

Research Articles

Exploring Pedagogical Strategies in English Language and Literature Classrooms for Empowering Female Learners for Confidence Building

Abstract

This study explored pedagogical strategies in English Language and Literature classrooms for empowering female learners and enhancing their confidence in secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by persistent concerns over low self-confidence, limited classroom participation, and reduced self-expression among female learners despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in education. Specifically, the study examined the pedagogical practices currently employed by teachers, investigated how these practices influence female learners' confidence and participation, identified the sociocultural and institutional factors affecting their engagement, and proposed gender-responsive teaching strategies for improving confidence building. The study was anchored on Intersectionality Theory and adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised female students in selected public and private secondary schools in Delta State. Using a multistage sampling technique involving stratified, simple random, and purposive sampling procedures, 120 Senior Secondary School (SS1–SS3) female students were selected. Data were collected using a researcher-developed 20-item structured questionnaire validated by experts in Language Education and Gender Studies. A pilot study yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82, confirming the instrument's internal consistency. Descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores, were used for data analysis, with a criterion mean of 2.50 for decision making. The findings revealed that while some learner-centred teaching practices were adopted, interactive strategies such as storytelling and group work remained underutilised. Interactive pedagogies significantly enhanced female learners' confidence, participation, and self-expression, although sociocultural expectations, family responsibilities, and institutional practices continued to hinder their engagement. The study concluded that adopting gender-responsive pedagogical strategies and strengthening teachers' capacity in inclusive instructional practices would significantly enhance female learners' confidence, participation, and empowerment in English Language and Literature classrooms in Delta State.

Keywords: Pedagogical strategies; gender equality and empowerment; self-confidence; self-esteem; intersectionality theory

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Introduction

Female empowerment through education is widely recognised as a fundamental strategy for achieving inclusive and sustainable development across the world. Education equips women and girls with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities needed to participate actively in social, economic, and political life, thereby reducing gender inequalities and promoting national development (United Nations, 2015). Across many countries, educational institutions increasingly serve as platforms for nurturing leadership, critical thinking, communication skills, and self-efficacy among female learners, enabling them to challenge discriminatory norms and realise their full potential (UNESCO, 2020). Female empowerment through education is a pivotal driver for sustainable development, social equity, and economic progress (UNESCO, 2020). In Delta State, Nigeria, female learners often grapple with low self-confidence due to entrenched sociocultural barriers, limiting their participation and voice within academic and public spheres (Okeke, Nzewi, & Njoku, 2008). Building confidence through teaching activities in English Language and Literature is essential to breaking these cycles of marginalization and fostering self-expression and leadership among young women.

Language education plays a central role in shaping learners' identities and enhancing their ability to communicate and assert themselves in various contexts (Gee, 2004). English Language and Literature, in particular, offer more than linguistic competence; they serve as mediums through which learners can explore emotions, experiences, and societal issues. Engagement with texts invites learners to reflect, critique, and empathize with diverse characters and situations. For female students, this reflective and expressive capacity becomes a powerful tool for self-affirmation and intellectual liberation (Obasi & Asodike, 2014). However, many classroom environments fail to tap into this potential, often emphasizing mechanical comprehension and examination skills over personal engagement and critical dialogue (Murphy, Greene, Firetto., Hendrick, Li, Montalbano, & Wei, 2018).

This gap in pedagogical practice contributes to a broader problem where female learners are either silenced or underrepresented in classroom discourse. In mixed-gender learning environments, boys are often given more opportunities to speak, challenge ideas, and receive feedback, while girls are subtly encouraged to remain compliant and quiet (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). The pressure to conform, combined with fear of making mistakes or being judged, further undermines female students' willingness to participate. In Delta State, traditional gender roles may also prevent girls from fully engaging in class, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and self-doubt (Okeke, & Okeke, 2018).

While various existing studies such as Cummins, (2009) and Morrell (2005) tend to explore either general literacy outcomes or sociolinguistic challenges without delving into how literature and language instruction can become tools for transformative learning experiences for girls. The intersection of gender, pedagogy, and literary engagement remains underexplored, especially in relation to non-Western educational contexts where gender norms are particularly rigid (Albrecht, 2025).

Emerging research suggests that when girls are exposed to inclusive teaching methods such as collaborative learning, storytelling, reflective writing, and interpretive reading they tend to develop stronger self-efficacy and emotional intelligence (Bandura, 2006; Wang, & Wang, 2022). Literature featuring strong female protagonists or narratives that challenge patriarchal norms can enable learners to relate to and reimagine their own lives with confidence and agency (Kumar, & Daves, 2024). Additionally, learner-centered approaches that validate students' perspectives encourage

female learners to see their voices as worthy of attention, thereby promoting both academic success and personal growth (Hall, 2011).

