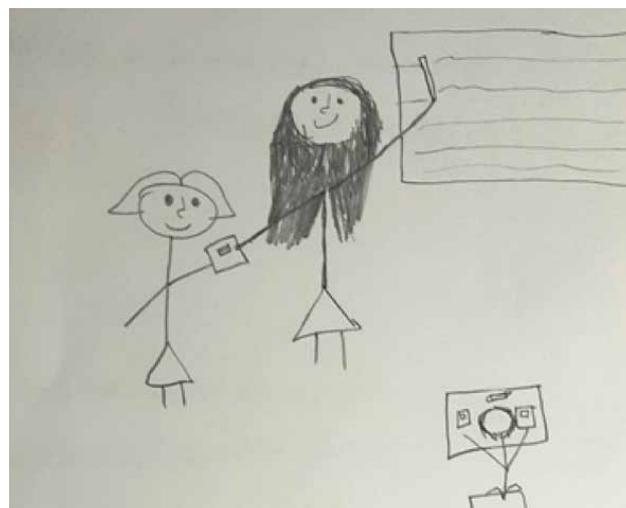
Chart 1: The teacher who helps me learn best...



In this context where the teachers saw their job as to control nearly everything in the classroom, how the teacher administered this control affected pupils' classroom experiences to a great extent. This may have been especially true for pupils who did not have support from home. As Othman reflected: 'If we are afraid of the teacher, we will not be able to understand from them'. Understanding depended on liking the subject: and this meant having a strong rapport with the teacher. In Adel's words:

*We must understand first before we memorise.
But first of all we need to like these things!*

This link between liking a teacher, liking their subject and then doing good learning was made by many of the pupils. As Chart 1 above shows, good rapport was especially important for the girls in the sample. Similarly, one of the teachers in the focus group interview reflected on the findings as follows (perhaps contrasting them with actual practice in the classroom): 'If the pupils love the teacher, it is the most important thing... They will accept the teacher and anything from them. Love is stronger than anything!'



The teacher who had a good rapport with pupils

However, some pupils felt that teachers had a tough job controlling so many pupils and understood why teachers sometimes lost their tempers in class. Teachers also voiced these difficulties and described feeling extremely tired nearly all the time. One teacher explained:

Before I start the lesson, the class must be quiet. I suffer for 15 to 20 minutes to make them silent. They are naughty and violent... By the time they are silent, I am exhausted.

Teachers confessed to losing their temper with the children sometimes because they found it so difficult to communicate in the noisy, crowded classrooms. They seemed to feel sad about this. They conveyed a real love for their pupils and a desire to be able to help them a lot more than they could at present. As one teacher said, 'We are trying and doing our best. We want to be the best country and we wait for more support'.

Pupils advised that the teacher should teach step by step and re-explain patiently where necessary

The importance of patience in the teacher was underscored by pupils on several occasions. We asked Mahmoud what a 'good' teacher does. He replied:

Whenever there is something we don't understand, she explains carefully.

In particular, when someone made a mistake, pupils found it more helpful if the teacher re-explained the topic rather than shouting at them. In many of the interviews, the children emphasised the need for teachers to 'explain' well, clearly, step by step and to repeat what they said several times to make sure that everyone had grasped it. Hana reflected this common view:

She explains quietly, step by step. She does not shout. She explains in a quiet and gradual manner. She does not get irritable easily. She repeats her explanation when someone has a problem understanding. When a student tells her that they do not understand something, she does not insult them or call them names... She explains again instead.

Pupils thought that teachers should also check who had grasped something and who had not. If a first explanation did not work, then teachers should try explaining in a different way. Hani advised: 'Teachers shouldn't leave the classroom until we fully understand'. During the teacher focus group interview, one teacher commented on the fact that teachers no longer had time to check pupils' understanding during class due to the large amount of material they had to cover. This teacher talked about not being able to fulfil his actual duty and responsibility:

The supervisor will come and check that I have finished the written work and that I have covered the assigned lessons. These are the things that come first before my actual duty and responsibility towards the pupils. This is reality!

This teacher's colleague agreed that real learning was not allowed to be a priority:

All the supervisor is looking for is the written document. There is no real interest in checking whether there is real learning taking place or not. This is not important.

The teachers during focus group sessions therefore implied that to be a good teacher, work would need to be done outside of the normal classroom or on top of work done in the normal classroom. A few girl pupils also suggested that, if they were teachers, they would provide struggling students with extra lessons during their free time. Clearly, helping struggling students was not seen by pupils or teachers as the basic job of the teacher, especially in large classes.

Pupils suggested that teachers should use improved audio and visual aids

Hania reflected many other pupils' comments with suggestions, to help pupils speak English better:

Do lots of activities!... Because it builds our confidence. [Then] we won't feel afraid or shy when we speak [English] with anyone...

