Analyzing the Representational Aspect of Gender in Learning English as a Foreign Language: The Case of Grades 7 and 8 Students' Textbooks in Ethiopian Context

Mihretie Kibret Awoke, Dessie Alemayehu Kibret, Abebe Asres Mengistu, Derb Abiew Dires[*]

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Gondar
[*]Email: derb2002@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the representational aspect of gender in learning English as a foreign language in the case of grade 7 and 8 students' textbooks. The study used a descriptive survey research design involving a mixed approach (quantitative and qualitative methods). To collect data, content analysis was primarily employed. The data were analyzed quantitatively using frequencies and percentages and qualitatively using narrations. The study found out that males occur with 59.8% but females with 40.2% in grade 7 students' textbook, and males with 57.5% but females with 42.5% in grade 8 students' English language textbook. Moreover, it was uncovered that males appear first with 67.3% and females with 32.7% in grade 7 students' textbook, and males with 61.1% but females with 38.9% in grade 8 students' conversational tasks in their textbook. Accordingly, it can be concluded that EFL students' textbooks in the Ethiopian context dominantly embed males more than females both in representations and orders of occurrence as the major acting characters in dialogical situations. Thus, it is pedagogically implied that curriculum developers and textbook designers should harmoniously consider gender representation while designing learning materials.

Keywords: Gender, Representation, Learning English

Introduction

Learning English as a second and foreign language is a sophisticated process that multifarious variables could influence. Gender as socially and culturally made roles to males and females, is regarded as one of such major affective variables that influence second and foreign language instruction. It significantly affects and plays an essential role in the achievement of students in language learning. As a result, jeopardizing its influence may lead to inappropriate development of learning materials and contexts for male and female learners (Andreou, Vlachos & Andreou, 2005; Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012; Maghsudi, Sharifi & Abedi, 2015).

Gender as part and parcel of the socio-linguistics has to do with the visible or invisible portrayal of males and females in learning materials. Scholars from sociolinguistics and education postulate that textbooks can share knowledge, attitudes, and social values with learners (Hamdan, 2008; Zoghi, Kazemi & Kalani, 2013). Teaching materials are the most crucial social as well as linguistic sources; they help students begin understanding their roles in society in general and classrooms in particular. In light of this, Hamdan (2008, p.19) explained, "The way the text portrays the various people in the target society, and the way those people are shown to communicate will directly affect EFL students' choices of language when communicating". This entails that students can learn multi-

farious values from their textbooks. The attitudes students develop, the knowledge they acquire, and the roles they wish to act out in the classroom are highly conditioned by the actual representation of their learning materials (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008).

In the same vein, it is argued that the way gender is displayed in learning materials potentially influences pupils' language learning and use (Jarbawi, 2002; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). Emphasizing the issue, Hamdan (2008, p.11) echoed, "The most convincing reason would be that the representation and the presentation of gender in school textbooks potentially affect students as language learners and users." From this, it is obvious that the inclusion of balanced gender representations in a certain material matter to students' way of thinking and actions. To consolidate the idea, Sunderland (1992, p. 86) claimed the influence in the following three ways:

"First, films, videos, and newspapers have an unconscious influence on the audience, so presumably can EFL materials on students. Second, if female learners are conscious of the female characters in their course books as relatively few, with limited roles, and are offended, alienated, or made to feel marginalized, this is more likely to hinder than facilitate their learning. Third, models of language usually become classroom practice. So textbooks that have males always initiate speech in dialogs and pair work practice, give the whole class a model of a conversational discourse characterized by 'male firstness'.

The above argument suggests that policymakers, curriculum developers, and syllabus designers should genuinely characterize gender (male and female) while conducting teaching materials in such a way that fairly reflects the roles of learners in the classroom. The current study attempts to investigate the occurrence, sequence of occurrence, and roles of assignments which are manifested in communicative activities in dialogs and reading texts, photos, and illustrations in textbooks.

To the researchers' observations, most female students in Ethiopian elementary schools were often seen not actively involved in EFL classrooms. They preferred being silent, especially in conversational tasks. When they were making dialogs with their counterpart males, they kept being silent or waiting until males opened the conversations. This was likely because their learning materials did not properly depict gender in a way that females or girls could take initiative in dialogical settings. Nonetheless, Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh (2012), Główka (2014), and Mahmud (2018) assured that females look more interactive in a cooperative way which could make them effective learning process if the educational system provides equal opportunities for all learners regardless of their gender. Therefore, conducting a study concerning the extent to which females were represented in textbooks, their roles, and the orders they appeared in seemed helpful to address the issue.

