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Gender representation in EFL materials: an analysis of English textbooks of Iranian high schools

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to examine different areas of gender-bias in representation of women and men in 3 volumes of English textbooks taught in the high schools of Iran. Chi-squares were performed to find the frequency of names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives attributed to women and men. Also, chi-square was carried out to investigate whether women and men had more or less equal first-place occurrences in instructions, exercises and sentences. Furthermore, the other areas which were investigated were: 1. reading passages to find whether women and men appeared more or less equally or not, 2. male-generics and 3. animals. The findings revealed that the manifestation of women and men in these textbooks was not fair. In other words, the presence of men was more highlighted than that of women regarding names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives attributed to them. In regard to firstness, also, male-attributed terms came first more frequently than those of females. In reading passages, male characters appeared more frequently than female characters. Moreover, these textbooks contained many male-generics in which women were almost invisible. Also, sexism was detected in regard to animal representations.

Keywords:: gender-neutral; sexism (gender-bias); male-biased terms; male-generics; firstness

1. Introduction

Textbooks play a very important role in EFL education since it is generally through textbooks that learners get acquainted with the target language culture and values. It is believed that women are derogated in language and texts are manipulated in favor of men as Rahimi and Sahragard (2006, p. 29) believe derogation is "… rife in the ideological manipulations of the texts". According to Hartman and Judd(1978) what is taught in ESL classrooms including lexicon, topics of reading passages or grammar, are all of cultural importance. Therefore, based on different cultures, different characteristics and behaviors are expected from both genders. Contemplating the culture and its relationship to language, we can understand that in most of the cultures, women have been treated oppressively(Mills, 1995, p.1). Unequal treatment of women and men is not limited to textbooks; rather, it can be extended to other aspects existing in a society because according to Mills(1995, p. 1) it is through language that ideas are shaped. Therefore, if language treats women and men unfairly, it will affect the thought and ideas of the EFL learners, too (Bravo, E., Enache, M., Fernandez, V., & Simo, P. 2010). Although the issue of gender and

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language play a very important role in students' language learning and attitudes, not much has changed since the first study of sexism   in 1970s(Ansary and Babaii, 2003, p.10). Sexism has been examined from different perspectives, some of which are as follow:

1.1.Male-biased terms

Henley(1987, cited by Weatherall, 2002)states that language not only ignores women but also belittles them, that is, male-referring words, e.g., the words bachelor, master and lord have more positive connotations than the feminine equivalents spinster, mistress and lady. Moreover, Nilsen(cited by Porreca, 1984) believes that in the word pairs governor/governess, major/majorette, and lord/lady, the male term represents 'seriousness and respectfulness' but the female word has got a disparaging value. So, the terms referred to women regard them as being inferior Baskan, G., & Erduran, Y. (2009).

1.2. Male-generics

Another controversial area of sexism in the English language is the use of male-generic items(Weatherall, 2002). According to many researchers(Kramper, 1975; Miller & Swift, 1998, cited by Parks & Roberton, 2004; Bauer, Holmes & Warren, 2006) the use of male-generics to refer to both women and men such as *he* and *mankind* are sexist and, in fact, results in invisibility of women. Kramper(1975) suggests the use of *human beings* instead of *man* or *men* and Graham(1975, p. 63) recommends the use of the term *person* instead of the term *man*. To reduce the abundance of the pronoun 'his' , the use of 'their' is suggested but it is stated that the use of the gender-neutral 'they' should not be encouraged since it is not grammatically correct (Van Ek and Robat, 1984, see Sunderland, 1992; Mills, 1995) .

1.3.Titles

The common title used for men in English is the term 'Mr.' whether the man is married or not. However, the titles used for women are 'Miss' referring to unmarried women and 'Mrs.' for married women. So, the term *Ms* was introduced to parallel *Mr.* However, it is claimed that "… Ms is frequently interpreted as title for divorced, separated or widowed woman,…."(Bauer, Holmes & Warren, 2006, p. 164). According to Lakoff(1973, cited by Thorne & Henley, 1975) sexist language is the result of social inequality of the sexes and as long as the difference between a married and an unmarried woman exists in a society, the acceptance of the term *Ms.* seems to be difficult as Thorne & Henley(1975, p. 29) believe " … language and society cannot be easily separated".