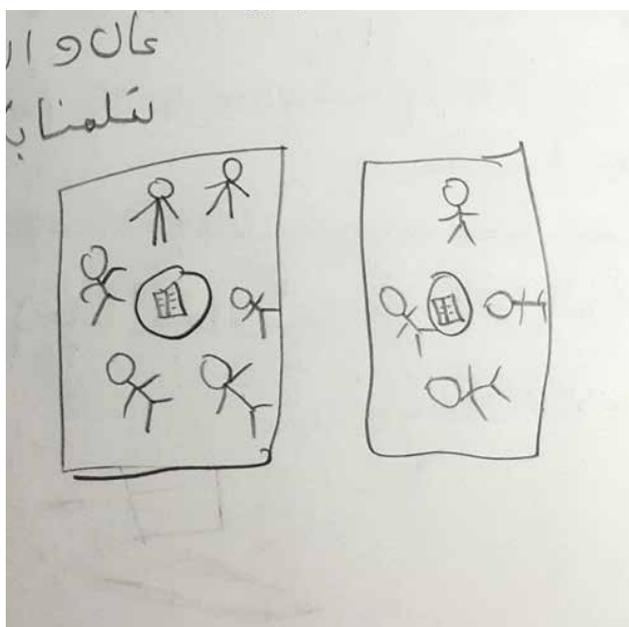
Many of the pupils suggested the use of songs, pictures, posters, games, videos, films, plays, stories and other activities to make pupils love English and so to help them learn better. While many of their suggestions were for including technology (see below), others seemed to be mainly for props to make lessons more colourful and more personally relevant.

Regarding the content of the school English text books, Fareeda, along with several others, felt that it should push students more by including content at a higher level. Adel among others requested more questions in the text book while his colleague Yaseen and others required more pictures and colour and more translations. Riham wanted the textbook *Time for English* replaced with a 'modern' textbook. All these views were reflected by the teachers during the focus group interviews who told us that they also found the materials they had to use too long and not very interesting.

Pupils recommended some forms of collaborative peer learning

Reem: *We are young. When we speak in pairs, we are very happy.*

It was noticeable from our observations that almost no peer learning seemed to be occurring inside English classes. Occasionally two pupils would be invited to take two parts in reading a dialogue but that seemed to be the extent of peer interaction. When we asked about peer collaboration, it seemed to be hard for some children to conceive of learning with – or even from – other students in class. Several of them said they preferred to work alone and have the teacher correct their mistakes. Moussa summed this view up: ‘We prefer teacher’s corrections more as we are used to it and the teacher knows better... it is the teacher’s work’.



Some possible peer learning arrangements

However, among those who could think ‘outside the box’, several pupils underscored the need for good relationships in the classroom in order for collaborative work to be successful. Samia told us she had helped a boy in her class through pair work and had then been teased: ‘There was talking: she is in love and he is in love’. In the end, Samia told us:

I stood in class and repeated what the others had said – in front of everyone – and told the teacher that this was not acceptable.

Indeed, there were several girls who mentioned being teased or laughed at by boys in class. On the other hand, some pupils mentioned that teachers had addressed this issue directly. For example, Mahmoud said, ‘All the teachers told us [to treat each other well]. The English teacher made us work together and help each other’.

However, when talking about learning with a partner, many pupils envisaged the peer’s job as correcting their English rather than practising it and they therefore suggested pairing so-called ‘strong’ with ‘weak’. Ossama told us that he preferred to work with ‘clever’ peers because ‘sometimes my peers don’t know the correct answer’. Hazim suggested: ‘Each two students should sit together and speak to each other. The good pupils can come to the front and speak. They can also help the weak ones’.

However, a handful of children proposed some practical yet more inclusive possibilities for pair work, as *communication among pupils*. Mostafa proposed: ‘I will pair them to ask and answer each other... There are passages they will read and they will form sentences using the words in the passage.’ Donia saw that: ‘When I make a mistake and [peers] correct me, I know that I made a mistake and I will learn from mistakes’. Othman even described sharing tips on how to learn best:

I can ask [my partner] about how they study and how they manage their time... Because we are making the effort to understand, this should make the teacher happy.

