

Investigating Gender Representation in Iranian EFL Textbooks

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Abstract

Sexism is the prejudice or discrimination based on one's gender and it particularly refers to the belief that female sex is weaker, less intelligent or less important than the other. This outlook can manifest itself in textbooks which are an important source for thought construction. This study investigates the existence of sexism in two EFL textbooks widely used in Iran. One of which, *Right Path to English*, taught in third grade of Iranian secondary schools as an obligatory textbook, and the other one, *Basic 2*, taught in Iran Language Institute. Content analysis was used to analyze the pictures of the books qualitatively based on three concepts; namely, job opportunities, sports and physical activities, and household duties. The results of the study revealed that the book *Right Path to English* has a sexist outlook while *Basic 2* was to some extent neutral; however, it was not devoid of sexism. The findings of this study can possibly make EFL textbooks designers aware of gender –biased content and help them avoid sexism in their future material development.

Introduction

Sexism is the prejudice or discrimination based on one's gender and it particularly refers to the belief that female sex is weaker, less intelligent or less important than the other. Throughout history, women have been considered in an inferior position to men so that the roles which were attributed to women were also considered as trivial. One of the views held on family structure and female roles was that of Talcott Parsons (1955). This view was like a continuum which had two extremes first of which is called model A and the other one is model B. On model A, which asserts the total role segregation, high education is only attributed to men. Professional improvement is regarded important only for men. Housekeeping and taking care of children are considered as the fundamental functions of women and men are not involved in these seemingly trivial affairs. When a conflict comes across, it is the man who has the last say. On model B, that places emphasis on total integration of roles, education is not peculiar to males. Co-educative classes are available and the same materials presented for both genders. Career is important for women as much as it is for men. Job opportunities are equal to both genders. In the case of marriage, neither man nor the woman dominates and if they could not reach a concerted decision over a conflict, they would make a compromise. The man and wife have equal duties in housekeeping and children care.

After women's suffrage movement in the late 19th century and after the first and second world war, women, willingly or unwillingly, took the position of those men who were at the fronts. Gradually, it was not surprising to see a woman who was doing a previously-considered masculine job. However, the continuum presented by Talcott Parsons shows two extremes of gender roles, today, the actual behavior of people of society mostly is laid between these two poles.

Although approximation of female and male roles can be regarded as one of the anti-sexist movements in today's society, the sexism can show itself in other ways; particularly in language. A main part of general attitude of society is constructed through using language. Holmes (1992, p. 317) states that

Language conveys attitude. Sexist attitudes stereotype a person according to gender rather than judging on individual merits... In principle, then, the study of sexist language is considered with the way language expresses both negative and positive stereotypes of both women and men. In practice, research in this area has concentrated on the ways in which language conveys negative attitudes to women.

One of the areas in which a lot of sexism-related research has been carried out is sexism in EFL textbooks. Textbooks are like vehicles which can convey the attitudes to the learners. Regarding to the importance of the textbook materials and the attitudes they can create among learners, this study is to investigate the existence of sexist language in two Iranian EFL books, namely, *Basic (2)* and *Right Path to English* and make a comparison between these two. Although sexist language can be manifested in written, oral and pictorial modes, this comparative study aims to explore the sexist language mainly in pictorial mode in these two books.

Review of Literature

Ansary and Babaii (2003) conducted a research in order to investigate the sexist attitude and values in two school books: *Right path to English 1&2*. A quantitative content analysis was conducted with regard to sex visibility -and female/male topic presentation in dialogs and reading passages. A qualitative research was made with regard to (1) sex-linked job possibilities, (2) sex-based activity types, (3) stereotyped sex roles (4) firstness and (5) masculine generic conception. The