Despite this evidence, many education systems remain slow to integrate such practices into their curricula or teacher training programs. Classroom practices often remain exam-driven, text-centric, focusing on surface-level literary analysis while ignoring the deeper personal and social dimensions of engagement with literature (Ubahakwe, 1982). Moreover, pedagogical frameworks such as feminist pedagogy, dialogic teaching, and culturally responsive instruction although proven effective are rarely adopted as mainstream strategies in English language education (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Hooks, 1994). This study explores pedagogical strategies that can empower female learners through English Language and Literature, with a particular focus on confidence building in Delta State. It aims to identify effective classroom practices, assess how teacher-student interactions impact female learners' self-perception, and provide practical recommendations for fostering empowerment in educational settings.

Statement of Problem

Despite sustained efforts to promote gender equality in education, many female learners continue to experience low self-confidence, limited classroom participation, and reduced academic self-efficacy. Although English Language and Literature have the potential to promote communication, critical thinking, creativity, and self-expression, these benefits are often undermined by teacher-centred approaches that prioritize rote learning and examination preparation over active learner engagement. In Delta State, Nigeria, this challenge is compounded by sociocultural expectations that discourage female learners from expressing their views confidently in academic settings. Furthermore, English functions as both a colonial legacy and a language of social mobility, yet many learners engage with literary texts that are disconnected from their lived experiences (Mustapha, 2013). The predominance of Western canonical texts and teachers' limited capacity to facilitate learner-centred discussions further constrain opportunities for confidence building and identity development (Omojemite, 2024). Although previous studies have examined female empowerment and gender disparities in education, limited attention has been given to how teaching activities in English Language and Literature can intentionally enhance the confidence of female learners in Delta State. Similarly, insufficient emphasis has been placed on gender-responsive pedagogical strategies that encourage self-expression, critical dialogue, and inclusive classroom participation (Obasi & Asodike, 2014). This gap necessitates the present study.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives were formulated for this study:

- To examine the current pedagogical practices used in teaching English Language and Literature in selected secondary schools in Delta State.
- To investigate how these pedagogical practices affect female learners' confidence, participation, and self-expression in English classrooms.
- To identify the sociocultural and institutional factors that influence the engagement of female learners in English Language and Literature.

- To propose gender-responsive teaching strategies that can enhance confidence building and empowerment among female learners through the English curriculum.

Literature Review

The empowerment of female learners through English Language and Literature education has been the subject of extensive research, focusing on pedagogical strategies that enhance confidence and participation. Effective pedagogical strategies are crucial for engaging learners and fostering an environment conducive to language acquisition. Approaches such as peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) have demonstrated efficacy in supporting English learners by promoting collaborative learning and increasing academic achievement (Calhoun et al., 2005; Sáenz et al., 2005). Additionally, modeling strategies, where instructors provide clear examples of learning tasks, have been identified as particularly beneficial for English learners, aiding in comprehension and skill acquisition (Witt & Soet, 2020). These strategies underscore the importance of interactive and supportive teaching methods in language education.

Empowering female learners in the educational sphere involves addressing gender-specific challenges and promoting inclusive practices. Research indicates that gender-responsive pedagogy, which actively engages both girls and boys while combating gender stereotypes, plays a significant role in enhancing girls' learning experiences (Unterhalter et al., 2016). In the context of English Language Arts (ELA), incorporating female voices and perspectives into the curriculum has been shown to encourage critical conversations and contribute to educational improvements that benefit women and promote multicultural understanding (Ruth & Edward, 2022). Such inclusive curricula not only validate the experiences of female students but also foster a more equitable learning environment.

Confidence is a pivotal factor in the successful acquisition of language skills. A systematic review by Narzillayevna, (2024) highlights that learner with high self-confidence are more likely to excel in second language acquisition, demonstrating better pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Furthermore, creating a welcoming classroom environment is essential for building the confidence of English language learners, as it enhances their comfort level and encourages active participation (Ali, Masroor, & Khan, 2020). Specific strategies, such as providing opportunities for learners to succeed and offering constructive feedback, have been recommended to improve the self-esteem and facilitate language learning.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a framework to understand how multiple social identities such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity interact to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. At the heart of Intersectionality Theory is the idea that individuals do not experience life through a single identity category such as gender or race, but through a combination of intersecting identities that collectively shape their everyday experiences. A female student, for instance, is not affected by her gender alone, but also by other factors such as her socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or geographic location. These overlapping identities do not act independently but interact to influence how she is perceived and treated within society and

institutions like schools.

