GENDER REPRESENTATION IN LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

Textbooks and teaching materials play a key role in the learning process as well as both formal and hidden curricula. The hidden curriculum relating to gender biases transmitted to students may influence not only their conceptualisation of gender roles, but also their personal growth, cognitive development, and identities involving their academic and career choices. This paper aims to discuss the hidden curriculum of language textbooks and teaching materials with a specific focus on gender representation. First, it gives a critical account of empirical studies, and this will be followed by an analysis of a textbook which explores gender representation in a commercial English listening and speaking textbook (*Real Listening and Speaking 4*). Focusing on gender stereotyping, gender visibility, use of gender-biased language, address titles, and firstness, a quantitative content analysis was carried out. While the results indicate that the textbook maintains stereotypical depictions of gender roles, the gender equality

is reflected in the form of balanced female and male visibility and the use of gender-neutral language, non-asymmetrical address titles and firstness. This study also provides some implications for language teaching and the development of future materials.

Introduction

The significant impact of textbooks has been acknowledged by numerous researchers (e.g. Baldwin & Baldwin, 1992; Sadker & Zittleman, 2007) since 70–95% of classroom time is spent using them (Goyal & Rose, 2020). Textbooks play an important role in both formal and hidden curricula. Since they have been used to construct the social structure (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009), the hidden curriculum is considered as the 'socialization process of schooling' (Kentli, 2009, p. 83). The hidden curriculum relating to gender biases transmitted to students may affect their personal and cognitive development (Mineshima, 2008) and their behaviour in very gendered ways (Odhiambo, 2012). Prejudiced representation of educational materials may not only influence students' beliefs about gender roles (Stromquist et al., 1998), but also constrain male and female learners' relationships (Gray, 2000) and restrict the conceptualisation of their current and future identities involving their academic and career choices (Samadikhah & Shahrokhi, 2015). This paper will discuss the hidden curriculum of language textbooks and teaching materials with a specific focus on gender representation. First, I will draw conclusions from critical and empirical research, and this will

be followed by my analysis of a textbook. Finally, implications for teaching and the development of future materials will be discussed.

Previous studies on textbooks

In view of the social impact of the hidden curriculum, some governments have published guidelines for establishing a gender-fair society, such as UNESCO's human rights programmes. However, numerous studies on sexism in language textbooks have shown gender imbalances and stereotypical depictions worldwide, such as in the UK (Jones et al., 1997), Australia (Lee & Collins, 2008), and Russia (Rifkin, 1998).

Previous materials research related to gender consisted of mainly quantitative analysis (e.g. counting male and female characters and pictures) and qualitative analysis (e.g. analysing types of topic). In general, five manifestations of gender inequality have been commonly found (Lee, 2014): gender stereotyping, female and male visibility, use of gender-biased language, asymmetrical female address titles, and male-firstness.

Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping is a common manifestation of gender inequality observed in textbooks. Women are generally depicted as weaker, more passive, following and serving others, whereas men are presented as more active, leading and rescuing others (Amare, 2007; Evans & Davies, 2000; Lee & Collins, 2010). Arnold-Gerrity (1978) conducts a content analysis of a series of elementary reading textbooks and finds that females are more frequently portrayed in

household tasks (e.g. housewife-mother capacity). Moreover, Ansary and Babii (2003) perform a systematic quantitative content analysis of two ELT textbooks (*Right Path to English I* and *II*) for Iranian secondary schools. The results indicate that the textbooks portray males mainly in active outdoor roles, while females are fundamentally shunted into more traditional stereotypical roles (e.g. cooking and taking care of children) and passive indoor activities (e.g. watching TV at home). Moreover, it is observed that men are more visible than women, and male-oriented topics and male-firstness are more prevalent. Similar findings of female under-representation and the assigning of weak and subordinate roles to women in ELT textbooks used in Iran are reported by Fatemi et al. (2011). Nevertheless, while Ansary and Babii (2003) argue that 'since the first study of sexism in ELT materials in the 70's, little has changed over the past three decades' (p. 51) and that a linguistic change seems to be 'unworkable and futile' (p. 52), they do not conduct any systematic review or longitudinal research to compare the changes in relation to sexism in textbooks over time.

