

## *Original Paper*

# A Review of Studies on Gender Representation in EFL/ESL

## Textbooks

Zihui Guo<sup>1\*</sup> & Huan Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Jiaotong University, Chongqing, China

\* Zihui Guo, School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Jiaotong University, Chongqing, China. Email: 837998416@qq.com

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### ***Abstract***

*Gender representation in EFL/ESL textbooks is often transmitted in a direct way to language learners since these materials are deemed as authoritative and therefore impeccable by language learners given that they are usually written by a group of experts from corresponding fields. Therefore, it is necessary to make sure that partial gender ideologies are excluded from these materials. This paper reviews studies on gender representation in EFL/ESL textbooks which are scattered across various nations, with an attempt to see if gender impartiality is ensured in educational contexts and further calls for attention from textbooks writers and educational practitioners. At the end of this paper, a research gap is pointed out that studies to come could cast an eye on EFL/ESL textbooks at the tertiary level as gender socialization continues throughout the whole life of individuals.*

### ***Keywords***

*gender representation, EFL/ESL textbooks, gender ideologies*

## **1. Introduction**

In the last decade, the number of research concerning textbooks shows no sign of abating. Lying at the heart of teaching and learning, textbooks serve as the essential material in almost every classroom. It remains a tie between instructors and learners, equipping/providing instructors with directions for the teaching towards learners and learners with materials to review the teaching carried by instructors. Besides, this teaching and learning material is often compiled by a group of experts in corresponding fields, thus being attached to a sense of authority (Tomlinson, 2012). Bearing this opinion in mind, learners have taken textbooks as impeccable and tend to take in every detail without comment (Lee & Collins, 2008), daring not to point out errors with them or doubting whether it is the problem of their

own if they do find some. In doing so, the values and attitudes of textbook developers embedded in textbooks, whether intendedly or inadvertently, may directly transmit to learners (Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung & Chung-Chieh, 2011).

The topic of gender ideology in language textbooks has received much attention and has been widely explored by examining the way textbooks represent women and men. Gender representation in language textbooks has an influence not only on students' learning process but on their gender socialization. One may argue that in these textbooks characters are inevitably described in disparaging genders and some of the portrayals are merely a reflection of the reality of gender differences. However, although some gender differences do exist, they should not be taken for granted and confine people's thoughts and behaviors. Repeatedly thinking about and presenting females and males in a distinct way may fix people's perceptions of gender differences and further lead to a meaningful gender stereotype (Ariyanto, 2018).

Considering this, numerous studies have been conducted to examine gender representation in ESL/EFL textbooks in various educational contexts on the basis that English as a Lingua Franca enjoys the largest number of learners.

## **2. Studies on Gender Representation in ESL/EFL Textbooks outside of China**

Scholarly attention to gender depiction in textbooks could date back to the mid of 20th century when Child, Potterv and Levine (1946) claimed that gender images portrayed in textbooks will have an impact on students' gender behaviors. However, it is until the 1970s, with the awakening of female consciousness, that studies on gender portrayal in ESL/EFL textbooks began to sprout (e.g., Hartman & Judd 1978; Hellinger, 1980; Porreca, 1984). Of all the pioneering studies, the study of Porreca (1984) was probably the most influential one. She systematically analysed 15 ESL textbooks in respects of omission (the average ratio of female to male), firstness, occupation, gender-related nouns and adjectives, and masculine generic constructions, and concluded that sexism was pervasive in every category, with the most serious inequality found in the area of occupation. It is noteworthy that Porreca's framework has been proved useful and extensively applied by subsequent studies.

Findings from studies on gender representation in ESL/EFL textbooks in different countries are actually inconsistent. A majority of these studies indicated that gender stereotypes or gender bias more or less existed. For example, examining ESL textbooks in Singaporean primary schools, Gupta and Yin (1990) indicated a biased and stereotypical representation of females and males, reporting that among all the characters around 70% are occupied by males and that they are depicted with a wider range of occupational roles compared with their female counterparts. This is, however, in contrast with the then reality that the population of females in the country then was around more than half (51%). The distribution of domestic roles to the two genders in these examined textbooks, however, was reported to be even, but a closer examination revealed that males are playing an essentially ancillary role, such as

accompanying their wives to go shopping and helping take after the baby when their wives are busy with other household chores.

