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A study on how social gender identity is constructed in EFL coursebooks

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Abstract

Gender is generally a social identity reformulated by societies and cultures so it is not a coincidence that coursebooks used in EFL classes are abundant with the reflections of these socially constructed gender identities. Thus, this study aims to find out how social gender identity is constructed in the reading passages in two sets of coursebooks, Face 2 Face and English File, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate. To collect the data, the reading texts in these coursebooks were scanned and the adjectives used to describe both genders were identified and categorized to determine what kind of characteristics have been attributed to male and female and how their social identities have been constructed.

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1. Introduction

Education, which is an important system dealing with language is shaped by the society. In other words, it can be said that the educational system of a country can be affected by the prejudices, values and traditions of the society, which are also reflected in coursebooks. As stated by Duffy and Jonassen (1992), to make sense of things students are in a constant process of “engaging, grappling, and seeking”. In this process, they not only understand the given or shown information but also, using their experiences, make tentative interpretations and go on to elaborate and test those interpretations within the process.

Freeman and McElhinny (1996) define school as an institution in which “children come to understand their social identity relative to each other and relative to the institutions” (p.261). Delamont mentions that “schools develop and reinforce gender segregations, stereotypes, and even discriminations which exaggerate the negative aspects of the gender roles in the outside world” (as cited in Swan and Graddol, 1995, p.135). As a part of school and the educational system, coursebooks and teaching materials are of great importance and they may also pave the way for prejudice and fossilized roles in the education environment. Considering the vital importance of coursebooks, it is crucial that their contents should be analyzed in many aspects as cultural values, international and global issues, gender, and etc. There seems to be limited research concerning the stereotypes placed in the coursebooks. This study is important as it can be a complementary of the other studies carried out. Therefore, the study aims to determine and analyze the adjectives used in the coursebooks and their relations with the social roles

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in the texts, considering the gender. The aim of this study is to define how social gender identity is reflected via adjectives in two EFL coursebooks, *Face 2 Face* and *English File*.

2. Review of Literature

From the 1970s on, studies have revealed that women and men are attributed traditional roles like women are shown as submissive, controlled, muted, passive, powerless and emotional beings while men as strong, controlling, active, superior characters with occupations so the adjectives used in the coursebooks also highlight the stereotyped roles in the society. Gender, according to Frank and Treichler, (1989) involves social meaning that classifies humans into masculine and feminine in terms of their roles defined by the culture of the community. As stated by Simone de Beauvoir “women are not born, they are made” (as cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p.15). This state is also the same for, as the process of ‘making a man or a woman’ starts with the curiosity is whether the baby due will be a boy or a girl (McConnell-Ginet, 2003). At birth that unknown sex of the baby that is mentioned as “it”, turns into a “he” or a “she” that is a male or as a female (Butler, 1993). From birth, a child is surrounded by the pre-determined rules; and, values as female or male social gender roles are being attributed. These roles play a large part in how individuals identify themselves and how society judges them. Within this consideration, they are the behaviors that society imposes as “correct” for boys and for girls. Female and male responsibilities, rights, duties, roles in production are all determined by social gender identity.

Hartman and Judd (1978) examined the images of women and men, the order of female- male mentioned, and stereotyped roles for females and males. They found that sexist usage of language is built into English, and textbooks model this usage to the students. For each category they found evidence that ELT materials reflected sexist attitudes and values. Additionally, Porreca (1984) tried to find out how sexism was treated in ESL textbooks. The content of 15 ESL textbooks were analyzed in terms of the following categories: the ratio of females to males, the order of females and males, occupations, the frequency of male nouns to female nouns, types and frequency of adjectives for men and women. It is reported at the end that sexism continues to develop in ESL textbooks.

Language in the coursebooks as an ideology maker and social role determiner leads us to make generalizations about the roles of the sexes in a community. This seems beneficial at first sight although it may create prejudice and discrimination among individuals. Haas (2003) states “generalizations are used to organize facts and concepts by summarizing them and describing the relationships among them. Once a generalization is formed, it can be used to make predictions of actions and events” (p.122). Once the intolerance and generalization have been exposed to individuals through materials used in the learning atmosphere, it would be rather difficult to change the views of the people.

