

Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks Used at the Secondary Level

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Abstract: Among the most effective tools for the socialization of teenagers, textbooks have a significant effect, which is especially strong in the case of English language textbooks due to the role played by English as a language of education and exam testing worldwide. This paper presents an overview and analysis of existing research into gender representations in English language textbooks aimed at secondary school children. Based on studies conducted in South Asia, the Middle East, East Asia, and Africa, the paper analyses how male and female characters are presented in terms of their frequency, firstness, occupation, personality traits, and language use (such as generic masculine pronoun usage). The results of the review reveal that despite the critiques raised during several decades starting from the 1980s' content analysis studies, secondary English language textbooks in many countries still overrepresent men, restrict women to domestic and low-prestige occupations, and maintain traditional gender stereotypes, although a number of recent editions make gradual steps towards gender equality. The theoretical underpinnings of this study, its methodology (content analysis approach), and implications are presented.

Key Words: gender representation, english language textbooks, secondary education, gender bias, content analysis, EFL/ESL materials

Introduction

English language textbooks do not contain a neutral compilation of grammatical rules and lexical items. English language textbooks reflect implicit messages regarding who is supposed to do what, who should speak first, whose accomplishments are worth mentioning, and whose lives should be portrayed as normal or extraordinary. Considering the age of secondary school students at which identity formation is an important part of their development, the images and linguistic features contained in their textbooks can influence their notions of proper roles, goals, and behavior for men and women. It has been shown that textbooks operate as a "hidden curriculum," passing on values and norms without direct teaching through repeated exposure.

In fact, concerns regarding gender biases in the content of English language teaching (ELT) textbooks have existed for quite some time already. Indeed, following the groundbreaking study analyzing the content of fifteen widely used ESL textbooks, which established that women were consistently underrepresented and stereotyped into a small set of jobs, numerous researchers in different countries and institutions have expanded on this area of research by conducting similar studies in dozens of contexts. Such consistency of results obtained in very different settings implies that gender bias in ELT textbooks is not a one-off occurrence but rather a structural characteristic of these materials (Ariyanto, 2018).

The current research paper will explore the state of the art in this research area, specifically answering the research question: What is the nature of gender representation in secondary-level English language

textbooks, and what are its pedagogical and policy implications (Mengistie & Worku, 2021; arton & Sakwa, 2012). The paper is structured as a literature review, in which the author will analyze the existing studies conducted in the field, describe the theoretical and methodological framework, summarize the key results, and provide recommendations (Lee & Collins, 2009).

Even though all national curricula nowadays claim to support gender equality within the realm of education, empirical research carried out throughout the early years of the 2020s still reports on the existence of some observable discrepancies regarding the representation of men and women in English school textbooks (Lee, 2014). These disparities tend to be quite subtle in nature: they occur not in obvious forms of discrimination but rather through statistical analyses of such aspects as the more frequent presence of one sex in pictures, the order of names' mentioning in a sentence, or the occupation assignment for certain characters. The indirectness of the aforementioned phenomena makes it quite easy for the teachers, book assessors, and even authors themselves to overlook those disparities, which allows for gender bias to persist within the framework of officially sanctioned educational materials long after it has been identified scientifically.

This paper pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the theories on which the study of gender and language in educational literature is based.
2. To provide a synthesis of the results of the studies done in relation to the visibility, primacy, occupation, personal characteristics, and language of males and females in secondary-level English textbooks in various nations.
3. To present methodologies employed in analyzing gender portrayal in textbooks.
4. To provide pedagogical and policy recommendations related to gender-balanced textbooks production.

Research Questions

1. How are male and female characters portrayed numerically in terms of frequency and order of appearance in English textbooks in secondary school?
2. Which occupational roles, actions, and characteristics are allocated to male and female characters?
3. To what degree does the use of language in the form of nouns, pronouns, and generics show gender disparity?
4. Which methods and theories have been employed to analyze these phenomena?

This review is important in multiple ways. For authors and publishers of textbooks, it summarizes those issues that need to be addressed in materials design repeatedly in order for reviewers to identify them. For teacher educators, it offers an empirical basis for teaching future teachers how to detect gender bias in textbooks. For curriculum planners, it underpins the importance of including gender-sensitive criteria in the textbook approval process. For students of applied linguistics and gender studies, it serves as a framework for accessing a vast literature distributed across different regions.

Literature Review

The systematic study of gender bias in language education material started in the late 1970s and gained speed when analyzing the fifteen most popular ESL textbooks in the United States. The study included the category of omission (female-to-male ratio in text and pictures), firstness (who is referred to first in case of both sexes' presence), visibility in occupation, number of times males were referred to in nouns compared to females, generic masculines ('he' and 'man'), and the kind of adjectives used for each of the sexes. It was found that sexism thrived in ESL textbooks where women appeared only half as many times as men, although being slightly more than half of the population (Wijetunga, 2017; Lee & Collins, 2009).