Adopting Porecca's framework and critical discourse analysis, Barton and Sakwa (2012) investigate gender representation in an English textbook (*English in Use*) in Uganda. Nine of a total of 20 units are selected. The instruments include two 80-minute class observations and semi-structured interviews with two teachers. The results reveal that male characters constituted 64.3% of the total number of characters in texts and 79.3% of those in images and accounted for 73% of the professional positions. Furthermore, the authors observe that teachers ignore the gender issues by dealing with students uncritically since they believe influencing students' thinking to be unethical. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution since fewer than half of the units are analysed and a sample of only two teachers cannot be considered to represent the common pedagogies and general attitudes of teachers.

It is suggested that the propagation of fixed notions about masculinity and femininity in textbooks may lead to a dichotomous set of standards about the roles of men and women (Christie, 2000) and restrict learners' social behaviour and interpersonal relationships (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009). The portrayal of women who are homely, housebound and nurturing (Bakhtiari & Saadat, 2015; Sunderland, 1992) may impact females' personal and career aspirations and social status. Blumberg (2007, p. 5) observes that stereotypical representations of gender in textbooks might constrain 'girls' and boys' vision of who they are and what they can become'.

Female and male visibility

Female invisibility is another common manifestation of gender inequality. In terms of English textbooks, numerous researchers (e.g. Gupta & Lee, 1990; Lee & Collins, 2009; Porreca, 1984; Wharton, 2005) report that females appear in texts and pictures less frequently than men, ranging from 'simply invisible' (Weitzman et al., 1972, p. 1128) to under one-third (Hellinger, 1980) and close to parity (Williams et al., 1987). Focusing on a business English textbook, Goyal and Rose (2020) compare the gender representation of two editions of *Market Leader* published in 2000 and 2010. The authors identify some improvement in the gender visibility and portrayal of females and males; however, power imbalances between men and women in professional roles are also reported.

Otlowski (2003) analyses the gender bias of an English language textbook (*Expressway A*) used in Japan. Examination of the conversations and illustrations of 38 units reveals that men are twice as visible as women in the illustrations. Women are stereotyped as homemakers and mothers – roles that no longer accurately represent females' role in the society nowadays. However, it is worth

noting that the data collection and analysis procedures are not clearly presented. While the author reports some figures, he does not provide a clear overall picture (e.g. the total number of textual contexts). Moreover, it is unclear how the data are analysed. Although the researcher claims that these extracts were scrutinised from the gender perspective, there is a lack of information on how subjective judgments were minimised. Furthermore, some examples quoted are of arguable validity. For instance, Otlowski (2003) argues that the expression 'Oh, it's lovely' (p. 10) is not a common expression for men to use. However, the researcher does not justify this argument with solid evidence.

Use of gender-biased language

Some language commentators (e.g. Mills, 2008; Spender, 1998; Swim et al., 2004) criticise the use of masculine nouns and pronouns as the benchmark for human beings and occupational roles (e.g. businessmen). For instance, Sano et al.'s (2001) study shows that the deep-rooted prejudice in favour of male supremacy and female inferiority is reflected in gender-biased language (e.g. chairman). Furthermore, Ansary and Babii (2003) find that ELT materials are fraught with the unfair and inexcusable language of a male-dominated society. At the same time, however, gender-neutral terms and paired pronouns (e.g. his/her) have increasingly been adopted to replace their gender-exclusive counterparts (Pauwels, 1998).