Perihan found group work effective:

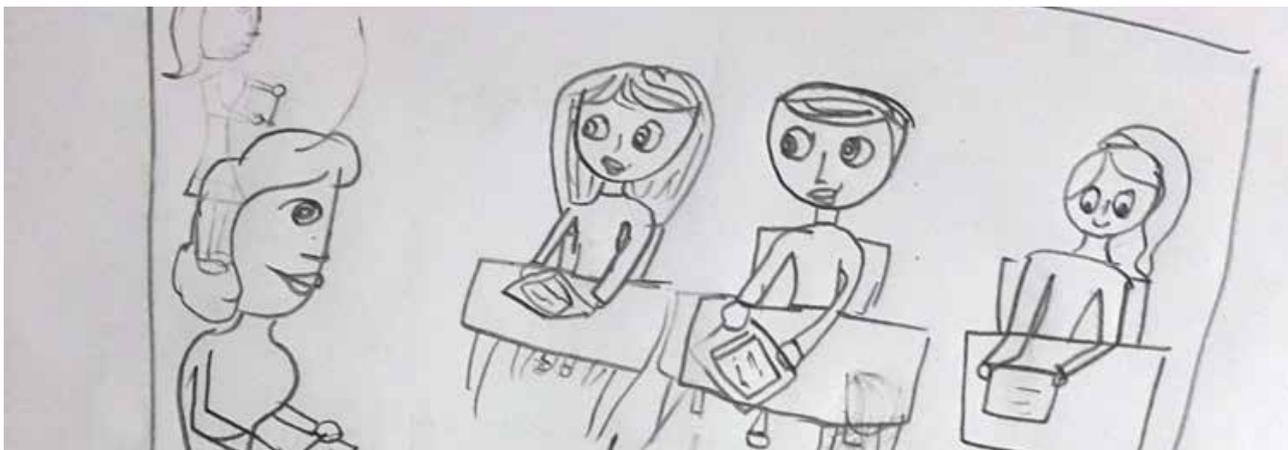
When we are taught in groups, it’s likely we’ll learn better than individually... Yes, they should be in groups, because pupils will get confused if they work alone... My group may not be good so I can help and tell them words they don’t know.

Lobna suggested having (outside class) weekly groups in which teachers and pupils came together just to speak English with each other. Other forms of study groups were mentioned too.

Some pupils suggested that they could learn using the internet, both inside the class and at home

It appeared that the internet was neither widely accessed nor widely used for learning by the pupils in our sample. Not all our interviewees had internet access at home and those who did were not always allowed to use it. There was not necessarily internet (or even electricity) inside school, although one class did describe going to their computer lab on a regular basis. Only a minority of children latched onto the idea of improving English through the internet, and for them, it was usually to learn new words or occasionally to improve pronunciation.

Using digital technology in the classroom



Pupils using tablets in the classroom

A handful of children, however, had some quite innovative ideas about teachers using digital technology to teach English in the classroom. Mostafa and a few others suggested that each pupil should have a tablet (see picture). Lobna, among others, proposed:

I would install a laptop to show them [pupils] how pupils in England talk and provide a tablet so they could see how pupils [in England] learn and a CD to know the pronunciation of words... I want technology... I need a small iPad instead of textbooks because now pupils like iPads not textbooks... If they had iPads, they would communicate with each other.

Reem had some insightful ideas that acknowledged the active voice of the individual learner as they used technology:

Teachers would explain the lesson then ask us to search for a similar topic on YouTube. We would watch it but not memorise it, and then we could write about it on our own.

Merna suggested that pupils would prepare work at home to then share in class:

[We could] use the internet to write our own topics and prepare PowerPoint presentations with pictures and writing. I would access useful sites and chat with my friends [using texting language] and we could use the camera to see each other.

The teachers expressed during focus group interviews their recognition that cartoons, films, tablets and mobile phones could be used in class as one solution to the problem of teaching English to large classes. But they needed support in learning technological skills as well as a guarantee of internet access in the classroom.

Using digital technology at home

It appeared that, in the sense of ‘flipped learning’, the internet could perhaps in the long run replace private lessons and help mediate between school and home learning. Carmen suggested:

We can have the school book on the internet. It will be easy to study and I will like English. It will be better than taking private lessons. I will speak in English... I and my friends can learn together and share things over the internet.