From this basis, an exploration of sexism in ESL/EFL textbooks in use in secondary Iranian schools through quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis was carried out by examining sex visibility, topic distribution, occupational opportunities, activity type, stereotypical roles, firstness, and masculinity in generic use. This study, among other later studies on pre-university Iranian textbooks, revealed a persistent imbalance between genders, with more male characters, but variations according to the edition of the book and language skills taught.

Similar studies have been conducted elsewhere. Gender dominance in EFL textbooks used in public schools in Jordan was considered in another study with the same findings regarding topic and role bias in favor of males (Al-Turani & Baniabdelrahman, 2025). Gender voice trends in Hong Kong English textbooks were explored in East Asia, while comparison over time in this case was done to the primary level textbooks (Montoro, 2023). Social interactions as gender representations in four series of secondary English textbooks used in China were analyzed, revealing that despite the persistence of stereotypes about women, they are becoming increasingly involved in non-traditional occupations, albeit still being confined to domestic chores (Huang & Liu, 2024; Lee & Collins, 2008).

The situation is much the same in the African scenario, as evidenced by an analysis of an English book used in secondary education in Uganda, which showed that only one third of all character portrayals were those of females, with the women often depicted in the role of being occupied in low-ranking jobs like cashiers and secretaries and without any leadership positions. Likewise, analyzed a textbook in English for grade ten used in Ethiopia and found that the male characters prevailed in number and diversity of roles portrayed, just like decades ago, but in an entirely different country and language.

These studies reveal the fact that there is a commonality of certain analytical categories used by researchers, allowing for the comprehensive understanding of gender in textbooks: Visibility and invisibility: the frequency of male and female character appearance in written texts and illustrations. The male-to-female ratio has been reported in favor of males in almost all studies, and was 64% to 36% in a Ugandan secondary book. Firstness: Whichever gender is brought up or illustrated first when talking about both genders. Since firstness is considered an indication of priority, the frequent precedence of the male gender in this category was considered an indirect but significant indication of hierarchy.

Occupational roles: The number of jobs available to each gender, as well as their status. While women tend to be confined to a few occupations that include teaching, nursing, clerical, and service work, men can be found performing a wide array of occupations, including executive, scientific, and skilled labor. Activities/traits: Personal attributes or actions that are associated with each gender, where women tend to be associated with their looks or emotional traits and men with their accomplishments or actions. Gender-neutral masculine language: The use of he/man/mankind as universal terms referring to everyone, a practice traced way back to the original study but also noticed by researchers even now.

Firstness, visibility, and occupational diversity are usually measured through quantitative content analysis, whereas activities, traits, and discourse roles have usually been studied using qualitative or discourse analytic approaches. The investigation of sexism within discourse roles of textbook dialogues falls within the scope of a more general debate about negotiation of gender relations during the classroom discourse on the text of textbooks as opposed to the text per se.

A range of theories can be used in this particular field of study. Feminist stylistics investigates sexism at the lexical, grammatical, and discursive levels, regarding language as a tool for ideology creation and deconstruction (Brussino & McBrien, 2022). Social learning theory provides psychological grounds for the relevance of textbook representation, which presupposes that adolescents imitate the behavior of people represented in their educational materials. The inequality in terms of modeling male and female roles can have implications for the students' aspirations and self-concept, an idea raised in the statement about the relevance of representation in traditionally gendered communities. Lastly, systemic functional linguistics with its interpretation of language as a social semiotic can be employed to investigate how the structure of transitivity and participant roles of textbook sentences allocate agency to males.

One critical limitation of purely text-based studies is that it proves that the ultimate impact of a gendered passage within a textbook is dependent on the way the teacher mediates this passage within the classroom setting. It could either be emphasized, ignored, or even challenged based on the teacher's discourse regarding the passage. Hence, it shows that both textbooks and classroom practices play a role in creating gendered messages among students.

Gender discrimination in instructional materials has been explicitly acknowledged as an issue in the policy of international organizations. The global survey of national curricula by UNESCO showed that gender biases and stereotypes continue to exist in many countries, especially when it comes to the representation of women in science- and mathematics-oriented material, and issued guidelines for developing and evaluating gender-balanced textbooks. The international approaches to the elimination of gender biases in educational and learning materials suggest balanced numbers of participants in illustrations, equal representation of aspirations for different occupations, and non-stereotypical depiction of family and work settings (Espeleta et al., 2024). This framework allows for the evaluation of the research findings outlined above and emphasizes the fact that the observed phenomenon is addressed in international educational policies, not just in individual scholarly studies.

Methodology

As this study combines and analyzes previously done research instead of conducting the analysis of the empirical textbook, the approach applied to the research is that of the systematic literature review. Literature sources were found in the academic search in the field of gender representation in English and other subjects' textbooks for secondary school conducted in peer-reviewed journals, institutional repositories, and international policy documents. The preference was given to those studies that applied specific methods of content and discourse analysis, included quantitative data (for example, male to female ratio, numbers of occupations), and focused on secondary level textbooks or those close to the issue.

For those interested in performing an original content analysis on some particular textbook or textbook series, the following research design should be considered based on the literature review above:

1. Sample: select the entire textbook or textbook series used at some particular secondary grade level and language board/ministry of education.

