

**WHAT DOES THE FEMALE-DOMINATED, ENGLISH LANGUAGE
EDUCATION STUDENT BODY IMPLY?
A LITERATURE REVIEW FOR A STUDY ON STUDENTS' CHOICE
OF ACADEMIC MAJOR AND FUTURE CAREER SEEN FROM A
GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

In an undergraduate English Language Education Study Program at a major education university in Makassar, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, a large female-dominated student body has been a phenomenon each year's intake, at least in the last decade or so. In fact, the same phenomenon has occurred in the whole Faculty of Languages and Literature and the English Department where the English Language Education Study Program is a part of. There is a dearth in the current literature on gender and English language teaching, however, to explain such a phenomenon and address the fundamental question "What does the large English Language Education Study Program female student body imply?" and a number of specific questions (e.g. "What makes English Language Education Study Program attractive to more female than male high school graduates?"). Using a gender perspective, this paper presents a literature review for a research study proposed to address the above and other relevant issues.

Keywords: *English language teacher education, female-to-male ratio, academic major, future career*

Introduction

The proposed study whose literature review is discussed in this paper is situated in the context of initial English language teacher education in Indonesia, particularly at a major education university in Makassar, South Sulawesi Province, referred to in this paper as Uni M. At Uni M's four-year undergraduate English Language Education Study Program, a large majority of the student teachers are female and a large proportion of female students dominates each of the yearly intakes at least within the last 10 years.

In the view that the above phenomenon of high female-to-male ratio may have gender implications and require gender explanations, e.g. teacher identity as stated by Richards (2008, p. 167), I propose the study to seek answers to a general question and a number of specific questions that have bothered me as a teacher educator for some time now. The general question I am posing is "What does the large female student body imply?" which refers to the various aspects of the English Language Education Study Program as they are shaped or affected, in whole or in parts, by the student teachers' choice of academic major

and future career. The general question is followed by a number of specific questions such as:

- a. What makes the English Language Education Study Program attractive to more female than male high school graduates?
- b. Does this reflect parents' expectations regarding their children's choice of tertiary major or future career?
- c. Does the ELT job market prefer female teachers to male teachers?
- d. What implications does this have for ELT profession in the future?
- e. What does this mean to the English Language Education Study Program in particular and to initial English language teacher education in Indonesia in general?
- f. Does it matter that the English Language Education Study Program faculty is a male-majority one?
- g. Does the English Language Education Study Program get the kinds of students it needs?
- h. Do the students have what they expect from the English Language Education Study Program?
- i. To what extent does the female-male disparity affect students' interaction in class and on/off campus?

The review of the literature, as discussed in the ensuing sections, shows that in spite of the growing interest in and literature on gender and English language teaching world-wide, very little is known about the extent to which gender considerations have influenced student teachers' their decision to choose English language education as their academic major and English language teaching as their future career.

2. Gender in Language Education Studies

In his *state-of-the-art* article on gender and language education research, Mustapha (2013) implies that gender and language education had been a research area for a number of years before Janet Holmes published her state-of-the-art article on its development in 1991 and Jane Sunderland published hers in 2000, which then triggered many studies focusing on gender and language education. Mustapha observes that while Holmes provides a broad view of gender and language studies, Sunderland narrows her review to language and gender in second and foreign language education, covering diverse topics including:

Gender and language learning; gender, language learning and ability; second/foreign language acquisition and the four skills; motivation/investment; language learning styles and strategies; classroom interaction; the 'what' of teaching; English as a non-sexist language?; teaching materials; language testing; teachers, professional organizations and gender, what can teachers do? Teacher action and teacher education; new theorizations of language and gender; language learners' identities; masculinities: boys, men and language learning;

and future research.

(Mustapha, 2013, p. 454)

Despite the variety of research areas in relation to gender issues in his quotation above, Mustapha emphasizes that research and publications on gender in the area of language education in the first decade of the 21st century which he reviewed may be grouped into two main themes, namely gender in classroom/school interactions and gender in textbooks. The two themes will be adopted in this article to discuss the relevant research and publications on gender in the contexts of English language education to date.

3. Gender in the Interactions of English Language Education Students

Not many international publications are available in the area of gender in the contexts of interactions in English language education institutions. So far I have only been aware of two relevant publications that are worthy of further discussion; they are Mahmud (2010) and Kizilaslan and Diktaş (2011).