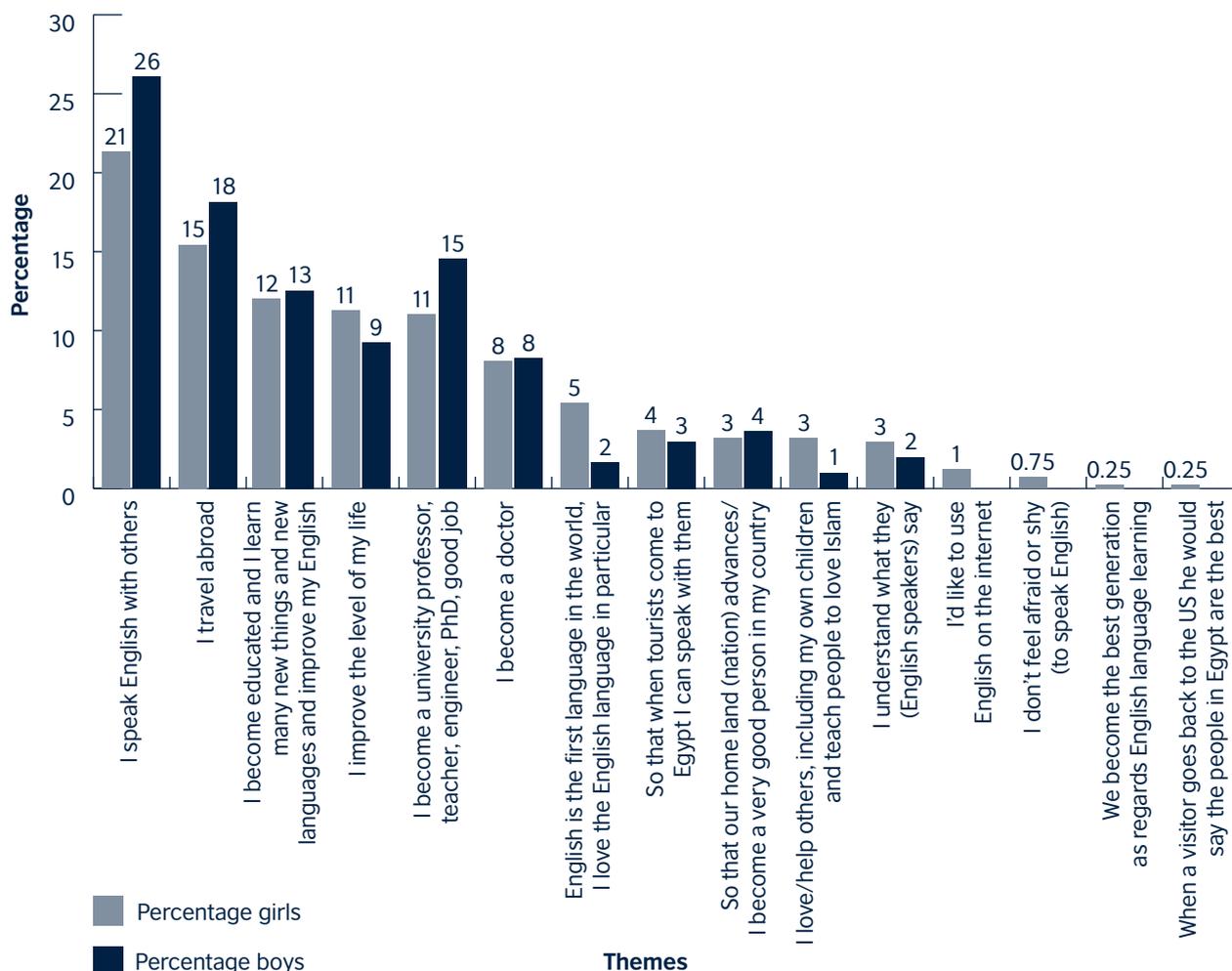
Reem among others noticed that ‘Those who are very good at English watch lots of films and depend on themselves... the more we listen, the more we learn’. Pupils suggested having follow-up CDs and videos which related to school lessons to help consolidate or expand those. Deena added: ‘Using the internet and private lessons will make learning better and we can speak’. In other words, she was suggesting that a range of sources was necessary for good English learning, including speaking. Ossama agreed about using the internet as part of a range of sources:

You shouldn't only depend on the book. When I study at home with my mother, I download videos from YouTube when I don't understand something... This term we studied direct speech which I didn't understand in class. I surfed YouTube and got videos that explained that grammar rule.

Pupils described their attitudes to the English language

Pupils explained why they were learning English

Chart 2: I want to learn English so that...



The following are the reasons given by the 393 pupils in response to the sentence-starter, 'I want to learn English so that...' The themes are presented in order of frequency, starting with the most popular (see Chart 2, above). All the reasons were anticipated by teachers in the focus group interviews who seemed familiar with their pupils' aspirations: to speak English with others, travel abroad, become better educated, improve life status, get a respectable job, become a doctor (specifically), because English is the international language, to speak to tourists, to help the nation, to help other people, to understand what people say in English, to use English on the internet, to gain confidence in using English and to increase the status of the nation among other respected nations.

It is notable that the primary reason for learning English was to speak English, despite the fact that these pupils rarely had opportunities in their lives to speak English, least of all in the classroom. Our analysis, based on the list above, is that this desire to speak English related to the pupils' imagined

community of English speakers who were educated, high status, international people who inhabited 'advanced' countries and were accessible to some extent via the internet. The children's desire, especially boys', was to belong to this imagined community to improve the 'level' or status of their lives. Reem emphasised the urgency she felt for joining the imagined English speaking community:

I know English but I want to know the pronunciation of all words. Actually if you could help me achieve this, I would pray for you night and day... When I travel abroad, I need English to finish deals with business people. They don't speak Arabic and I want to speak English not Arabic so that I could do whatever business I want.

Merna reflected the rather vague notion she had of the community but also her desire to identify fully with it:

I would like to ... travel abroad and to be able to talk to people there and be like one of them. I wish to live abroad... I wish I can be like them and speak English like them.