Asymmetrical female forms of address

Similarly to the analyses of gender-biased language, there is relatively limited literature on honorifics (Takemaru, 2005). Some researchers (e.g. Atkins-Sayre, 2005; Pauwels, 2001) suggest that English honorifics have been criticised

for being gender-asymmetrical, namely the female titles *Mrs* and *Miss* indicate a female's marital status. Otlowski's (2003) study demonstrates the discriminatory use of the address title *Mrs* and the stereotypical portrayal of married females as housewives. Nevertheless, it has been observed that non-parallel forms of address have been increasingly replaced with the neutral title *Ms* nowadays (Holmes, 2001; Winter & Pauwels, 2007).

Male-firstness

Male-first ordering reflects the traditional assumption of male supremacy. Amare (2007) observes an almost 5:1 ratio of male–female-firstness in online grammar exercises. Samadikhah and Shahrokhi (2015) examine two ELT textbooks (*Top Notch* and *Summit*) and find that both textbooks to be biased in favour of males regarding firstness and titles used in dialogues. The majority of previous research mainly employs manual methods of analysis, which means it is possible that subtle gender biases have been missed (Carroll & Kowitz, 1994). In view of this, Lee (2014) uses corpora and software tools (WordSmith) to uncover the hidden curriculum in relation to gender representations in Japanese EFL textbooks (*Orbit* and *Unicorn*). The results reveal that male-firstness, female invisibility and stereotypical images are prevalent, although the textbook writers attempt to use gender-inclusive terms and neutral titles. Although Lee introduces a quantitative dimension, without qualitative analysis, there is no reliable data to expose how this discourse was reproduced.

Analysis of *Real Listening and Speaking 4*

While general English textbooks have frequently been analysed, those that focus on listening and speaking skills, which tend to comprise more interactions

and dialogues, have rarely been investigated. My analysis aims to explore the hidden curriculum of a commercial English listening and speaking textbook (*Real Listening and Speaking 4*) from the point of view of gender. In order to explore gender representation in the textbook, the quantitative content analysis was carried out focusing on gender stereotyping, gender visibility, use of gender-biased language, address titles, and firstness.

The selected textbook for advanced learners was published by Cambridge University Press in 2008. After referring to relevant research (e.g. Ansary & Babii, 2003; Goyal & Rose, 2020), the whole textbook, containing 111 pages, 16 units and 2 sections (social and travel, and work and study) was analysed. Data analysis was performed manually by counting and categorising verbal dialogues (audio scripts), texts and pictorial illustrations in the textbook.

As shown in Table 1 (see Appendix), the results reveal an almost precisely balanced representation of males (51) and females (50) in images. While this finding is consistent with that of Dominguez's (2003) study, which suggests that publishers have become more aware of gender-sensitive visual presentation in EFL/ESL textbooks, it contradicts findings of previous studies on other language textbooks (e.g. Aydınoglu, 2014) that males appear more often in illustrations. However, instances of power imbalance between males and females in professional roles and also of gender stereotyping in images were found. While males were placed in more authoritative roles (e.g. managing director and visa officer), females were portrayed in stereotypical roles. For example, in unit 3 (See a doctor), all the nurses were female. In line with Arnold-Gerrity's (1978) finding, females were more frequently portrayed engaged in household tasks and associated with indoor activities. In terms of visibility in textual and speech elements, relatively balanced male–female representations were found. The frequency of in-text references to males and females was 44 (51.16%) and 42

(48.84%) respectively (see Table 1). Similarly, females accounted for 42.19% of the total number of speakers and 43.09% of the words spoken in the dialogues were by women (see Table 1). This result indicates that there was no significant male-first ordering. While few gender-biased terms (e.g. chairman) were found, gender-neutral and gender-inclusive terms were frequently used (e.g. 'police' [cf. *policeman*]). In terms of honorifics, no address title was found in textual elements and only three formal male address titles (*Mr*) and one female address title (*Mrs*) were observed in speech.