Researchers conducting studies on gender have reported the existence of imbalance occurrences of males and females at a global level (Pavlenko & Piller, 2008; Główka, 2014; Mahmud, 2018). For instance, Chick (2006) examined the proper incorporation of boys and girls in American K-12 students' textbooks and confirmed more boys than girls in contents. Hamdan (2008) also evaluated the aspect of gender in Jordanian textbooks and reported males were dominant actors in the materials. Furthermore, Zoghi, Kazemi, and Kalani (2013) examined the effect of gender on learning the English language. However, little attention in studies has been paid to the issue at hand in EFL textbooks in the Ethiopian context. It is from this gap bridging intention that the current study attempted seeking the following research questions:

1.   To what extent is gender fairly (males and females) represented in grades seven and eight English for Ethiopia students' textbooks?
2.   Who more frequently appears first when males and females co-occur in pairs?
3.   What roles are assigned to males and females in the textbooks?

Review of Literature

Gender in language learning stems from the theory of social constructivism. It is shaped by social and cultural-specific language assumptions and then significantly affects the achievement of students in language learning (Andreou, Vlachos & Andreou, 2005; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). Males and females learn different gender-based behaviors, beliefs, and experiences from various sources; their learning materials are the major ones (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Główka, 2014). This is especially true in EFL contexts. In support of this, AlGhamdi (2014, p. 25) said, "Textbooks play a vital role in language teaching in EFL classrooms as they offer the primary form of linguistic input" because the model in EFL context where learners do not have other sources of language exposure is most likely their textbooks (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Andreou, Vlachos & Andreou, 2005; Iranmanesh & Darani, 2018).

Thus, textbooks have mandates to meticulously address the characterizations and roles of genders in their preparations. Adding the same idea, Hamdan (2008, p.13) claimed, "Textbooks as major educational tools, occupy a central place in the curriculum. They can be powerful instruments for influencing ways in which both children and adults think about core human concepts and values such as the image of male-female and the concept of gender equality and equity". Hamdan (2008) and Zoghi, Kazemi, and Kalani (2013) proved that the way textbooks portray women and men will negatively or positively matter the perception of the pupils. This misconception in turn develops into a strong stereotyping in the community and results in imbalanced perspectives towards the roles of males and females in the instructional process. To avoid this like conception, textbooks should depict positive characteristics and active roles for both males and females (Zoghi, Kazemi & Kalani, 2013; Główka, 2014; Maghsudi, Sharifi & Abedi, 2015).

Methodology

Design

The major objective of this study was to analyze the representational aspect of gender in learning English as a foreign language in grades 7 and 8 students' textbooks in the Ethiopian context. To this end, a descriptive survey research design was employed. This descriptive survey study involved quantitative and qualitative methods (mixed approach) together because as Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) said, "MMR [mixed method research] enables a more comprehensive and complete understanding of phenomena to be obtained than single methods" to provide a richer and more reliable understanding (broader and deeper) of a phenomenon than a single approach would yield (p.33).

Source of Data

The study aimed at analyzing grade 7 and 8 'English for Ethiopia' students' textbooks. Thus, data were gathered from grades 7 and 8 English for Ethiopia students' textbooks which has been conducted in 2017 and used since 2020. Grades 7 and 8 English language textbooks were purposively chosen. This was since these are intermediate grade levels in which learners seemed to be more sensitive to gender-represented roles in their textbooks.

Data Gathering Tool

Content Analysis

Content analysis is one of the data collection tools by examining the contents of the actual texts (Krippendorf, 2004). Thus, content analysis was majorly used to gather data for the present study. To achieve this, names and pronouns divulging both males and females in communicative

activities such as in dialogs, reading texts, photos, pictures, and illustrations in textbooks were taken into account.

Data Analysis Method

Names and pronouns representing both males and females in dialogs, reading texts, photos, and pictures in textbooks were counted and analyzed using frequencies and percentages to realize the extent to which females and males were considered and the frequencies males and females occurred first to when both sexes appeared together. And, the roles assigned to both males and females are analyzed using verbal narration. Hence, both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were employed.

Results

The data are analyzed in line with the research questions.

1.   *To what extent is gender fairly (males and females) represented in grades seven and eight English for Ethiopia students' textbooks?*

Table 1. Males' and females' representation in pictures, photos, and texts in grade 7 textbook

Textbook	Aspect of Evaluation	Males		Females		Total	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Grade 7	Pictures and photos	112	60.5	73	39.5	185	100
	Texts	483	59.6	327	40.4	810	100
	Total	595	59.8	400	40.2	995	100

The table above (Table 1) delivers the data concerning the representation of males and females in texts, pictures, and photos in grade 8 students' English language textbooks. As displayed in the table above, the data revealed that 112 (60.5%) of gender representation is that of males in pictures, photos, and illustrations. However, 73 (39.5%) of the gender representation is of the females. This shows that males are dominantly represented; females are less emphasized in pictures and illustrations in grade seven English for Ethiopia students' textbooks. Accordingly, this may entail that the textbook does not seem to fairly represent and enhance the participation of girls in their learning.