However, while many pupils recognised that people in the world did not always speak Arabic, a couple of them identified more strongly with the Arabic-speaking community. Anas for example noted, 'Also foreigners don't know how to speak Arabic. Some of them don't like to speak Arabic. I don't like to speak English.'

Pupils described the two Englishes that they had to learn

Teacher in focus group interview: *In real life, when they [pupils] listen to English songs, someone speaking English, they feel that they haven't learned English at all.*

The English that pupils needed in order to belong to an English-speaking community was not clear-cut. Was this the English of school lessons or the English of home conversations? The pupils seemed to experience some tension between these two Englishes. During the classes we observed, we saw no examples of spontaneous or open-ended speaking and yet some pupils told us how they immersed themselves in English speaking at home. During the teachers' focus group interviews, teachers acknowledged that the classroom conception of English learning was different from the English that pupils needed. Teachers perceived that pupils wanted to apply English in their real lives as well as learning school English. The teachers said this when we shared with them that nearly half of the 393 children in the study had said that their aim for learning English was to speak English with others. One teacher noted this tension when he mentioned the real reason for learning English:

Vocabulary and structures are not important for the students. They wish to be able to use English to communicate and not to answer exams.

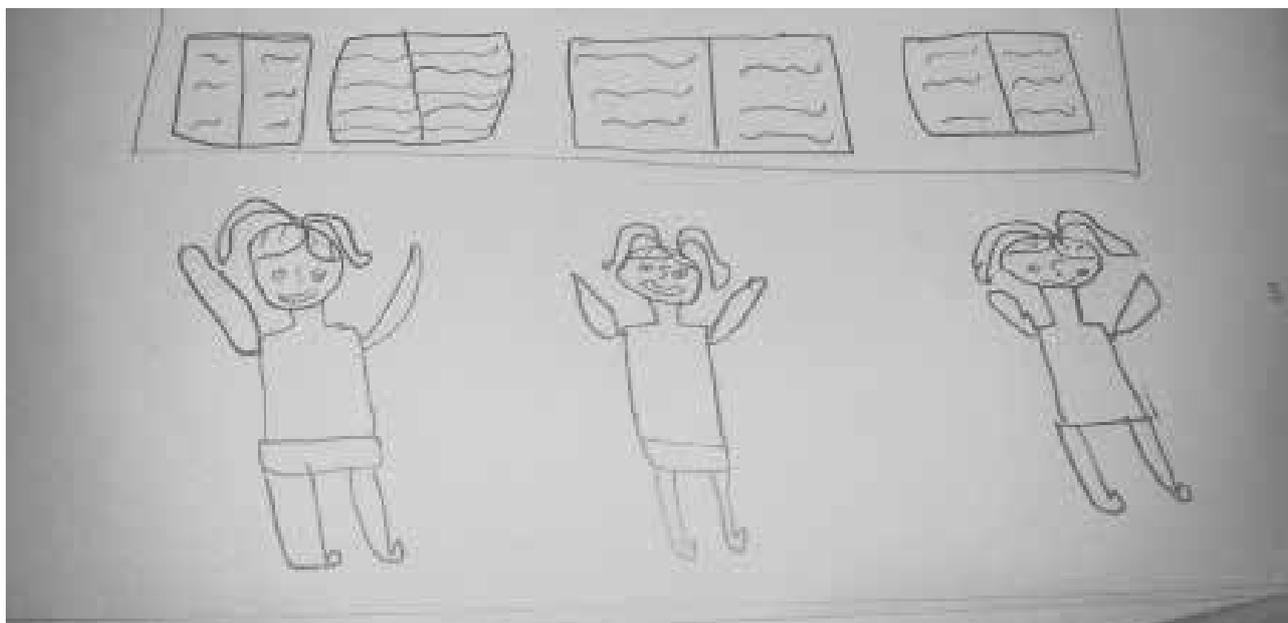
This is their dream! In this way there is a gap between the current curricula and what the students need and the real reason for learning English.

However, the distinction between school and spoken English was not perhaps as clear for the pupils as the teachers perceived. Even those pupils who told us that they wanted to speak English and travel abroad with their English still clung to the classroom versions of formal English at the same time. Some seemed to believe that speaking English would happen naturally once they had studied grammar and vocabulary and got these correct. The children's ongoing focus on the written word was highlighted when we asked children about how they would teach a foreign child Arabic. They almost all mentioned teaching the child A, B, C and teaching them to read vocabulary before allowing the foreign child actually to use the language. For example, Rana believed the following when we asked her advice for a foreign child learning Arabic:

If he [foreign pupil] learns the alphabet, he can form any word... When he learns the alphabet, he can learn words and sentences. I will make him practise saying the words he needs. If he knows the words, he can form the sentences on his own.

