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The power of language and ELT textbooks

Ehya Amalsaleh[a], Fatemeh Javid[b], Ali Rahimi[c] *

[a]*English Department, Paramedical School, Shiraz, Postcode 92645-43356, Iran*
[b]*Islamic Azad University of Marvdasht, Marvdasht, Iran*
[c]*Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, University of Kashan, Kashan, Postcode 87317-51167, Iran*

Abstract

This study investigates how language is employed in EFL textbooks to represent a society and its members. The idea that textbooks are neutral and they just serve to transmit knowledge is no longer accepted (Hodge and kress, 1993; van Dijk, 1998; Howard and Dedo, 1989). Howard and Dedo (1989) point out that textbooks can disseminate the idea of accepting power and taking it as natural. This pr study applies the CDA approach, more specifically Hodge and Kress's framework (1993), to a selection of texts found in Spectrum, as sample of EFL textbooks studied in certain EFL institutes in Iran.
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1. Introduction

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) views language a crucial vehicle for disseminating certain viewpoints. Language is believed (Van Dijk, 2001; Hodge & Kress, 1993) to form behavior, and the way we feel and think. It is also seen as an instrument capable of shaping our ideology as well as changing social reality. It seems, therefore, necessary to make people aware of what language can do in defining people and their status in the community. CDA, generally speaking, (Anastasiag, S. and Stephanos Paraskevopoulos, 2004:107) attempts to synthesize linguistic and social approaches of discourse analysis. This study has taken the CDA approach, more specifically Hodge and Kress's framework (1993) and tends to analyze a selection of texts found in *Spectrum*, as a sample of ELT textbooks studied in certain ELT institutes in Iran. CDA proponents (Hodge & Kress, 1993, Van Dijk, 1998) strongly argue that no text is innocent; that is, all texts contribute to disseminating certain ideology. Hence, language is involved in carrying out ideological work. The study wishes to investigate how patterns of choices of lexicogrammar in a language may represent the members of the community, more specifically men and women and the nature (Erozkan, A. 2008).

2. Statement of the problem

This study is to investigate how language as a social practice is employed in the EFL/ESL textbooks to represent the members of a community as well as the nature. More specifically, it is to study how the representation constructs certain social and normative realities, such as subjectivity and identity. There is a consensus that textbooks are

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98-913-309-9535; fax: +98-361-555-2930
E-mail address: rahimijah@yahoo.com

neutral and they just serve to transmit knowledge. This is no longer accepted by CDA proponents (Hodge and kress, 1993; van Dijk, 1998; Howard and Dedo, 1989). In this concern, Howard and Dedo (1989) point out that not only the idea doesn't hold true, it even disseminates the idea of accepting the power and taking it as natural. Then, the textbooks used in classrooms, along with other sources, including teachers and students, can have some political and or socio-political effects on the members of the community in general and the learners in particular (Schaal, S. 2010).

3. Research question

This current research is framed by the following questions:

1. Which classification is used to represent the underlying ideology? To answer this question, the clauses are divided into two general classes, namely, *actionals* and *relationals*, each further divided into two subcategories.

2. What 'social actor' (van Leeuwen, 1996) is seen as most powerful in the lexicogrammar of the clause? To answer this question, social actor is viewed from the point that whether the clause is taken male, female, or general (both males and females) or non-animate objects, as the doer of the action or somebody/something to talk about.

3. What actions are the doer or affected involved in? This would help the researcher to be more specific about the categories/subcategories and their possible effects on the learner.

4. Data Analysis

In analyzing the English textbooks under the rubric of CDA, the study tends to find the ways the agents are represented in them. . As it is emphasized by the proponents of CDA that the allocation of roles to certain agent is by no means innocent; rather it follows and attempts to sustain a particular kind of ideology. Hence, textbooks, to the extent that they represent the community members in certain ways, can reveal the underlying determining ideologies at work.

The texts are analyzed to show the representation of gender and nature mainly through the following properties: verbals, voice and nominalization. As table 1 indicates, the textbooks offers almost equal opportunity to genders to present themselves. There is no statistically significant difference in representing genders in terms of using actional verbs or relationals.

Table 1. Gender & Verbal Cross tabulation

	Verbals				
Gender	Transaction	Non-transaction	Attribute	Equative	
Male	46	76	8	10	140
Female	45	54	6	3	108
Total	91	130	14	13	248

Concerning voice and gender, again no significant difference was detected between males and females. Both of are mostly presented in active voice, with a few number of clauses in which they are the agents of passive voice. Again, most statements used either general subjects (32.1%) or things (35.3%). This issue may invite different interpretations presented in the next section.

Table 2. Gender and Voice Cross tabulation

Voice	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Active	103	137	240
Passive with agent	3	1	4
Passive with no agent	2	2	4

Total	108	140	248

With regard to nominalization, in which actions are turned into objects and verbal processes are changed into nouns, the textbooks have rarely used nominalization (5.8%) (Table 3). The texts mostly tend to depict the doer of the action. This may be because of the fact that the text with nominalization requires more complex processing which may make the task of language learning difficult. Again the difference in using nominalization for males and females is not significant.