2. Unit of analysis: consider all appearances of characters in narrative, dialogue, exercises, and illustrations as units of analysis, coded by gender.
3. Categories: utilize the same coding categories which have been developed in the literature – visibility/omission ratio, firstness, occupation/role and status, activities, personalities and adjectives, and the presence or absence of generic male forms.
4. Inter-rater reliability: in case multiple coders are involved, estimate the inter-coder agreement rate (e.g., via Cohen's kappa).
5. Quantitative analysis: calculate the number and ratios of coded instances of each category and compare them with the benchmark of numerical equality.
6. Qualitative analysis: combine frequency counts with close textual analysis of relevant passages and illustrations to see how stereotypes are produced through discourse, not just counted.

Findings and Discussion

The synthesis of the above-reviewed studies in different countries reveals a number of consistent trends, in addition to the emergence of some shifts.

Constant Male Dominance in Terms of Visibility and Primacy

Apart from a few exceptions, all the reviewed studies found that males outnumber females in terms of their representation in texts and illustrations, while the names or pronouns of males appear more often at the beginning when there is reference to both sexes together. Such a trend can be observed in the original sample of America as well as in the samples of Uganda and Ethiopia for the period of nearly four decades.

Occupational Stereotyping

Role assignment within occupations always seems to be biased; women are always depicted doing domestic, clerical, or caregiver jobs, whereas men cover a wider variety of professions, including technical, professional, and leadership roles. Even where working women have been introduced into textbooks through revisions, such as in secondary Chinese educational materials, household tasks have still remained the sole purview of women. This means that it is possible to make advances in some areas of gender imbalance (such as diversification of occupations) while remaining unbalanced on other fronts (such as responsibility for household work).

Gradual But Uneven Progress

Some more recent research studies reveal that there has been a gradual disappearance of overt sexist language (like that observed in the 1970s and 1980s literature, where there were overt statements such as “boys grow up to be men and girls grow up to be housewives”) in modern-day materials. Nonetheless, the implicit biases discovered by subsequent research on the basis of frequencies, order of appearance, and occupational range indicate that the bias has been reduced only in terms of visibility and not frequency.

The Role of Context

It is further evident from the reviewed literature that the extent and form of gender bias also depend on the culture and education system in which the study has been carried out. In the case of South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, restriction of females in domestic environments is observed to a greater degree

than in other cultures, whereas in East Asian cultures, there is an observed shift towards an expanding but incomplete variety of occupations for females. It follows from the above observation that the issue of gender stereotyping in textbooks cannot be dealt with in one universal way.

Implications For Textbook Development and Pedagogy

The research evidence highlighted above has significant implications for the development of English language textbooks. In writing textbooks, authors need to monitor numerical balance between the number of male and female characters throughout the unit or entire textbook, not just one lesson at a time. Illustrators need to be made aware that the illustrations of occupation and activities need to be vetted using the same standards that were used to vet the text, as bias may occur even when the language is modified. Teacher education programs need to be taught about gender bias hidden within prescribed textbooks, and classroom discussion of the textbooks can further perpetuate or reduce this bias. Finally, textbook review boards need to use checklists on gender responsiveness, like those advocated by UNESCO, in their assessment process.

Recommendations

1. Making goals that aim for quantitative parity, such as near balance between males and females in terms of representation, an integral part of the criteria involved in assessing textbooks.
2. Broadening the portrayal of occupations and roles played by women, particularly within management, science, and technical disciplines, and also including men in the portrayal of caregiving roles.
3. Using gender-neutral or gender-balanced language in lieu of gender-specific language in learning exercises and examples.
4. Conducting in-service training workshops for teachers to identify and remedy biases within prescribed textbooks.
5. Hiring gender experts along with subject experts during the review and approval process of textbooks.
6. Engaging in systematic content analysis of prescribed textbooks periodically with each successive edition.

Limitations

Since this literature review is literature based, it has its own limitations in terms of the scope of the studies reviewed, the number of samples, the coding system used, and the textbooks being studied. It is important to note that gender representations have been studied in different countries and institutions; thus, any comparison between these different studies is meant to give general trends and not the actual meta-analysis figures. Future researchers looking to study the content of any textbook or curriculum should carry out their own content analysis in accordance with the methodology discussed earlier in the paper.

Conclusion

Forty years of studies, from seminal investigations to recent analyses of textbooks in use in China, Ethiopia, Uganda, Iran, Jordan, and Hong Kong, all lead to the same conclusion: secondary level English

language textbooks continue to represent females less frequently, restrict their roles both occupationally and socially, and reinforce gender conventions, although sexist language has been eliminated and there is some occupational diversity. As the textbook serves as an important and relatively unexplored component of the hidden curriculum, such tendencies have implications for the expectations that adolescent learners hold regarding themselves and members of the opposite sex. It calls for coordinated efforts on the part of textbook writers, illustrators, teacher educators, and policy makers using the categories of analysis and standards developed in the reviewed literature.

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