Similarly, Lee and Collins's (2009) content and linguistic analysis of Australian English-language textbooks for intermediate learners reported the existence of impartial gender depiction. It was found that, although the writers intentionally avoided masculine generic construction by using "they" and "he/she" to refer to characters with an unspecified gender, they might inadvertently present male characters more often (391 vs 289), putting male figures always ahead of their counterparts and describing the two genders in traditional gender roles.

Since the 21st century, as education in third-world countries began to receive ever-increasing attention, many researchers have shifted their focus to ESL/EFL textbooks in less developed countries and conducted a multitude of studies to see whether gender equality is presented. Studies in Pakistan have suggested that imbalanced gender representation pervaded English textbooks not only in primary but also in secondary schools. For instance, in the English language textbook taught to students of Grade 5 in public and private schools, males are represented much more often than females, monopolizing social and outside activities (Ahmad & Shah, 2019). In addition, they are depicted in superior positions in that males (20 out of 31 cases) tend to precede females when they appear in pairs and are mentioned with proper names and pronouns while females usually remain anonymous, mentioned by their domestic roles such as wife and mother. In a similar vein, Qasim (2018) observed that English textbooks developed for students in Grades 9 and 10 in Pakistan underrepresent females in the same manner and that the masculine generic construction has been persistently used throughout the analyzed textbooks.

Similarly, EFL textbooks in Turkish high schools are found to depict men and women in a different manner concerning jobs and adjectives (Söğüt, 2018). That is, male characters are attributed a greater number of jobs with high social status while female characters are assigned to more domestic and indoor jobs such as nurse, waitress, teacher and housekeeper. In addition, the numerical imbalance is reflected in adjectives, with females attributed to a smaller number of adjectives, many of which have negative connotations.

Considering the prevalence of gender stereotypes in Ugandan society, Barton and Sakwa (2012) noted the reinforcement of these stereotypes by gender representation in English textbooks in secondary schools. Specifically, female underrepresentation (females comprising 35.7% while males 64.3%) and stereotypical images of females as emotional and confined to the domestic sphere were found to appear in the examined textbooks.

Although most studies have indicated an unbalanced representation of gender in ESL/EFL textbooks, there still exist textbooks that were found to be void of gender bias or stereotypes. For example, Nagatomo's (2010) study of a Japanese university EFL textbook revealed that female characters outnumber their male counterparts (49 to 33), have more speaking turns (192 to 141) and precede male

characters slightly more often (21 to 19). In addition, examining two EFL textbooks used in Iranian secondary schools, Hall (2014) found that while the second textbook presents a clear-cut borderline between indoor activities of women and outdoor activities of men, females in the first textbook enjoy active outdoor activities such as playing ping pong, visiting the art gallery, and eating at a restaurant. Moreover, in a more recent study, Demir and Yavuz (2017) systematically analyzed a series of ELT textbooks for public high schools in Turkish, vis-à-vis nine aspects, i.e., visibility in the illustrations, occupational groupings, domestic roles, household and out-of-home responsibilities, associated activities and sports, amount of talk, the dispersion of interlocutors and text/paragraph writers according to gender, firstness and gender focus in writings. The findings revealed no indications of gender inequality either verbally or pictorially throughout the coursebook series, which is in stark contrast with an earlier study by Söğüt (2018) in a similar educational context as mentioned above.