Table 3. Nominalisation & Gender Cross tabulation

Nominalisation	Gender		Total
	Male	**Female**	
No-Nominalisation	139	108	247
Nominalisation	1	0	1
Total	140	108	248

The topics of the reading sections can display the attitude of the writers toward power, nature, among other things. Nature comprises about 35% of the topics under discussion in the textbooks analyzed. Concerning the verbals used to present the nature, the textbooks resorted to relational verbs, in which either a sort of value judgment is added to it or an entity is assigned to it. As Table 4 demonstrates, textbooks employs actionals predominantly when take human being as the social actor while relationals are used to represent nature. Concerning voice, the social actors receive active voice when they are human beings (67.5%) while passive voice predominates when the actor is nature. Of course, active voice is employed to talk about nature (32.5%), but, this is done mainly when the text is talking about the threatening function of the nature. Generally speaking, nature is represented as active and tranactionals are used to present nature whenever the negative features of nature are into account.

Table 4. Verbals & Voice representing nature & Human beings

	Nature	Human	Total
Verbals			
Transaction	56 (38)	91 (62)	147
Non-transaction	44 (25)	130 (75)	174
Attribute	39 (74)	14 (26)	53
Equative	21 (62)	13 (38)	34
Voice			
Active	116 (32.5)	240 (67.5)	356
Passive with agent	5 (55.5)	4 (44.5)	9
Passive with no agent	39 (91)	4 (9)	43
Total	320 (39)	496 (61)	816

5. Results and discussion

The findings of the study reveal that unlike some other EFL books studied before (Amalsaleh 2005), these books have made an attempt to show male and females almost equally. For instance, as table1 above shows, although in the case of non-transactive, male subjects have dominated the female ones ,males and females are equally presented as those who had some effects on their environment (transactive). Concerning the relational, again there are almost equal accounts of males and females (Jim was never late/ Octavian was very pleased) while under equatives, in which , two entities are related to a verb not showing any action (e.g. "Most are men"), there are more instances of

men than women. The texts have mostly resorted to either general terms such as 'they', encompassing both sexes or non-human. Otherwise, the textbook may be deliberately overlooking the problem if not evading it. Furthermore, since the society is depicted in the book as a society in which equality between genders is in effect, then no one would seek finding a solution when there is no problem (gender inequality, e.g.) in the first place (Peskett, 2001).

Furthermore, as Lee (1993) puts it, school subjects do not offer the subject matter of a particular branch of science; they, rather, are the media of education as well. The finding of the study shows how the textbooks studied represent the ideology supported and disseminated by the west mainstream policy in which democracy and a non-discriminatory approach among the issues is encouraged. Although the books are seemingly geared towards men, the writers are very careful to present both sides with equal social position and status. The textbooks, in fact, have tried to depict a society in which people, male and female, are equal and have equal opportunities to be a writer, an athlete, an adventurer, etc (Tables 2 & 3).

However, In addition to representing the members of the community, the textbooks contain a number of reading passages on non-human issues, such as environment, climate, city, etc. Nature has comprised about 35% of the topics under discussion in the textbooks analyzed. The topics of the reading sections can display the attitude of the writers toward power and nature. In different units of the textbooks, it is noticed that nature is depicted as something subservient to human being. Human beings are instead powerful. They, in effect, control the nature, including animals, forests, space, etc. Concerning the verbals used to present the nature, the textbooks have mostly resorted to relational verbs, in which either a sort of value judgment is passed or an entity is assigned to nature, respectively. In both cases, the nature is presented as a passive object. In contrast, actional verbs are used to represent human being, indicating that they have more effects on nature or their surrounding (Table 4).

The textbooks encourage the hegemonic ideology in which human beings, mostly men, have the power to rule over and control nature. Such an approach takes nature as Others. The idea of "otherness" is what most CDA proponents are concerned (van Dijk,2005, Wodak, 1999). As the above table shows, there is a 'human being' who is successful, genuine, expert, etc and a nature which is risky, dangerous, hence should be tamed. As the above table reveals when nature is admired, it is for the human being o take pleasure out of it.

The power of nature is deliberately undermined in the textbooks studied and instead the anthropocentric is encouraged in which "all value and/or ethics should or even must have human beings as its principal or even sole focus." (Curry). In Book three, unit 1, for instance, animals are under the control of human and the writer stated "She is driving animals", but in the same lesson, it is written " Dogs had been badly injured" or "Two were already dead". Here, apparently, nobody is responsible for the injury or the death of the animals. Man, instead, is the powerful social actor and is depicted positively throughout the textbook. In another lesson, when the writer talks about some dangers for men, the write nominalized the verbs and uses the following words: fall, injuries, fire, burn, etc. In all these instances, human being as the social actor who can cause such dangers is sent into the background and therefore took on no responsibility.

6. Implications of the study

Textbooks are generally taken as a kind of genre presenting the fact objectively, and the materials included are usually assumed to be true and hence, do not usually encourage critical thinking. However, concerning the roles given to community members and nature, normative implication of such practices used in textbooks cannot be overlooked. In this regard, Taylor (2003) states that "When normativity is seen as a condition for the possibility of politics, it becomes impossible to think about politics in any other terms". And Bury (1994), while subscribing to Tayor, suggests that "it is our work to transmit the message that our present path is the road to death and that it can be changed. People must recognize that the human system is a subsystem of the larger Earth system which is a part of the Universe system".

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