Surprisingly, even the internet was seen by many pupils as a source of information rather than an opportunity for practising speaking conversationally and understanding English. For example, Mahmoud explained how, if he were an English teacher with access to tablets, he would:

Ask the pupils to use their tablets to search dictionaries and then ask them to recite what they learned. And give them grades.



Pupils highlighted the written word when considering how language is learned

However, nearly all pupils agreed that the classroom learning of English was not enough, although not all of them saw the need for immersing themselves in speaking as well as writing. Nearly all the pupils emphasised the importance of making the effort to do extra work beyond the classroom, such as practice activities at home, extra homework, and reading English books/stories. Rana explained how: 'When the teacher taught us something, I would immediately go home and study it'. Ossama advised pupils:

They should search the internet and read subjects and not rely only on the school ... you shouldn't depend on the teacher. You should have access to other resources...

It seemed, however, that during the process of building on the teacher's lessons, pupils began to encounter the other English (conversational English) in informal sites, in interaction with YouTube, siblings, parents and tourists. Ossama explained how, when accessing additional resources, he would use such sites:

When I watch Disney Channel and listen to them speaking English all the time, I listen to them and learn new expressions. I mean it helps me to learn good English.

This helped them to improve their formal school learning but also helped them to develop another English, the English of conversation. For example, Yulia gave a vivid picture of learning English by playing games using the English language with her older sister, with the support of YouTube:

We just play a game of characters, animals and birds... We also talk about films. I usually check if she understands me or not and she does the same with me... We get videos from YouTube and talk about them.

Meera explicitly described her perception that the English she observed in English films on television was a different English from school English. When we asked her in interview, 'How could we speak like them [on television]?' she paused, then replied: 'But we can't be like them'. After further pause, she decided that such learning could occur – but not in school classrooms:

Meera: But we could speak like them if we had courses.

MM: Where could we have courses? In schools?

Meera: No!

MM: So where would these courses be taught?

Meera: In institutes ... any place.

Indeed, one teacher in our focus groups was amazed when we showed him our findings, that the pupils

actually found their school English lessons to be of any benefit at all. He commented:

Amazing answers for me! The most amazing thing is that they [the pupils] think that the [school] teacher helps them in learning English. I would have thought that they felt they got help at home. The fact that they benefit from learning in [school] class is good.

While he may have been referring primarily to private lessons at home, he may also have been thinking of the conversational English that was available via more informal sites.

Pupils described barriers to their learning

Pupils described teachers' shouting and physical violence as barriers to learning

Samia: The teacher enters the classroom with a stick and she is shouting all the time... When the student stands up to read, they are liable to make mistakes and of course the teacher will hit them and shout and in this way the teacher makes the student upset.

One of the most common requests from pupils to teachers was to stop shouting, and stop hitting pupils, in order that the learning of English improve. Pupils told us that when the teacher shouted at them or hit them or their peers, it stopped them from learning because they felt 'distracted', 'confused', 'embarrassed', 'upset', 'angry', 'insulted' or 'afraid'. It made them hate their lessons. Being shouted at or beaten was particularly offensive if it happened because they made a mistake or asked a question. Anas reported:

Once I asked [the teacher] a question and he reproached me saying, 'You are stupid, you are dumb.'... In Year 4 one of the [female] teachers slapped me on the face... My dad came and said it was OK. But I didn't find it OK!... Learning stopped.

In interview, many pupils told us that if they were teachers, they would not hit pupils but would be kind and patient with them to help them learn. However, sometimes they went on to say that if a pupil continued to get things wrong, then it might be necessary to hit them. Mahmoud told us that for 'weak' students, 'We give them a chance and if they keep making mistakes we hit them'. In other words, something other than constructivist learning is being attended to here: as clearly being hit does not help people to construct knowledge. Mahmoud perceived this:

If a student does not know the answer... if the teacher shouts at a student, they will be upset. They won't be willing to talk about the drawbacks of the lesson or learn from their mistakes.

Sameer was being kind-hearted when he told us that he would 'forgive' students who made mistakes: but this reinforced the idea that getting something wrong was misbehaviour rather than a process of learning. Perhaps behaviour discipline and learning had become confused, so that a child's misbehaviour had become classed together with their needing support with learning.

Pupils blamed themselves and other pupils for hindering learning

In the classroom where pupils were blamed for making mistakes, and blamed for being 'weak', it was not surprising to find that pupils blamed themselves and other pupils for hindering learning. In some of these large classrooms, it appeared that a destructive atmosphere of social judgement dominated. There was a harshness in how the children conceived of blame for deficits in learning which was in contrast to their otherwise compassionate attitudes. Pupils often blamed themselves and their peers – not the teacher or the difficult conditions – when learning was hampered. For example, out of 393 pupils, 233 suggested that the main barrier to their learning in the classroom was when they themselves made a noise, talked or caused trouble in class. There were 122 pupils who blamed lack of learning on not paying enough attention; which was sometimes the fault of their peers who disturbed them. Deena expressed the common approach that the pupil's primary task was to please the teacher by keeping quiet and it was in this way that understanding could happen rather than through the pupil activating their own voice:

The pupils should be well-behaved in class and shouldn't upset their teacher... If we all sit quietly in class, we will understand.