Mahmud's (2010) work is an investigation into what she describes as "the impact of gender differences in English language teaching", with "English language teaching" being used here as the context where the gender differences occur. Conducted in 2008, the study explores students' learning styles as affected by the notions about men and women differences in communication pioneered by Lakoff (1976) and Tannen (1990). The data were collected from 20 male students and 20 female students of the English Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The aim of the research was to reveal the students' attitudes towards speaking to the other students of the opposite sex, the strategies they employed to express opinions, their group work preferences (in relation to men and women interactions), their activeness/passiveness in those interactions, and their perceptions in regards to ways of increasing English skills while having to deal with sex differences.

The main findings of Mahmud's study show that the female students were more reluctant than the male students to speak to those of the opposite sex; the female students were more inclined to using the direct way to express their opinions, working with students of the same sex, and being passive in class activities. In addition, while the female students saw the high possibility to increase their English skills by working only with those of the same sex, the male students were more flexible. These different styles of female and male students in learning English were said to have been affected by the notions of women's language as indicated by Lakoff (1976) and Tannen (1990) and other scholars and authors in this area. Mahmud's work seems to be the only publication accessible which investigates this topic (gender influences in interaction in English language teaching) in the Indonesian context.

Writing about gender roles based on a study on the students of an English language education institution in Turkey, Kizilaslan and Diktaş (2011) say that despite recent improvements in demographics and educational outcomes, it is still the case that traditional expectations and attitudes toward

gender roles in the Turkish society have been preserved to a great extent. Given this current position of Turkey in terms of gender issues, the transformative power of education, especially of teachers, could be emphasized more strongly at all levels of education. Therefore, it is important that teachers are trained to identify and counter gender bias to help fight the problem of sexism prevalent in the country.

The purpose of the study was to compare the gender role perceptions and gender role classifications of first-year and fourth year English language teaching student teachers and to identify any difference between the two groups. The sample (N=204) for the present study was obtained from a large state university in western Turkey. Gender role orientation was assessed with the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem 1974).

The research findings indicate that male student teachers still have a traditional perspective on gender roles and that university education does not seem to have a role in changing their existing value judgments in relation to gender. On the other hand, Turkish female students have adopted a more masculine gender role within the four years of their university education. The paper concludes by offering some implications for teacher education institutions in Turkey.

In summary of this section, even though the two studies (Mahmud, 2009 and Kizilaslan and Diktaş, 2011) were conducted in two different countries, they have some things in common. First, both studies were conducted in the EFL context—Indonesia and Turkey being countries where English is used as a foreign language and where people view gender roles differently, partly due to both countries' Muslim backgrounds. Second, the two studies focus on the extent to which gender has an effect on how English language education students (student teachers) interact with each other in English (as in Mahmud's study) and in their social lives on campus (as in Kizilaslan and Diktaş' study). Third, both of the research studies indicate an interest in gender issues related to students of English language education institutions. Fourth, both studies were conducted in English language education institutions in the respective countries where the student body is predominantly female. Finally, due to their focus on interaction, the two studies offer no explanation whether the students' choice of English language education as an academic major and English language teaching as a potential career in the future has anything to do with their own (or other people's) understanding of gender roles. The proposed study aims to provide this explanation.

4. Gender in English Language Teaching Textbooks

In various settings around the world, gender issues in English language teaching textbooks have been quite well-researched and published world-wide, and a sizeable body of literature on this topic is available. Some of the relevant studies include those by Amini and Birjandi (2012), Arikan (2004), Barton and Sakwa (2012), Fatemi, Pishghadam, and Heidarian (2011), Holmqvist and Gjörup (2007), Lee and Collins (2008), Skliar (2007), and Zubair and Yaqoub (2009). The Indonesian perspective in this area is represented by Damayanti

(2014). To illustrate what the relevant literature contains, the following is a summary of Zubair's and Yaqoub's (2009) work, as well as that of Damayanti's (2014).

The study conducted by Zubair and Yaqoub (2009) was part of a doctoral research project titled 'Ideology and World view in Textbooks: A Study of Cultural Aspects in ELT in Pakistan'. Investigating the issues related to gender in the English language teaching text books being taught at the secondary level in Pakistan, it was conducted in an elitist school and all governmental (Urdu-medium) high schools and private non-elitist English-medium schools in Multan, Pakistan.