Moreover, the data uncover that 483 (59.6%) of the activities portray the occurrence of males, and the remaining statistical percentage deserves to females. This may indicate that activities regarding girls are not equally treated in reading passages, activities, dialogs, etc. in text form.

In a nutshell, the data divulge that 595 (59.8%) of the contents take part of males whereas 400 (40.2%) of the contents consider females. From this, it is possible to say that girls are not properly represented in grade seven students' English language textbooks.

Table 2 shows the entertainment of females and males in grade 8 students' English language textbooks. As evident in Table, the data point out that females are delegated with the amount of 37.4 percent. On the other hand, males are taken into account with a better amount, that is, 62.6%. Thus, the data unravel that the visibility of boys takes advantage in pictures, photos, and illustrations over that of the girls in the textbook, then, the textbook may not have inspired girls to engage in activities.

Table 2. Females' and males' representation in pictures and texts in grade 8 students' textbook

Textbook	Aspect of Evaluation	Females		Males		Total	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Grade 8	Pictures and photos	52	37.4	87	62.6	139	100
	Texts	348	43.4	454	56.6	802	100
	Total	400	42.5	541	57.5	941	100

It is also witnessed that 43.4% of the text unveils the portion of females, while 56.6% is that of males. Still, the data suggest that there is an unbalanced portrayal of females' and males' presentation in grade eight students' English language textbooks.

The total data in both pictures and texts disclose that females occur with 42.5 percent, whereas males are delegated with 57.5%. Accordingly, the data could imply male control kind of male and female representation in grade eight students' English language textbook.

2.   *Who more frequently appears first when males and females co-occur in pairs?*

Table 3. Males' and females' order of occurrences (firstness) in students' textbook

Textbook	Males		Females		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Grade 7	33	67.3	16	32.7	49	100
Grade 8	33	61.1	21	38.9	54	100

Table 3 shows to what extent males and females appear first in dialogs and other sorts of the textbook. In particular, the data in grade 7 display that males appear first 33 times with 67.3 percent. However, their counterparts, females, occur the first 16 times with 32.7 percent. According to the data in grade 8, males occur first 33 times with 61.1 percent; on the contrary, females come first 21 times with 38.9 percent.

Based on the data analyzed above, though the amount of percentage differs in both texts, textbooks (grades 7 and 8) seem to provide priorities to males when males and females appear together in different dialogical situations; females' dialogue does not take the opportunity of opening conversational situations. This seems to reveal the existence of male-opening-dialog sort of stereotype assumption in textbooks.

3.   *What roles are assigned to males and females in the textbooks?*

The data in grade 7 indicate that males are portrayed as having the following roles: inventing technologies, managing, directing, bossing, operating machines, farming, acting as legendary/heroes in various battles celebrating festivals, weaving, playing football, playing different games, horse riding, shipping boat, etc. On the other hand, females are repeatedly portrayed with baking, cooking, serving, washing, looking after kids, spinning, and other chore tasks though both males and females are assigned having roles in marketing, celebrating holidays and festivals, involving athletics, and learning in common. This implies that females are assigned to do home activities.

In the same token, the data in grade 8 students' textbook witnessed that males are assigned in directing, managing hotels and companies, brevity, legendary, playing games, javelin, playing foot-

ball, high jumping, refreshing, portraying, weaving, inventing technology, discovering and researching. Yet, females seem to deserve beauty, making coffee, cooking, serving in the restaurant, and spinning even if some of the activities such as learning, playing volleyball, participating in athletics, and gardening are shared activities of males and females. What is more, there are also gender-biased words like salesman, manhood, manmade, and heroin in the textbooks.

According to the analysis above, one may understand that females are not involved in various roles except indoor/home activities. Such sort of representation may undermine the participation of females in classroom learning occasions. This seems to induce that there are stereotype divisions of activities to males and females. Then, this may weaken girls' involvement in learning the English language.