Carmen commented that it was the students who made the teacher shout; and Merna thought that sometimes it was for the pupil's own good to be beaten by the teacher:

When the teacher punishes the students by hitting them it is because they have done something wrong and they learn that this is wrong.

There was also a stigma attached to being 'weak' which was seen in deficit terms. 'Weak' seemed to indicate some inherent trait that pupils carried around inside themselves rather than being seen as a sign that a child's needs were not being met. Pupils described on several occasions how other pupils would laugh at them if they tried to speak English and especially if they made a mistake.

An exception to this way of thinking was expressed by Samia who seemed to perceive reasons beyond the individual child acting as barriers to learning, and that those reasons needed to be investigated:

[If I were the teacher] I would try to understand why a pupil isn't paying attention, and if the reason is me [as teacher], I will try to see what I can do about it... I need to know what the pupil needs to be changed and I will change it.

Pupils blamed large class sizes for hindering their learning

Donia: *Those who sit at the back tend to disappear.*

Pupils complained that the large number of pupils in class hindered their learning. They generally suggested about 20 pupils as the best number instead of the 30–70 that they experienced. Fareeda was perhaps the most outraged:

Can you believe that in exams pupils stand because there are not enough seats?... The classroom shouldn't be overcrowded. It becomes too hot as we don't have fans ... Also, the teacher can't do anything and can't control all those pupils!

Ossama agreed:

The number of pupils in the class should be fewer. I can't concentrate well because of noise and pupils' chatting ... I can't grasp the lesson.

Pupils in all schools explained how the teacher could not reach individual children because the classroom was packed full of desks. This meant that it was harder for the teacher to introduce interesting activities or even check on pupils' understanding. Reem suggested, as a solution, increasing the number of schools in the governorate. The teachers proposed having teaching assistants in every class.

Pupils blamed unfair treatment by the teacher for hindering their learning

Pupils perceived that teachers gave special privileges to pupils who took private lessons with them. They revealed that some teachers even withheld information in class from those who did not take private lessons with them. Ossama believed:

The Miss should do her best and she shouldn't keep some information for private tutoring. Those who take private tutoring with her ... get higher marks than those who are [otherwise] good.

Samia told us that she confronted the teacher about these injustices, envisaging English language learning as something important in itself and not just for an individual's exam results:

I faced the teacher and told her if she continued to ignore the good pupils... there would be a drop in pupils' learning of English in the whole school.

Some of the children were also aware of inequalities of provision between their government-funded schools and other schools. A couple of pupils believed that, on the contrary, government schools should help compensate for their pupils' poor home lives. Fareeda among others referred to the lucky children in private Egyptian schools and international schools who had 'good learning and nice treatment'. Mostafa even looked longingly at Victoria College, a semi-governmental language school in Alexandria, where there were only 50 pupils in each class.

Some pupils compared Egyptian schools to schools overseas in imagined communities where children were not beaten. Samia felt that the government schools were out of touch with the modern methods used in these overseas schools and Lobna advised local university professors to 'study all the international curricula, American and British, before constructing an Egyptian one'.

3

Conclusion

What teachers and children can do to make progress in the English language classrooms of government primary schools: pupils' explanations

Summary

This research set out to take seriously the active voices of primary pupils in government schools and to understand insights from them about learning and teaching in the classroom. The context was the traditional and over-crowded classroom where the teacher dominated and pupils were expected to keep silent. Despite their traditional background in the classroom, the children we researched with had many valuable insights about the classroom and how to improve it to enhance the learning of English. We also found that they were very eager to make these improvements happen for their own benefit, their children's benefit in the future and their country's status in the world. Furthermore, they felt valued and honoured to be allowed to express their voices in a public domain. They seemed capable of taking action rather than just spectating, of making choices not just following prescriptions and of speaking out rather than remaining silent (Freire, 1972).

Pupils shared with us that the teacher who helped their learning most was the patient teacher who supported them, rather than punished them, when they were struggling. Pupils suggested that teachers should use more interesting resources in lessons, including visual and audio stimuli. They should support pupils to learn how to work in pairs and groups to speak English together and help each other in the classroom. Another way teachers could help pupils more was in using digital technology, either in the classroom or for the homework they set, since this would be both more interesting and would also extend pupils' range of English skills to include speaking and listening as well as reading and writing.

