

ANALYSIS OF GENDER BIAS IN EFL TEXTBOOKS



Linguistics

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Abstract

Nowadays, a textbook plays a crucial part in the process of education and as a result of this, teachers and students can be ‘victims’ of it. Usually, males are presented as stronger, more powerful, and hard-working whereas females are presented as housewives, staying at home and looking after the children. The main focus of the study will be to analyze these gender prejudices finding out if they really are part of EFL textbooks. If these biases are found in these textbooks the study will find out also the extension of them and the teachers/ students efforts to avoid them. The study will be conducted in 2 primary schools of Kosovo: Shmu “Haxhi Zeka”, Shmu “Asdreni”, where Headway-Beginner/Pre Intermediate (Liz & John Soars), books are being used. Beside of the research of EFL textbooks, this research will include a questionnaire and an interview where students and teachers will participate.

Introduction

Gender bias is an everyday issue that requires more focus and also more space for discussion. We deal with this issue in different ways, different situations including education, as well as textbooks. Knowing that a textbook is a crucial information tool for the students, obviously, its content is very important. To be more specific, the focus of this study will be in the gender bias in EFL textbooks. Unfortunately, such prejudices are found in many other textbooks.

As a result, students may be affected by these prejudices which usually lead to wrong impressions as well as stereotypes.

According to some textbooks some jobs are ‘only’ for males and some ‘only’ for females. For instance, females are mainly presented doing the washing up, cooking, taking care of children while males are presented as bank employees, journalists, school directors, etc.

Obviously, these textbooks writings favor more the male gender.

Furthermore, the teachers should be aware of the gender prejudices and try to avoid them at least in the classroom activities which are not based on the textbooks. For instance, if the book presents a dialogue between a couple where the husband is phoning from work asking his wife what do you need for the kitchen and children, here the teacher can be creative by providing a handout with a similar dialogue where the wife is not presented as a housewife.

However, the result of this study will give a clearer opinion related to this topic. It will find out if such prejudices are part of EFL textbooks, too.

Literature Review

Gender Biases are noticed in all kinds of textbooks including Literature textbooks. It is considered that usually the heroes and the main characters of the books are boys. There have been a lot of studies about these biases.

Wiik. S (1973) did some research into the quality and quantity of female characters in literature textbooks. She was very concerned with the results “I found that current textbook literature does not in any way assist a female adolescent in establishing a satisfactory self-concept.” (Wiik. S, 1973: 224).

However, Wiik gives a clear message to the teachers “I believe that it is imperative that all secondary school teachers be made aware of existing biases in the literary material that is frequently used in our schools.” (Wiik. S, 1973: 224)

Kobia J. (2009) conducted a study with primary school students using qualitative and quantitative approaches. He used four of “Let’s learn English” textbooks and examined the portrayal of gender images in the textbooks. He chose 2 classes including 4 levels (lower- upper) since the authors were different. One of the categories he selected for analysis was the participation of staff involved in the production of LLE textbooks. According to this study the majority of participated authors in LLE textbooks are male.

Mani. A (2009) conducted a study about gender stereotypes related to occupational and domestic roles. He found out that 31 jobs were presented in the textbook (Standard I, II, and III).

The doctors, pilots were mainly men while nurses and teachers were mainly female. According to the researcher: “these textbooks reinforce the stereotypical image that men dominate the public sphere and women private sphere.”

Through their studies, most of the researchers try to display messages to authors and teachers so they won’t be part of such gender prejudices. For example, some of them give a message that human potential, the gifts or talents that an individual may have, be it a male or a female, are not given and should not be judged on the basis of gender. If we consider that these God-given gifts are to be realized, we need to break all the barriers that may result from gender-based stereotypes. There should be no doubt that both males and females should have equal opportunities and rights for the simple fact that they are born in such a way.

It is certain that some individuals were able to see beyond their culture’s attitudes. A great example of such a case is clearly shown by the writings of women like Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century. But if we need to understand Mary Wollstonecraft’s arguments in defence of

women, we must reconsider not just what was said about the position of women during her time, but also what was said about the position of men (Darling, Glendinning, 200).