1.4.Firstness

By firstness in the present research we mean placing male terms before the female terms. When both female and male referring terms come in a text, it is almost always the male term that precedes the female term. Mills(1995) believes that the order of male terms coming before the terms referring to females is another aspect of the unequal treatment of women and men and this , in fact prioritizes men. In the English language fixed collocations are used "… where the male referents occur first-as in 'he or she', 'husband and wife', 'men and women'"(Goddard and Patterson, 2000, p.57). Hartman and Judd(1970, quoted by Farooq, 1999, p. 16) state " While such automatic ordering(with the male first) may be a minor point, it reinforces the second-place status of women".

1.5. Males as the main characters

Another area in which women are absent is the stories or reading passages of some textbooks where usually the main characters are males (Weatherall(2002). Furthermore, the toys children play with are named after male characters, e.g., *Mister Train* or *Thomas the tank engine* or a toy dog was given a males name and called *Joey*. It is stated that in writing EFL materials, only boys' interests are taken into consideration because it is believed that boys will not tolerate girls' topics and interests; however, girls do not usually complain about this issue(Poynton, 1989).

2. Aim of the study

The present study intends to analyze gender representation in English textbooks of Iranian high schools written by Birjandi et al.(2006) and come in three volumes and are taught in the first, second and third grades of Iranian high schools. It was questionable if English textbooks of Iranian high schools were gender-biased. For this purpose, these textbooks were analyzed in terms of names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives allocated to each sex. Also, these textbooks were examined to find out whether females and males had equal first-place occurrences in instructions, exercises and sentences. Other areas which were investigated were reading passages, male-generics and animals.

3. Method

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches in which frequency counts of female and male referring terms, frequency of first-place occurrences of words attributed to females and males were examined. In order to find out whether women and men were treated equally in the three volumes of English textbooks of Iranian high schools, all parts of the textbooks were investigated including the illustrations as well. After the tabulation of the raw data, they were converted to statistical data. Chi-squares were used to get the frequencies of the raw data statistically. In addition to the textbooks mentioned, a questionnaire was also given to twenty-five graduate students of TEFL at Alzahra university to find out how EFL learners believed gender is presented in Iranian EFL materials used in our high schools.

4. Findings

The analysis regarding whether nouns, names, pronouns and adjectives attributed to females and males have equal frequencies in these textbooks revealed the following results as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1. Frequency of Names, Nouns, Pronouns and Adjectives Attributed to Females and Males in Volumes 1, 2 & 3 of English Textbooks of Iranian High Schools

(M=Male & F=Female)   The numbers in square brackets represent the percentages, and the ones in parentheses the instances

Volume	Sex	Names	Nouns	Pronouns	Adjectives	Presence
Vol.1	M	[85%](215)	[63%](116)	[78%](285)	[89%](117)	[79%](733)
	F	[15%](38)	[37%](68)	[22%](80)	[11%](14)	[21%](200)
	M	[87%](120)	[77%](145)	[75%](222)	[84%](68)	[78.8%](555)
Vol.2	F	[13%](18)	[23%](44)	[25%](75)	[16%](13)	[21.2%](150)
	M	[77.3%](109)	[71.3%](67)	[68.4%](162)	[69.5%](32)	[71.5%](370)
Vol.3	F	[22.7%](32)	[28.7%](27)	[31.6%](75)	[30.5%](14)	[28.5%](148)

As table 1 shows, the percentage of all the names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives of men is 79%, but those of women is 21% in volume 1. This means that without the slightest doubt males have been given priority over females regarding the points under investigation. To confirm the results of the frequencies, Chi-square test was used. The Chi-square 304.49 with the degree of freedom=1 and alpha=0.01 is significant. The total percentage of nouns, names, pronouns and adjectives referring to males(78.8%) is more than those of females(21.2%) in volume 2. Therefore, in this case too definitely males outnumber females. To confirm the above-mentioned results, Chi-square test was used. The Chi-square- 232.6 with df=1 and alpha=0.01 is significant. The total frequencies and percentage of nouns, names, pronouns and adjectives referring to males(71.5%) is more than those of females(28.5 %) in volume 3. Therefore, in this case too definitely males outnumber females. To confirm the above-mentioned results, the findings of Chi-square test are considered. The Chi-square 95.14 with df=1 and alpha=0.01 is significant. Therefore, with 99% certainty, it can be stated that there are statistically significant differences between the names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives referring to males and those of females in volumes 1, 2 and 3 of the textbooks under investigation.