### **3. Studies on Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks in China**

With the education of third-world countries attracting more attention in the international community, researchers both in China and abroad began to pay attention to the depiction of gender in textbooks for other unexplored subjects, English in particular. Examining a series of officially designed EFL textbooks for Guangzhou elementary schools, Xiong, He and Li (2017) noted that imbalanced gender proportions and gender roles persist. It was found that male figures and names are far more evident than those of females (60.93% to 39.07% in illustrations; 61.64% to 38.36% in texts) and celebrities are more often ascribed to males (87.5% to 12.5%). In terms of gender roles, males tend to be portrayed as enjoying a wider range of occupations than females (36 to 15) and enjoying themselves by watching TV or reading books when females are doing housework such as cleaning and cooking. Similarly, a study on primary school English textbooks issued in 2012 reported similar gender discrimination towards female characters. It was reported that male characters have more exposure not only verbally but visually, appearing more often in closer shots and frontal angles and having more eye contact with viewers (He, 2020).

A large body of literature also reported studies on gender representation in EFL textbooks at the secondary level (e.g., Yu, 2018; Li, 2019; Yang, 2020; Chen, 2021; Wang, 2021). In general, these studies have found similar underrepresentation of females, either verbally or visually. For example, Yu (2018) examined textually a series of EFL textbooks for junior high school, finding that men outnumber women in terms of occurrences and social positions. Analyzing the pictorial content in junior high and senior high EFL textbooks respectively, Li (2019) and Yang (2020) discovered consistently that the male roles are mostly located at the top and center positions and are more likely to be depicted in low-angle, indicating a more important and more powerful position.

In addition to primary and secondary EFL textbooks, a few studies also examined EFL textbooks at the college level and found an underrepresentation of females in a similar manner. For example, Wang's

(2016) study on generic pronouns in two sets of college English textbooks revealed that the use of female pronouns is far less than that of male pronouns (2581 to 1187), indicating the relative disregard for females (Wang, 2016).

Despite the fact that most studies have demonstrated the pervasiveness of gender bias and gender stereotypes in EFL textbooks in China, a diachronic study on gender representation in secondary English textbooks in Hong Kong suggested that textbook writers' gender awareness has improved within the context of a more equal society (Lee & Collins, 2008). Compared to the 10 textbooks published in the late 1980s or early 1990s, the 10 textbooks issued recently were found to manifest a more equal gender value. Although the recent textbooks still associate women with domestic domains and a passive image such as weak and present women less frequently in both the written and visual modes, various strategies are employed by the textbook writers to avoid biased or stereotypical depiction, that is, the use of gender-inclusive terms, alternative pronouns such as he or she, and the representation of women in a wider range of activities and careers.

#### **4. A Brief Evaluation**

In view of the previous studies that have been reviewed so far, it could be seen that gender representation in EFL textbooks has received worldwide attention and research on this topic has yielded rich results, which has contributed to a more enhanced understanding of the way how gender (in)equality can be embedded in textbooks as well as of gender ideologies in EFL textbooks in various countries.

These results, however, are far from conclusive in that some of the studies have found evidence for gender stereotypes and/or gender bias while some other studies indicated gender equality in textbooks. In addition, it is worth noting that research on gender representation in EFL textbooks in China and other educational or national contexts mainly focuses on primary and secondary educational levels, paying far less attention to EFL textbooks at the university level. According to Wang (2011), gender socialization continues throughout the whole life journey of individuals. Therefore, gendered content in textbooks may also have an impinge on students whom some claimed to have already developed their gender views. Besides, modern college students embrace gender equality more than ever and only when the gender ideology reflected by textbooks corresponds to that of their own can their language learning be advanced. Moreover, given that years of efforts have been made to ensure balanced gender representation in elementary and secondary school textbooks, it is essential for the research to come to keep those at the college level on track so as not to reverse years of work.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have briefly reviewed gender representation in EFL/ESL textbooks across different contexts. It is found that the research focus in this field is shifting to materials of developing countries

with an increasing heat on the third world's educational issues. Besides, the results of studies are found to be inconsistent since some reported gender bias and/or gender stereotypes while others did not. It is worth noting that most of the studies mainly focus on primary and secondary educational levels, leaving textbooks of university relatively understudied. As mentioned earlier, modern college students embrace gender equality more than ever and therefore gender views on EFL/ESL textbooks at the tertiary level need to be unbiased and free from stereotypes so as to boost the learning of students.

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