Another central tenet of intersectionality is the recognition that social inequalities are sustained by interconnected systems of power, such as patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and classism. These systems do not operate in silos but reinforce one another, often intensifying the disadvantages experienced by marginalized individuals. For female learners in Delta State, Nigeria, the intersection of gender and cultural expectations, alongside institutional biases in schools, can produce compounded challenges. For example, a girl may experience limited classroom participation not only because of patriarchal attitudes but also because of systemic under representation of her ethnic group in educational leadership or curriculum content.

Intersectionality is also grounded in the understanding that the impact of intersecting identities is shaped by specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The barriers faced by a female learner in an urban school might differ from those in a rural setting, even if both are exposed to similar gender norms. This context-specific lens allows for a nuanced analysis of how inequalities manifest differently across regions, communities, or institutions. It underscores the importance of localized research and interventions that are sensitive to the unique circumstances affecting different groups of girls.

Intersectionality Theory provides a robust theoretical framework for this study, which explores pedagogical strategies for empowering female learners and building their confidence through English Language and Literature in Delta State, Nigeria. The relevance of this framework lies in the fact that female learners in this context do not experience educational challenges solely due to their gender; rather, their experiences are shaped by a confluence of other factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, family responsibilities, regional educational disparities, and institutional gender dynamics.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate pedagogical strategies for empowering female learners and building their confidence through English Language and Literature in secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. The survey design was chosen for its effectiveness in capturing the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of participants regarding teaching practices, gender responsiveness, and student engagement. This approach allowed the researcher to collect data from a broad sample, analyze trends, and draw conclusions that reflect the prevailing realities within the school system.

The population of the study comprised female students in selected public and private secondary schools across urban and rural areas in Delta State. Using a multistage sampling technique, schools were first stratified based on location (urban/rural) and ownership (public/private). Thereafter, simple random sampling was used to select six schools, and purposive sampling was employed to select female students in Senior Secondary School classes (SS1–SS3) who had experienced at least two years of English Language and Literature instruction. A total of 120 female students participated in the study, ensuring adequate representation across different backgrounds and learning contexts.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher based on the study's four research objectives. The questionnaire comprised 20 items, organized into four sections, each addressing a specific objective. A 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly

Disagree) was used to measure responses. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in language education and gender studies to ensure its relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. A pilot study was conducted in a similar but separate location within the state, and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was found to be 0.82, indicating good internal consistency.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores, to determine the level of agreement with each item. A decision rule was established such that any item with a mean score of 2.50 and above was considered "Agree," while items below 2.50 were interpreted as "Disagree." The results were presented in frequency tables and interpreted according to the research objectives. This method facilitated a clear understanding of prevailing pedagogical practices, their impact on female learners' confidence and participation, as well as the sociocultural and institutional dynamics influencing gender equity in English classrooms.

Discussion of Findings

Research Objective 1: To examine the current pedagogical practices used in teaching English Language and Literature in selected secondary schools in Delta State.

S/N	Item	X	Decision
1	My English teacher uses student-centered teaching methods in class.	2.6	Agree
2	Teachers encourage class discussions during English and Literature lessons.	2.5	Agree
3	Teachers often use storytelling or drama to explain literature texts.	2.4	Disagree
4	The use of group work is a regular part of English and Literature lessons.	2.3	Disagree
5	Teachers integrate real-life examples into the teaching of English Language and Literature.	2.6	Agree

Pedagogical practices in teaching English Language and Literature in selected secondary schools in Delta State revealed mixed responses. Respondents agreed that teachers employ student-centered methods ($M = 2.6$), encourage class discussions ($M = 2.5$), and integrate real-life examples into lessons ($M = 2.6$). However, they expressed concerns about the limited use of storytelling or drama ($M = 2.4$) and group work ($M = 2.3$). These inconsistencies suggest that while efforts are being

made to adopt interactive pedagogies, essential strategies that promote collaboration and creativity remain underutilized, indicating a need for more comprehensive teacher training in diverse, learner-centered instructional methods.

Research Objective 2: To investigate how these pedagogical practices affect female learners' confidence, participation, and self-expression in English classrooms.

S/N	Item	X	Decision
1	I feel more confident to speak in English class when the teacher uses interactive methods.	2.8	Agree
2	Teaching strategies used in class make me feel valued and heard.	2.5	Agree
3	I am more likely to participate in class when English lessons include activities like debates or plays.	2.7	Agree
4	I can express my thoughts better in English when given enough time and guidance.	3.0	Agree
5	The way English is taught helps me build my confidence in using the English language.	2.6	Agree

The impact of pedagogical practices on female learners' confidence, participation, and self-expression in English classrooms was viewed positively. Respondents agreed that interactive teaching methods increased their confidence to speak ($M = 2.8$) and that activities like debates and plays enhanced participation ($M = 2.7$). They also felt better able to express themselves when given time and guidance ($M = 3.0$), and recognized that current teaching strategies helped them feel valued ($M = 2.5$) and built their language confidence ($M = 2.6$). These findings highlight the importance of inclusive and engaging pedagogies in promoting active involvement and self-assurance among female learners in English classrooms.