Zubair and Yaqoub focused their attention on how a set of textbooks published by Oxford University Press and another set published by Punjab Textbook Board observe in equality in representing males and females at three levels, namely professional, social and attributive. At the professional level, the study looks at which sex occupies higher professions in the two sets of textbooks. At the social level, the study assesses how the society treats both males and females in the textbooks. At the attributive level, the study looks at social roles related to males and females and the attributes associated with these roles. In fact, the study's main focus is on what the authors describe as the "ideology of difference or in equality observed in different walks of life towards males and females" how this ideology is portrayed or expressed in the two sets of English language teaching textbooks.

The study found that, on the one hand, the Oxford University Press text books, where lessons are written by different authors who came from all over the world, may represent different societies such as Pakistani, British, American, etc. because of the elite school's high fee structure, modern standards of education and Western atmosphere, the elite class was attracted to it for its children's schooling. However, it was ironic that the contents in these textbooks were replete with instances of female-gender bias or discrimination, even though they were close to modernity, Western conceptions of life, and the world. On the other hand, by including mostly religious, national and cultural events and practices to inculcate the learners with nationalistic, cultural, and religious fervor, the Punjab Textbook Board textbooks seemed to represent the Pakistani society. However, these textbooks were not free from female-gender bias either. Just like in the Oxford University Press text books, though in a slightly different way, the female sex is a victim of discrimination in these textbooks as well.

According to Zubair and Yaqoub, the findings of the study were expected to serve two purposes: (1) to help the policy makers, textbook authors and English language teaching practitioners realize the politics of gendered material and exclude such material from the curriculum; (2) to help in sharpening the students' critical thinking abilities in understanding the spin of language as an ideological tool in disseminating knowledge that favours the male sex.

In her article entitled "Gender Construction in Visual Images in Textbooks for Primary School Students," Damayanti (2014) points out that in

the Indonesian context, little has been done to raise awareness of political correctness in gender matters in school textbooks. As an attempt to fill this gap, she conducted a textual analysis on four English language textbooks used in Indonesian primary schools. The focus of the study was on the pictorial texts accompanying the linguistic ones. The “Visual Grammar”, developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, was used as the frame work of analysis.

The study results showed that the illustrations accompanying linguistic texts fortified the representations of gender asymmetry. Females were depicted more dependent than males and were also construed to be admirers of an action carried out by the males. The study recommended conscious efforts to value both genders equally in visualization as meaning construction is multimodal.

To sum up the points in this section, it is evident that in spite of the fact that the studies discussed above (Damayanti, 2014; Zubair & Yaqoub, 2009) and the other ones mentioned at the beginning of this section (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Arikan, 2004; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Fatemi et al., 2011; Holmqvist & Gjörup, 2007; Lee & Collins, 2008; Skliar, 2007) were conducted in different countries, they generally have some things in common. First, they were conducted in schools and not in English language education institutions to investigate how gender was represented in the English language teaching textbooks used in those countries. Second, they found generally similar results; that is, the English language teaching textbooks tended to be in favor of males. Third, because the studies were conducted in schools teaching ESL and EFL, they were not designed to address the basic question about the motivation of the teachers who used the books to choose English language education as a major and English language teaching as a profession in the first place.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a literature review for a proposed study on the gender considerations used by students of an initial English language teacher study program at Uni M, a major education university in Makassar, Indonesia. The research proposal was inspired by the fact that, at least within the last 10 years, at Uni M's four-year undergraduate English Language Education Study Program, a large majority of the student teachers are female and a large proportion of female students dominates each of the yearly intakes. As this high female-to-male ratio may have gender implications and require gender explanations, the study is proposed to seek answers to a general question and a number of specific questions. It is expected that the study would reveal whether gender considerations have motivated the students to undertake English language education as an academic major and English language teaching as a future career.

The review shows that there is a growing body of literature pertaining to gender issues in language education in general and English language teaching in particular. A large majority of the studies, however, have focused on gender issues in relation to classroom interactions or inter-gender interactions in educational settings and language textbooks for schools. Given their large proportion, very little is known whether gender considerations were used by

female students of initial English language teacher education institutions to justify their choice of academic major and future profession. This means that a research study in this area of inquiry is in order.

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