It was also examined to see whether females and males have equal first-place occurrences in instructions, exercises and sentences in English textbooks of Iranian high schools or not. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were applied and it was found that males and females do not have equal first-place occurrences in the areas investigated. As table 2 below shows, the total percentage of first-place occurrences of males, i.e. 89.6% is more than females, i.e. 10.4%. Therefore, males occupied first-place occurrences more than females.

Table 2. Frequency of First-place Occurrences by Males and Females in Instructions, Exercises or Sentences.

(The numbers in parentheses represent the percentages).

Items		Male occurrences	Female occurrences
Instructions	**Vol.1**	1	0
Exercises or sentences		2	0
Total(1)		3	0
Instructions	**Vol.2**	1	0
Exercises or sentences		7	2
Total(2)		8	2
Instructions	**Vol.3**	8	0
Exercises or sentences		7	1
Total(3)		15	1
Total (1,2 & 3)	**Volumes 1, 2 & 3**	26(89.6%)	3 (10.4%)

To confirm the above-mentioned results, the findings of Chi-square test was used .The result of Chi-square test-18.34 with df=1 and alpha=0.01 is statistically significant. Therefore, with 99% certainty, it can be stated that there are statistically significant differences between the frequency of first-place occurrences of males and females and the preference is given to males. To confirm the above-mentioned results, twenty five graduate students of TEFL at Alzahra university were given a questionnaire and were asked to choose the sentences which seemed more natural in English for a sentence to start with. The results showed that 79% of respondents believed that words attributed to males preceded the words attributed to females and only 20.5% believed the opposite is more natural.

In addition to the areas discussed, three more areas were also investigated: The first one was reading passages and the second one was to find the sentences which had 'male generic' terms and the last one was the case of 'animals'.

There were 9 reading passages in volume 1, out of which 4 passages were about famous male characters. Although the titles of 3 passages were not directly male characters, the passages themselves were about male characters ,and one passage was about a male monkey. Therefore, out of the total of 9 passages, 8 were directly or indirectly about male characters. In volume 2, there were 7 reading passages out of which one passage was about a famous male writer, one passage was about a man and one passage was about a monkey who was considered female. In volume 3, there were 6 reading passages which were gender-free. Therefore, out of the total 22 reading passages in the three volumes of the English textbooks investigated, 10 passages were directly or indirectly about male characters and only one was about a female monkey. So, in this case, also, men were given more priority.

Another area in which women were usually absent in the three volumes of English textbooks of Iranian high schools was the abundant use of male generic terms as if the human beings were only males. Therefore, the use of male generics to refer to both men and women in these textbooks excluded women and made them invisible.

In these textbooks, there were three kinds of animals considered as male, such as horse, bird and monkey; however, there was one animal which was considered as female and it was monkey, so in the case of animals, too, males outnumbered females.

5. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate and analyze gender representation of English textbooks of Iranian high schools. For this purpose, three English textbooks which are taught in grades 1, 2 and 3 at Iranian high schools were investigated thoroughly. The results revealed that there is not a fair treatment of females and males in these series of textbooks, i.e., there is a big gender gap between the portrayal of females and males in the books under investigation. Sexism is manifested in different areas in these textbooks. The areas of sexism found were names, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, firstness, reading passages and male-generics. In the areas of names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives, males outnumbered females. In regard to firstness, males occurred more than females in the first places of instructions, exercises and sentences. Concerning reading passages too there was the supremacy of males over females, i.e., they occupied the titles and the topics of most passages and women were almost neglected. Another area of gender-bias manifested in these textbooks was the abundant use of male generics referring to both men and women. In regard to animals, also, the number of animals referred to males was more than that of women. Therefore, it can be stated that in the textbooks investigated, women were almost invisible and discriminated.

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