Discussion

From the above data analysis, it was found out that males occur with the percentage of 59.8 whereas females are visible with the percentages of 40.2 in grade 7 students' textbooks. This tells us that males outnumbered girls in grade seven students' English language textbooks. Similarly, the study found out that males are delegated with 57.5 percent, and females occur with 42.5 percent in pictures, illustrations, and texts of grade 8 students' English language textbooks. These findings are in harmony with the findings of (Chick, 2006). This researcher reported that males are more frequently represented than females in learning materials. In addition, the study is also consistent with the literature documented by (Maghsudi, Sharifi & Abedi, 2015). They highlighted that males usually control the conversation and have more dominance than females do in English as a second or foreign language classes where the dialogs are going on.

Furthermore, it was found that in most dialogical tasks, males proceeded females in grades 7 and 8 students' English language textbooks when males and females co-exist in different conversational situations. This finding seems in agreement with the findings by Gass and Varonis (1986). As Gass and Varonis reported, "Men took greater advantage of the opportunities to use conversation in a way that allowed them to produce a greater amount of comprehensible output" as cited in (Maghsudi, Sharifi & Abedi, 2015, p. 163)." This in turn provides boys the advantage over girls in activities since the boys involve more in dialogs and have more control over girls.

It was also reached that males are frequently assigned to be accountants, managers, directors, heroes, legendaries, scientists, and researchers in myriad situations. However, females seem to deserve cooking, serving, and other home activities in grade seven and eight students' textbooks. This result is also deemed to be partially congruent with that of Hamdan (2008). Hamdan reported that males were seen jobs like postman, scientist, astronomer, pilot, engineer, farmer, inventor, policeman, sailor, etc. and females took parts in shop keeper, weaver, clothes seller, professor, nurse, journalist, and artist.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implication

The study found out that males occur with 59.8% and females with 40.2% in grade 7 students' textbook, and males with 57.5% but females with 42.5% in grade 8 students' English language textbook. The result in grade 7 displays that males occur first with 67.3% and females with 32.7%. As to the findings in grade 8, males occur first with 61.1%, but females with 38.9%. Accordingly, it can be concluded that Ethiopian EFL students' textbooks frequently prefer delivering males to females as the major acting characters in conversational occasions. Thus, it is pedagogical-

ly implied that curriculum developers and textbook designers should fairly consider the balanced inclusion of males and females while designing learning materials.

References

AlGhamdi, G. A. (2014). *Evaluating the metalanguage of pragmatics content of selected listening and speaking textbooks*. (Unpublished Master's thesis), King Saud University.

Andreou, G., Vlachos, F., & Andreou, E. (2005). Affecting factors in second language learning. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, *34*, 429-438.

Chick, K. A. (2006). Gender Balance in K-12 American History Textbooks. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, *1*(3), 284-290.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, A. K. (2018). *Research methods in education.* Taylor and Francis.

Eagly, A., & Karau, S. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Bulletin, 109*(3), 573-598.

Gorjian, B., Pazhakh, A. R., & Naghizadeh, M. (2012). Comparative study of conjunctive adverbials in native researchers' (NRs) and nonnative researchers' (NNRs) experimental articles. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, *1*(2), 224-247.

Główka, D. (2014).The impact of gender on attainment in learning English as a foreign language. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, *4*(4), 617-635.

Hamdan, S. M. T. (2008). *Analyzing aspects of gender in the English language Jordanian basic stage curriculum from a socio-cultural perspective*. (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation), Amman Arab University

Iranmanesh, A., & Darani, L. H. (2018). Effects of movies and gender on learning English idiomatic and everyday expressions among Iranian EFL learners. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences*, *6*(3), 1-11.

Maghsudi, M., Sharifi, E., & Abedi, S. (2015). The effect of gender on foreign language learning. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, *2*(2), 162-166.

Mahmud, M. (2018). Language and gender in English language teaching, pp. 172-184. Retrieved from November 20, 2021https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6e70/b17646b510469 daacec8c301bf4

O'Neill, R. (1982). *Why use textbooks*? Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pavlenko, A., & Piller, P. (2008). Language education and gender. In S. May (Ed.), *the encyclopedia of language and education*. New York: Springer.

Vellenga, H. (2004). Learning pragmatics from ESL & EFL textbooks: how likely? TESL-EJ: *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language; The Electronic Journal for English as a Second language* 8 (2) Retrieved July 31, 2010, from http://www.tesl-ej.org/word press/issues/volume8/ej30/ej30a3/

Krippendorf, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

Shteiwi, M. (2003). Gender role stereotypes in primary school textbooks in Jordan. *DIRASAT, Human and Social Sciences*, *30*(1), 90-104.

Sunderland, J. (1992). Gender in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*, *46*(1), 81-91.

Zoghi, M., Kazemi, S, A. & Kalani, A. (2013). The effect of gender on language learning. *Journal of Novel Applied Sciences*, *2*, 1124-1128.