results indicated that these two books do not give a fair attitude towards women and they can be considered as sexist books. Nagatomo (2010) investigated the an EFL textbook entitled *Conversation Topics for Japanese University Students*, using Porecca (1978) and Leiskin's (2001) theoretical frameworks, to examine the gender representation of the book characters. The results indicated that no gender imbalance was found and female visibility was quite fair in comparison to male visibility. Esmaili and Amerian(2014) explored gender representation in English Language teaching textbooks of Iran including English Book 1, English Book 2, and English Book 3. For conducting this research, they used Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional model to investigate the gender manifestation in these three textbooks. The results indicated that the textbooks presented a sexist attitude so that men are more represented than women. Bahman and Rahimi (2010) examined gender-bias in representation of women and men in three English textbooks which were being taught in Iranian high schools. In order to find the frequency of names, nouns, pronouns and adjectives attributed to women and men, Chi-squares test was run. For indicating whether or not women and men had more or less equal first-place occurrences in instructions, exercises and sentences chi square test was run once more. The results revealed that the male and female manifestation in these textbooks was not fair. Ghorbani(2009) investigated sexism in three EFL books, namely, *American Headway*, *Interchange (3rd Ed)*, and *Person to Person*, which were used in Iranian language institutes. A content analysis was carried out on six concepts including: 1. female and male characters; 2. woman and men portrayal in occupational roles and professional settings; 3. first place occurrences; 4. women and men in social roles; 5. women and men in domestic roles; 6. adjectives used for men and women. The frequency of occurrences of concepts was counted and the result of the research revealed that these books represent a sexist attitude towards women. Gharbavi and Mousavi(2012) explored gender bias in

EFL textbooks. They chose four English textbooks of Iranian high schools and they examined three concepts including: male and female visibility in illustrations, texts, and the male/female occupational roles. The researchers conducted a content analysis on the data and the frequency of each category was calculated and compared with each other. The results of chi-square test indicated that there is a significant difference between the frequencies of male and female for different categories. Hall (2014) investigated gender representation in two EFL textbooks, which are taught as compulsory courses, namely, *Right Path to English I and II*. The textbooks went through a quantitative analysis with regard to (1) gender visibility in both text and illustrations, and (2) female/male-oriented topic presentation in dialogues and reading passages. A qualitative analysis was also carried out with regard to (1) male-centered language including: (a) firstness and (b) masculine generic construction; (2) gender-linked occupation possibilities; (3) distribution of household responsibilities, and (4) distribution of spare time and leisure activities. Based on the results, there was imbalance in these two books concerning gender representation. Tao (2008) explored the methods of identifying and combating sexism in EFL textbooks. In this research, the EFL textbooks of China's senior high schools were examined and it was found that there existed sexism and gender inequality in the Chinese high school EFL textbooks. Yang (2012) investigated the gender representation in an English textbook series used in Hong Kong schools. The corpus software AntConc was used to analyze the collocations such as "He/he," "She/she," "Man/man," "Woman/woman," "women," "Boy/boy," "Boys/boys," "Girl," and "Girls/girls" in these series of textbooks. The results of the study indicated that females were not considered as a weak gender, even they were considered stronger than males. In the case of occupational roles, females were not more portrayed only as housewives, but they had a more active role in society. Males were not

described based on their physical characteristics; in addition, negative adjectives were used to describe men more than women.

Methodology

Materials

The materials which were used in this content-analysis research consisted of two EFL textbooks one of which, *Right Path to English*, which is taught in third grade of Iranian secondary schools as an obligatory textbook. The other book is *Basic 2* which is taught in Iran Language Institute. Both of the books have been planned and compiled by Iranian authors.

Data Collection

The sexist language may be manifested in written, oral, or pictorial modes; however, in this study the focus is more on the qualitative analysis of the pictures used in the textbooks. The pictures have been examined based on three concepts including *occupational roles, sports, and household duties*.

Table 1 shows the occupational roles of males and females in *Right Path to English*.

Table 2 shows the occupational roles of males and females in *Basic 2*.

Table 3 is a comparison between physical activities and sports that males and females do in *Right Path to English* and Table 4 shows the same quality in *Basic 2*.

Table 5 and 6 show the household responsibilities that have been distributed among males and females in the two textbooks.