The 394 children who took part in this research told us their aspirations for learning English. The first reasons were to speak English with other people and to use English when they travelled abroad. This was the English of the internet and films and the tourists they met in the street. At the same time, they wanted to learn English to become part of an imagined

international community of high-status English speakers many of whom were doctors, engineers and business people – as the children aspired to be – but who also spoke conversational English fluently (Norton and Kamal, 2003). This meant that the pupils had two Englishes to contend with: on the one hand, the bookish English of school, leading to medical school or the engineering faculty; and on the other hand, the spoken, evolving English of the living native, which pupils acquired mainly at home and through films and the internet.

The children in this study and their teachers recognised that often life in the English lesson at school was not easy. Pupils conveyed that teachers' harsh words and their tendency to beat pupils with sticks or rulers made pupils afraid, upset and angry, and above all, unable to learn fruitfully. In this climate of harshness and blame, pupils also found themselves blaming themselves and their peers for not behaving well enough and not studying hard enough. But both behaving well and studying hard were particularly difficult within the large classes where it was a challenge to move, to breathe freely and to be noticed. Pupils blamed their teachers for giving preferential treatment to some pupils because they paid for private lessons. They also recognised the injustice of the privileges held by pupils in private and international schools in Egypt and schools abroad to which they were denied access.

Discussion of issues

The active voices of ten-year-old pupils in this study expressed wise insights and confident authority. These suggested that the children are ready to take a more active role in their English language classrooms, perhaps marrying some aspects of their current out-of-school English learning into the school classroom. The traditional model of the teacher as the controller of children's bodies and minds has been challenged by these pupils' descriptions of how harsh treatment and long hours of inactivity hamper their capacity to learn and make them 'hate' the English classroom, which has little relevance in their lives. Whether referring to 'bookish' English or conversational English, the classroom culture was not conducive to the nurturing of either.

It was Holliday (1994) who urged his readers that 'learners' may not be the appropriate title for pupils in the classroom because '... there are often other purposes for being in the classroom, amongst which learning may be minor' (1994: 14). This suggestion is borne out by the current research. In this study, teachers differentiated between, on the one hand, situations where *real learning* could happen, where they could carry out their *actual duty and responsibility* towards pupils; and, on the other hand, the school classroom. The school classroom was too crowded, and the syllabus too full and too irrelevant, to consider the school classroom as a good site for learning. Instead it was rather a site for socialising pupils into the culture of academic English learning, handing over certain theoretical rules for English learning and setting the scene for private lessons with some pupils. It was a starting point from which pupils with the initiative or the support could go elsewhere to do the *real learning* which sometimes included conversational English – which the classroom did not. This analysis would explain why pupils felt that teachers did not attend to individual pupils' needs, but rather to pupils as one single unit who all equally needed socialising and initiating into something already defined. This was why pupils felt that teachers did not understand their needs or take time to explain as many times as pupils would have liked. This was simply not how school teachers saw their job today.

The division between pupils' English learning at home – via the internet and films and through children talking with other English speakers – seemed to be separated from the children's English learning at school (and in private lessons) which focused on the reading and writing of silent and inactive pupils. Perhaps this division illustrates another of Holliday's (1994) concepts, based on Bernstein (1971), that two cultures are evident, *collectionism* and *integrationism*. The government school system is traditionally fixed within the collectionist approach which emphasises qualifications and a culturally-revered set of theories. It adheres to a conception of learning as transferring

revered (fixed) knowledge from one generation to another. On the other hand, the approach in '*institutes – any place*' including learning at home, could be seen as integrationist, because the focus was more on *how* to learn than *what* to learn. In more informal sites, English learning processes are evolving and fluid, and content is within the control of the children themselves. Within the integrationist culture, learning is conceptualised as children constructing their own knowledge and their own meanings from this knowledge, using the pedagogies that suit them. The pupils in this sample constructed their own knowledge and their meanings from some informal sites outside the classroom, while continuing to accept prescribed knowledge from inside the classroom. They seemed to negotiate with some confusion the two Englishes that they encountered in the two respective scenarios.

Perhaps the challenge of the current system, as portrayed so vividly by the pupils in this study, is to try to integrate better these two disparate cultures. The pupils' emphasis on how the successful pupil draws on a range of sources for learning could be taken very seriously by schools. The pupils seemed to be telling educators that if the school classroom could incorporate more sources for learning, including more visual and audio stimuli, more pair and group work, more access to native speakers' voices, and most importantly, more patience and less focus on mistakes from adults, then there would be a reduced need for two parallel systems of learning and pupils would not only be happier but would be nearer to achieving their goal of joining the 'imagined' international community of successful English users (Norton and Kamal, 2003). Given the calibre of the pupils' insights in this study and the authority of their comments, and considering the openness and willingness of their current teachers to take their words seriously, the future of English language learning in Egyptian primary education is looking hopeful.

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www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications

ISBN 978-0-86355-850-4

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