This view is supported by Brunner (1986) as “Language necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view. It is not just that the medium is the message. The message itself may create the reality that the message embodies and predispose those who hear it to think about it in a particular mode” (p.121). Within this framework, curriculum developers and coursebook writers should consider these aspects while many of them fail to recognize the social organization of subjects and disciplines transcended its elicit origins as a basis for the acquisition, recognition and production of the language.

3. Methodology

This study was carried out with the help of content analysis. According to Fraenkel and Wallen content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way (as cited in Hinnds, 2000, p.53). This tool involves the examination or analysis of the contents of communication such as newspaper articles, journal contents, magazines, speeches, advertisements and so on. Weber (1990) and Krippendorff (1980) define content analysis as a systematic research method for analyzing textual information in a standardized way allowing evaluators to make inferences about that information.

The adjectives in the reading texts were scanned through the coursebook sets, Face 2 Face (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate) and New English File (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate).

3.1 Coursebooks

The two coursebook sets used in the study are Face 2 Face and New English File. Face 2 Face is a coursebook prepared on the communicative approach. Its syllabus integrates the learning of a new language with skills development and presents an equal emphasis on vocabulary and grammar. As an approach, it uses a guided discovery to learning. It is compatible with the Common European Framework for Language (CEF). New English File adopts CEF as an approach. The CEF focuses on using language for communicative purposes.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

It was observed that all studies related to the coursebooks were conducted with the use of content analysis of the coursebooks. Therefore, in the study, content analysis was used as a data collection tool. This study examines the adjectives used for genders in the two sets of coursebooks. Adjectives were detected in sentences in which a pronoun showing gender such as he or she or a name existed. Then, lists with the gender factor in mind were prepared and adjectives were classified into four main categories -namely physical appearance, personality, feelings and other- in order to make the data collection and interpretation easier and more to the ground.

4. Results

As the table below reveals, in Face 2 Face there is a wide range of adjectives used to define both genders. One of the most striking results is that the adjectives used for physical appearance of females offer more variety when compared to those of males'. Furthermore, female-related adjectives are usually the ones emphasizing a 'positive' characteristic such as beautiful, slim, attractive, young, gorgeous and so on. As for the adjectives used for personality or character, it can be asserted that both genders are modified with various adjectives; however, adjectives with negative connotations such as inconsiderate or bad-tempered are more common with females. The number of adjectives used for the expression of both genders' feelings is equal and at a glance they seem to be similar in meaning. But upon a closer look at the adjectives, it is obvious that the adjectives used for females modify more extreme and exaggerated feelings such as being shocked instead of surprised or feeling fantastic instead of well, which are the adjectives used for males. It is also surprising that adjectives such as famous and rich are attributed to the male characters in the books.

Table 1. Adjectives used with Gender Specification in Face 2 Face

		Female	Male
Face 2 Face Elementary	Physical	old (2), tall (2), short, attractive, slim,	Old(2), tall (2), good-looking, bald,
	Personality /character	friendly (3), outgoing, selfish, lazy,	selfish, kind, shy,
	Feelings		happy, good
	Other	Popular	busy, rich
Face 2 Face Pre-Intermediate	Physical	beautiful, tall, young, attractive,	Tall
	Personality /character	clever, easygoing (3), bright (2) , stubborn, impatient, inconsiderate, immature, moody, unhelpful, unselfish ,ambitious	moody, noisy, aggressive, considerate, hard, bright, patient, helpful, intelligent, lazy, dishonest, unreliable

	Feelings	happy, lovely,	
	Other	Single	favorite, famous
Face 2 Face Intermediate	Physical		
	Personality /character	sociable, talkative, well-qualified,	unconscious, careful
	Feelings	fantastic, shocked	Well
	Other	ill, healthy	famous (2), rich, allergic, professional
Face 2 Face Upper-Intermediate	Physical	gorgeous, beautiful, tall	good-looking ,tall,
	Personality /character	bad-tempered, easy-going	friendly
	Feelings	Terrified	fascinated, upset, pleased
	Other		