All men are equal. This is the idea that influenced those who established the American constitution. The same approach can be found behind the inspiration that resulted in the storming of the Bastille. It is a known fact that through history, Philosophers had long considered that what distinguished man from animals was man's ability to reason.

Moreover, as Darling and Glendinning state that In the second half of the eighteenth century it was declared that since all men possessed the faculty of reason, all men were equal. Any form of society, therefore, which failed to reflect this equality (and most societies certainly fell into this class) was indefensible and ought not to be tolerated. Old hierarchical social systems had to give way: hence the French Revolution, and the democratic spirit of the newly independent United States (Darling, Glendinning, 200).

“Like many important ideas, Mary Wollstonecraft’s was simplicity itself. She took the argument about the rights of man and applied it to the situation of women. Women were also, she maintained, endowed with the faculty of reason” (Darling, Glendinning, 200).

It is important to notice that in England, after the French Revolution, to argue for the rights of man was to be seen as some kind of subversion; while, on the other hand, to argue for the rights of women was to invite some sort of mockery. It can be stated that in the preceding decades various authors had addressed the issue of the position of women in society, with most suggesting views which were usually within the scope of conservatism.

Research Methodology

1) Participants

The participants of this study are EFL teachers and students from two primary schools. The age of the students is from 11 to 15. They belong to different grades and levels learning from two different textbooks (Headway Beginner and Intermediate). Both students and teachers will belong to male and female gender.

2) Methods

The first method for collecting data is the research of the EFL textbooks. This research will target all the textbook topics and find out if there is gender prejudice. The research will be focused on the authors of the books, images, occupation, clothing, and gender invisibility.

The second method will be the interview. The participants of the interview will be teachers and students. Part of the interview will be only some of teachers and students.

The third method will be a questionnaire which will include all students and teachers. The interview and questions will be based on the suspected textbook gender bias topics.

The teachers' interview is to find out if they agree or disagree that these researched bias are really part of these textbooks. Also, the teachers' interview will help to find out if there is any textbook topic that fights gender prejudices. The students' interview will find out if they are aware of their involvement in gender bias or not.

In this study will be included figures, tables, charts and the interview information obtained from the teachers and students.

3) Procedure

The textbook research will be done in order to find out the bias really are part of the today's EFL textbooks. After that, if these bias exist the topics that represent them will be targeted and be part of the teachers'/students' questionnaire.

Then, the teachers and the students will be interviewed orally. Part of the interview will be some of the teachers and students. They will give their opinions related to these bias presented in their textbooks. Also, the teachers will have few questions about their attitude towards these biases and their efforts to avoid them.

The questionnaire will provide more accurate information to find out if these biases really exist.

Results

Obviously, the study has shown if the gender prejudice is present in EFL textbooks. After that, if the gender prejudice is found in these textbooks, which is actually the case, the study shows also the extent of it. The teachers and students responds has helped us to give a more accurate result related to EFL textbooks by agreeing or disagreeing related to the topics presented in the interview or questionnaire. Another part of this study will show the teachers' efforts to avoid gender prejudices presented in the textbooks. At the end a comparison of all the results obtained from textbooks, teachers and students) will be done.

1. Do you understand what gender bias actually represents?

Regarding the first question we can see that all of the teachers have said that they actually understand the problem of gender bias which suggests that the teaching environment is prepared and capable to provide any possible explanation that may be needed for the students. Which happens to be exactly the case. From the students answers we can see that almost half of the respondents don't understand the problem, which suggests that in the future teachers will have to provide more extensive evaluation of the issue in order for the students do be more aware of what we actually dealing with.

2. Do you think that we encounter such a phenomenon in our everyday life?

The answers gathered for the second question suggest that teachers and also students to a certain degree are aware that gender bias can be encountered in our everyday life. This is especially important for the fact that if we understand that such an issue can be seen in our everyday communication, we can understand it better and actually see its effects on our lives. The importance of this problem generates from the fact that first and foremost we can notice which gender is more endangered and what should be done in order to make things better. 43% of students who said they aren't aware if such a thing is present in our society, is a bit problematic, however, if we consider their age, things can be explained more conveniently.