Table 1. Occupational roles in Right Path to English

Male	Female
Teacher Doctor Shopkeeper Bus driver Farmer	Teacher Farm worker Driving instructor

Table 2. Occupational roles in Basic 2

Male	Female
Cook Teacher Guard Shopkeeper Waiter Farmer Police officer Mechanic Taxi driver Chef Office manager Painter Musician Doctor Air traffic controller engineer chemist	Nurse Musician Engineer Teacher doctor secretary cashier Air traffic controller pharmacist hairdresser farm worker office manager

Table3. Sports in Right Path to English

Male	Female
Playing Football Riding bicycle Swimming Running	–

Table4. Sports in Basic 2

Male	Female
Skiing Riding bicycle Playing football Swimming Golfing Bodybuilding Playing basketball Playing volleyball Playing ping-pong baseball Playing tennis Horse riding	Swimming Playing chess Playing Volleyball Playing tennis Playing ping-pong Horse riding Ball playing

Table5. household duties in Right Pat to English

male	Female
–	Washing the dishes Setting the table for the meal Cleaning the house Cooking dinner Helping mother in the kitchen Serving the food Making cake

Table 6. household duties in Basic 2

male	Female
Cooking Cleaning the room	Cooking Washing the dishes Feeding the children Setting the table for the meal Cleaning the room Helping mother in the kitchen

Results and Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the sexist outlook towards women and family structure is that females education and jobs are not of priority and the main responsibility of women is the housekeeping and taking care of children; if they want to work, they should have some jobs which are in congruence with their abilities (that is, the traditional jobs for women like being a nurse or a teacher). As it is indicated in table 1, the job opportunities which have been presented in *Right Path to English* are not equal to men and it follows the traditional view of women capabilities. The most prevalent job which has been defined for women in this book does not exceed housekeeping or teaching. Although in *Right Path to English*, we see an attempt made to keep some distance from the traditional view of women by adding a job like driving instruction for women but the sentences below the pictures (He is a *careful* driver, she is a *slow* driver), somehow again, blurred the newly sprouting idea of equity between men and women. In the other book, *Basic 2*, we see a sharp different view of women. Here, women can take on previously regarded masculine jobs such as being an engineer, pharmacist, or doctor; however, in this book, as well, the job opportunities which have been offered for men has much more variety than it has been offered for women so that they have not appeared in some seemingly considered masculine jobs such as being a mechanic.

Regarding the table 3 and 4, we see that in *Right Path to English* boys are involved with physical activities and sports such as riding bicycle or swimming, but not a single sport has been shown for girls or women. All the activities they do are related to housekeeping such as washing the dishes, cooking, shopping, and so forth. It seems that physical activities, strength, and caring health are much more important for males than females and females are just restricted to indoor activities. In *Basic 2*, again, we see a different picture of women. They are involved in lots of sports and activities other than housekeeping related affairs although the diversity of sports attributed to men

is, again, more than women and it seems that there is more emphasis on physical activities and sports for men.

Table 5 and 6 show the household responsibilities of men and women. In *Right Path to English*, as it has been shown in table 5, even no single duty of house holding is attributed to men. This book follows the traditional view of housekeeping in which women are responsible for all the affairs and men are not involved in these works. In *Basic 2*, there are some seemingly feminine duties such as cooking which has been done by men as well. In this book, we can see repetitive pictures in which men are cooking food for the family or they are working as a professional cook. Although this book, to some extent, has kept a distance from the traditional view of household duties of men and women, the most responsibility of housekeeping has still been put on women's shoulders.

Esmaili and Amerian(2014) believed that the gender inequality which exists in Iranian EFL textbooks rooted in Iranian culture. Although it is somehow true, but there are many factors which may contribute to sexism in Iranian EFL textbooks. Based on the result of this study, although the two EFL books under investigation have been written by Iranian authors but they do not give a similar picture of women. In *Basic 2*, we see that women have more active roles in society and they have been nearly equalized to men; however, the trace of sexism could still be observed in this book.

Conclusion

Iranian culture, for a long time, has had a tendency towards segregation of men and women roles so as not to involve women in opportunities which have long been considered as peculiar to men, and on the other side, men have been kept aside from some affairs which have been regarded as feminine. Such a kind of sexist outlook can be apparently seen in Iranian schools' EFL textbooks. Although rooted in the same culture, the EFL textbooks of Iranian language institutes seem to have taken a different and more realistic view towards women in society compared to obligatory EFL textbooks being taught in Iranian schools. The content of the book Basic 2, which is a sample of EFL textbooks of language institutes, is nearer to what women do in today's Iranian society, so a need is called for a change in Iranian schools' EFL textbooks in order for these books to keep up with what is actually occurring in society and in order to put aside sexist perspective towards women.

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