These results suggest that the gender equality was reflected in the form of balanced female and male visibility and the use of gender-neutral language, non-asymmetrical address titles and firstness. The balanced female and male representations were in contrast to the female invisibility and male-firstness found in many of the previous studies reviewed above. This might be due to the design of the textbooks as it involves many conversations in mixed gender contexts. To help learners identify the voices, female and male speakers often talked alternately. This convention may contribute to the equality in gender visibility. However, in line with most of the findings of the previous studies (e.g. Gupta & Yin, 1990; Harashima, 2005; Matsuno, 2002; Sakita, 1995), the results indicate that the textbook maintains stereotypical depictions of gender roles. Nevertheless, this analysis is limited in several ways. First, only quantitative analysis was performed, by manual counting. In addition, this was a small-scale study, as only one textbook was analysed, and therefore the findings may not be generalisable to other textbooks.

Implications and conclusion

Textbooks are crucial since they 'carry great power of legitimation, which makes students imbibe […] behavioural models, collective identities and gender-sensitive values' (Goyal & Rose, 2020, p. 2). Appropriate gender representation in textbooks is important for promoting gender equality. An increasing number of studies on gender in textbooks argue that textbooks should reflect the world as *it should be*, rather than the world *as it is* (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009).

To create a gender-equal society, it is necessary for relevant government bodies to improve textbooks through their authorisation systems, such as publishing guidelines for establishing gender equality in educational materials. Numerous researchers (e.g. Beebe, 1998; Kanemaru, 1998; Pierce, 1995) suggest that publishers should critically reflect on female and male representations and be aware of sexist language use and sexist bias in textbooks. Future materials should manifest a balanced view of the role of women in modern society and not perpetuate prejudices about women and their roles. Textbooks should comprise balanced topics that have a fair distribution of female and male characters and introduce both genders as protagonists more equally. Gray (2000) proposes the 'PARSNIP' principle in textbook writing and advocates the avoidance of an inappropriate hidden curriculum, including gender bias. Lee (2014, p. 51) suggests that government bodies should compile guidelines to help publishers, textbook developers and teachers to strive for gender equality in educational materials, including 'balanced representation of men and women through the book', 'sufficient definition of important women', 'defiance of gender stereotyping in terms of activities performed and characteristics displayed', 'avoidance of sexist language', 'symmetrical address of women and men' and 'adoption of alternative ordering of men and women'.

In terms of teaching, teachers should be more critically aware of the hidden curriculum in textbooks and carefully select textbooks that have less gender bias.

Holmvist and Gjorup (2007, p. 28) emphasise that teachers should be responsible for providing 'a more versatile view on gender representation than is provided in the textbooks'. Teachers should challenge the gender biases inherent in educational materials and encourage students to discuss the gender issues raised in textbooks (Fairclough, 1992; Giaschi, 2000). For instance, teachers should critically discuss the social impact of the depictions with students and use the text as a vehicle for promoting gender-inclusive attitudes.

While previous research generally reveals gender disparities in the form of gender stereotyping, female invisibility, use of gender-biased language, asymmetrical titles of female address, and male-firstness, my analysis demonstrates the relatively balanced male–female representations in the listening and speaking textbook. Further research is needed to investigate how types of educational materials affect depictions of gender, how textbooks are used in classrooms, and how the gender bias influences students' growth.

Appendix

Table 1

Representations of females and males in images and textual and speech elements

Focus	Unit of analysis	No. of occurrences
Images	No. of male characters	51 (49.50%)
	No. of female characters	50 (50.50%)
Textual elements	Frequency of in-text references to males	44 (51.16%)
	Frequency of in-text references to females	42 (48.84%)
	Male address title: *Mr*	0
	Female address title: *Mrs*	0
	Female address title: *Miss*	0
	Female address title: *Ms*	0
Speech elements	No. of male speakers	37 (57.81%)
	No. of female speakers	27 (42.19%)
	Proportion of dialogue occupied by male speech	140 (56.91%)
	Proportion of dialogue occupied by female speech	106 (43.09%)
	Male address title: *Mr*	3
	Female address title: *Mrs*	1
	Female address title: *Miss*	0
	Female address title: *Ms*	0

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