3. *Why do you think gender bias is important for discussion?*

The answers for this question give us a clear view that avoiding or explaining gender bias can actually help mutual communication and cooperation, be it from the teachers-student relation, teacher-teacher and student to student relationship.

4. *Can you detect gender bias in your EFL textbooks?*

Teachers are generally able to detect any possible trace of gender bias, this is expected actually, considering that they are individuals of experience and are old enough to understand and detect such an issue. As for the students we can see that almost 40% can't detect something of that kind. This doesn't have to be bad if we consider their age, however, at the same time, it suggests that teachers should be more aware of their student's knowledge regarding gender bias and should continuously strive to make things clearer for them.

5. *Does it bother you?*

Regarding this question we can see from the answers that the percentage continues as previously, where teachers show their awareness, but students are also not far behind. The issue of if gender bias bothers a certain individual has to do with how much he is able to perceive the problem, therefore the results are not at all surprising.

6. *Does it affect your relationship with your friend/colleague in any way?*

If we are faced with a certain problem, the most important thing is to evaluate if such a thing interrupts our work or relationship of any kind. For this fact, the answers for this question were very important because by analyzing them we see that the vast majority of teachers have answered that they do not consider it to be any problem regarding their relation with their coworkers, although some of them have answered that they do see an issue when dealing with gender bias, however, I believe that it has to do more with being aware and uncomfortable rather than with something more serious which may affect their teaching process. Students on the other hand, almost 90% have answered with NO or I DON'T KNOW, which certainly means that if someone is not fully aware of a given problem it will, without a doubt, mean that it can't affect their relationship. This means that generally data from the questionnaire are consistent throughout.

7. *Do you believe gender bias in EFL is intentional?*

This is a very important question, because it represents the problem from a more serious point of view. As elaborated in the Literature Review section of this thesis, gender bias is profound and it derives from cultural and social aspects, therefore the awareness or, more specifically, the intention of those who have compiled the books is highly important. It seems, from the answers

that both the teachers and the students think that many things depend on the context in which they are put in. The vast majority do not think that there is any intention on how gender is represented, but they actually believe that it is a representation of how society in general views this issue.

8. *What do you do to avoid any inconvenience when encountering gender biases in EFL textbooks?*

From the answers obtained for this question we can relate to what has been previously been said that certain measures need to be taken in order for the students to be more aware of the problem at hand. It is promising, at least from the answers, that teachers are trying to do their job in explaining this sensitive matter. Most of the students have answered that they do nothing regarding this, but in the general context of the study it is expected given that they are not the ones who are more responsible to explain the phenomenon of gender bias.

9. *Have you ever considered trying other EFL textbooks than the ones you use?*

Given that most of the time textbooks are suggested by the institution and by the individual teacher, the answers to this question are expected too. Although it is promising that some teachers are trying to find new options, however, as was previously mentioned, gender bias is present in almost all EFL textbooks, or in that case in any other textbook. This makes the problem bigger, but certainly not unmanageable.

10. *Have you discussed gender bias with state education institutions?*

The answers to this question are a bit contradictory with what has been answered previously. So it seems at first glance, however, if we dwell deeper into the issue we can see a pattern here. Consider the teachers' answers about their cooperation with state institutions, because students have no such possibility, at least not at a degree as teachers have; from what they have provided as answers we can understand that the issue is not that teachers don't try to take any measures regarding the problem, but the thing is that there is no solid cooperation between the teachers and the state. This is a common problem in our society where certain textbooks are suggested to a certain level of education, without bothering to further discuss those textbooks for their content or effect on the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

Gender bias in textbooks in general and in EFL textbooks in particular, doesn't have to be that bad; at times it may not even be what we consider *bias*, after all; it may just be a study of our society which in order for the students to have a better grasp, it must be represented as it is. The problems do not derive exclusively from what is in those textbooks, but from the way teachers explain and try to improve each one of the lessons that students need to learn. In other words, things are a bit more complicated from what it seems first, and that is particularly why we have started this thesis by explaining the historical, cultural and psychological aspects of gender differences.

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