Research Objective 3: To identify the sociocultural and institutional factors that influence the engagement of female learners in English Language and Literature.

S/N	Item	X	Decision
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1	Cultural beliefs sometimes discourage girls from actively participating in English classes.	3.0	Agree
2	Family responsibilities limit my time and focus for learning English.	2.8	Agree
3	The school encourages equal participation of male and female students in English classes.	2.5	Agree
4	Teachers give female students fewer opportunities to speak in English classes.	2.9	Agree
5	Lack of female role models in English and Literature affects girls' interest in the subject.	2.5	Agree

Sociocultural and institutional factors influencing the engagement of female learners in English Language and Literature were broadly acknowledged by respondents. They agreed that cultural beliefs discourage girls' active participation ($M = 3.0$), and that family responsibilities hinder their focus and time for learning ($M = 2.8$). Although schools were perceived to encourage gender-inclusive participation ($M = 2.5$), there was concern that teachers give female students fewer opportunities to speak in class ($M = 2.9$). The absence of female role models in the subject was also noted as a limiting factor ($M = 2.5$). These responses underscore the need for targeted interventions that address cultural norms, institutional biases, and role modeling to enhance female learners' engagement in English education.

Research Objective 4: To propose gender-responsive teaching strategies that can enhance confidence building and empowerment among female learners through the English curriculum.

S/N	Item	X	Decision
1	Teachers should use more examples of successful women in Literature to inspire female learners.	3.0	Agree

2	Including more female-centered themes in English lessons can make girls feel more included.	2.8	Agree
3	Teachers should provide equal chances for girls and boys to speak and lead class activities.	3.2	Agree
4	Encouraging girls to write personal stories in English can help build their confidence.	2.9	Agree
5	English teachers should receive training on gender-sensitive teaching methods.	3.2	Agree

Gender-responsive teaching strategies aimed at enhancing confidence and empowerment among female learners received strong support from respondents. There was agreement on the need for teachers to provide equal opportunities for girls and boys to participate and lead in class activities ($M = 3.2$), and for teachers to undergo training on gender-sensitive instructional methods ($M = 3.2$). Participants also endorsed the inclusion of successful female figures in literature ($M = 3.0$), female-centered themes in lessons ($M = 2.8$), and opportunities for girls to express themselves through personal storytelling ($M = 2.9$). These responses highlight a clear demand for pedagogical reforms that actively support the inclusion, visibility, and confidence-building of female learners in English classrooms.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore pedagogical strategies that empower female learners and build their confidence through the learning of English Language and Literature in selected secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that while there is some adoption of student-centered and interactive teaching methods, certain essential practices—such as storytelling, group work, and gender-sensitive content—remain underutilized. These gaps hinder the full engagement and empowerment of female students.

Furthermore, the study established that the pedagogical methods employed have a significant impact on female learners' confidence, participation, and self-expression in English classrooms. When teaching approaches are inclusive and interactive, girls are more likely to feel confident, valued, and capable of using the language. However, sociocultural and institutional challenges such as cultural norms, family responsibilities, unequal classroom participation, and a lack of female role models continue to affect the active engagement of female learners.

Finally, respondents strongly supported the need for gender-responsive strategies that would promote female inclusion, visibility, and empowerment in English Language and Literature. These strategies

include the use of female-centered themes, role models, equitable class participation, and professional development for teachers in gender-sensitive teaching.

Recommendations

This study recommends that:

- Schools and education authorities should organize regular training workshops on gender-responsive pedagogy to equip teachers with the skills needed to foster inclusive and empowering classrooms for female learners.
- The English Language and Literature curriculum should be revised to incorporate more female-centered content and texts that reflect the experiences and aspirations of girls, alongside stories of successful women.
- Teachers should deliberately ensure balanced classroom participation by providing equal opportunities for male and female students to speak, lead activities, and express their thoughts.
- Schools should encourage the integration of group work, drama, debates, and storytelling into the teaching of English, as these methods have been shown to increase female learners' confidence and engagement.
- Stakeholders including parents, school management, and community leaders should work collaboratively to address cultural and family norms that limit girls' educational participation, especially in language-rich subjects like English.
- Schools should create platforms where girls can interact with female professionals, writers, and educators who can serve as role models, inspiring them to pursue excellence in English Language and Literature.

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