As seen from the below table, in New English File variety of adjectives are used to define both genders. Concerning the physical appearance, the ones used for females underline positive characteristics about their appearances such as beautiful, chic, young, and attractive. However, the ones used to define males bring out some negative features besides positive ones such as short, bald, overweight. As for the adjectives used for personality or character, a wide variety of adjectives are inferred. In order to define intellect, for females “intelligent” is used but for males besides “intelligent” the span widens such as “brilliant, bright, clever and genius”. In contrast with the adjectives defining females as “quiet, sensitive, conscientious” males are classified as “extrovert, brutal and extravagant”. Unlike Face 2 Face, the adjectives used for feelings in New English File did not show a distinctive difference between males and females. That is, most adjectives were used for both of the genders in the books. Additionally, it seems that being “rich” is an attribute for males, which is another common point of New English File and Face 2 Face.

Table 2. Adjectives used with Gender Specification in New English File

		Female	Male
New English File Elementary	Physical	beautiful (2), tall, thin, young	old, tall(2), good-looking, short, attractive
	Personality /character	intelligent, funny, crazy,	ambitious, brilliant, great (3), serious
	Feelings	sad (2), worried,	happy, tired
	Other	interesting, famous, lucky	famous (3), unhealthy, dead, difficult
New English File Pre-Intermediate	Physical	chic, young, beautiful (3), attractive (2)	middle-aged, bald, kind
	Personality /character	friendly, shy, talented	friendly, extrovert, wonderful, good, impatient, intelligent, bright,
	Feelings	angry, offended, afraid (6), terrified, surprised, depressed	bored, tired, afraid (2), frightened, exhausted, excited,
	Other	poor (2), late,	married (2), rich (2), famous, unemployed,
New English File Intermediate	Physical	young, attractive, blonde, slim, tall	old (2), young, little, tall(2), slim, well-built, short, overweight, bald
	Personality /character	mad, careful, friendly, determined (2), good, short-sighted, difficult, good, competitive, ambitious	friendly, brutal, intelligent, clever, selfish, lazy, rebel
	Feelings	angry, offended, afraid (6), terrified, surprised, depressed	furious, (not) surprised, sorry, angry(2), (not) serious,

New English File Upper-Intermediate	Other	vegetarian, hungry, fortunate, (not) rich, (not) famous, promising, hungry, married	healthy, unemployed, mysterious
	Physical	Young	
	Personality /character	talkative, (not)imaginative, unhelpful, conscientious, possessive, immature, shy, quiet, sensitive, loud, intelligent, unconscious,	unambitious, reliable, insincere, dishonest, bad-tempered, easy-going, moody, worried, excited, clever, careful, extravagant, respected, brilliant, genius, modest
	Feelings	nervous, hysterical, happy, excited, angry	embarrassed, furious, angry(2), shy
	Other		allergic, sick, unemployed

5. Discussion and Conclusion

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that every human being is born with a sex and born into a gender, which is a formation of roles molded by society and culture. In order to be a part of this specific society and culture, individuals go through a socialization process, through which they form their ideas on gender and the roles that it brings along. Schooling naturally plays a pivotal role in this process. In educational systems, where standardization is one of the important principles, it is observed that "sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations" (Sadker and Sadker, 1994, p.1). In fact, socialization procedures work differently for different genders as a result of the differences in the curriculum and materials. Consequently, girls obtain feminine roles, attitude, manner and behavior accepted and reinforced by the society while boys obtain similarly pre-defined masculine gender identity.

Samples for this occurrence can be seen in the two sets of books that were on the focus of this study. Although the adjectives seem to have been chosen randomly, writers of the books reflected the general outlook on females and males; that is, deliberately or not, coursebook writers have a tendency to use some adjectives with one gender rather than with the other. To overcome the imbalance, samples that include adjectives without gender specification should be placed in the coursebooks. For instance, the adjective "sensitive" should be attributed not only to females, but also to males.

People are not born with stereotyped roles or identities. Instead the society pushes individuals to distinguish the basic roles of the genders which should not be reflected in the education program. Educators should be prepared to help the learners achieve self-images constant with the crumbling stereotypic roles.

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