Gender Representation in Children's EFL Textbooks

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Abstract—The differences in the speech and behavior of adult males and females may be a consequence of their sexist education in childhood; experimental research suggests that the development of children's gender identity is strongly affected by their reading materials and extensive research on these materials have revealed that gender bias and gender stereotypes are prevalent. The present study examines the representation of gender in conversations, illustrations and graphic design of the cover in nine packages designed to teach English to young children for evidence of bias. From each series, the intermediate level is analyzed. The results revealed that females have equitable visibility in conversations with regard to the number of participants, number of turns and the length of turns. Females however appeared to be the initiator of conversations 30 per cent more times than males. The analysis of illustrations in the second part confirmed the results of previous studies that females were under-represented in children's books. There were no significant differences in the representation of gender in the graphic design of the covers.

Index Terms— gender, bias, children's EFL books, critical discourse analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in an age in which power is predominantly exercised through the generation of consent rather than coercion and through ideology rather than physical force. Educational institutions are heavily involved in the ideological developments that affect language in its relation to power. This is mainly because educational practices themselves constitute the core domain of linguistic and discursive power and much training in education is oriented towards the use of particular discursive practices in educational organization; moreover, many other domains are mediated by educational institutions (Fairclough, 1995). Thus, education is a rich site for the analysis of discourse and discursive practices and in this paper we focus on English education aimed at young children and try to understand how discourse supports or creates gender discrimination in this context.

A. Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse is a product of society and at the same time a dynamic and changing force that constantly influences and reconstructs social practices and values, either positively or negatively (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 12). Critical discourse analysis approaches this double-faceted concept of discourse analytically in order to illustrate how social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted through text and talk (van Dijk, 2008b, p. 85). According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), critical discourse analysis (CDA) addresses social problems and regards power relations to be discursive (in van Dijk, 2008b, p. 86). Fairclough explains that one of the objectives of critical discourse analysis is "helping people to see the extent to which their language does rest upon common-sense assumptions, and the ways in which these common-sense assumptions can be ideologically shaped by relations of power (Fairclough, 2001, p. 3). In critical analysis of discourse the analysts take explicit positions and attempt to expose and ultimately resist social inequality (Van Dijk, 2008b, p. 85). In other words, CDA illuminates ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favor their own interests and thereby try to encourage the victims of such dominant discourses to resist and transform their lives (Foucault, 2000).

Gender differences in talk and text can be studied, in a general perspective, as instances of 'powerful' and 'powerless' speech (van Dijk, 2008b, p. 44) and therefore analyzed from critical discourse analysis perspective. The intersection of language and gender provides a fertile ground for analyzing how power and solidarity are created in discourse.

B. Gender Bias

One vast field of critical research on discourse and language is that of gender. The power differences between women and men and their manifestations in language and discourse have received extensive attention by researchers, especially the feminists. Butler explains that gender is something people bring into being through their practices (Kendall, 2007, p. 126). Similarly, according to Goffman, gendered self is accomplished through different ways of talking or behaving that are conventionally associated with gender (Kendall, 2007, p. 126). Osch (1992) believes that there is an indirect relationship between gender and language; linguistic features directly communicate acts and constitute stances and the performance of these acts and stances may help constitute the user's gendered identity by being socioculturally associated with sociocultural expectations and beliefs about women and men (Kendall, 2007, p. 127). But what is the

significance of these expectations? These social expectations of the relative roles of women and men hamper the progress towards more egalitarian structures (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 95).

Some of the researches on language and gender have found several differences between the speech of adult males and females. Below we have passed some of these studies under review. But, the description of the (unfair) differences between adult males and females is one thing, and exploring the roots and discovering the causes of such differences is another. Some researchers believe that these differences do not come about overnight and after a certain age; rather, they are the result of years-long education that has started from the early years of life (see Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Therefore, we can hold the education and socialization processes of the childhood partly responsible for later unfair differences. Thus, after a review of the studies on the differences between the speech of adult males and females, we examine some of the studies that have traced the roots of such differences in the reading materials of young children to see whether children are given a balanced picture of gender or the biases start right from early childhood.

Van Dijk, in his review of the research on gender related language differences, observes that women generally do more work than men do in conversations by "giving more topical support, showing more interest, or by withdrawing in situations of conflict". It has also been found that men tend to interrupt women more often (van Dijk, 2008b, p. 44). Van Dijk then refers to the studies collected by Trömel-Plötz (1984), which illustrate that male dominance is not restricted to informal situations and may be observed in public contexts as well (van Dijk, 2008b, p. 44).

Fishman and Lakoff are among the researchers who have been concerned with women's style of language. Fishman (1998), unlike Lakoff (1998) who views the behavior (language included) of adult women as indicative of a gender identity acquired through childhood socialization, tries to explain specific features of women's language based on the forces at work in the immediate context of the speech. She studies two examples of women's conversational style, namely question-asking and the use of 'you know', in an experiment. Fishman challenges the idea that question-asking and 'you know' are indications of women's tendency to be insecure and hesitant and instead sees them as attempted solutions to the problematics of conversation (Fishman, 1998, p. 254). Lakoff, on the other hand, deals with two interrogatory devices, tag questions and questions with declarative functions, and argues that women use them more often than men. Fishman's experiment supports this claim of Lakoff, but as was mentioned, she gives a different reason for this (Fishman, 1998, p. 254). Lakoff also discusses hedging and views it as a sign of women's insecurity. In fact, Lakoff believes that there are two styles of speech: "neutral language" and "women's language" and argues that the latter is characterized by a lack of forcefulness (Cameron, 1992, p. 44). She explains that 'women's language' shows up in all levels of grammar of English; there are also differences in the choice and frequency of lexical items, in the intonational and other supersegmental patterns and in situations where certain syntactic rules are performed (Lakoff, 1998, p. 244).

One of the other differences in the use of language that can be attributed to gender is the positive politeness strategy of making and receiving complaints; Holmes, for example, has found that women in New Zealand both give and receive more compliments than men, a finding that confirms an earlier study of compliments in the USA (van Dijk, 2008a, p. 213). Humor in conversation also varies across gender and cultural boundaries; Lampert (1996) has shown that women use self-directed humor in all-female groups in order to express their feelings about a personal experience or to seek response; this is while men, in mixed groups, use humor to avoid criticism or downplay unacceptable behavior (van Dijk, 2008a, p. 213).

Although many differences can be observed between the language style of men and women, attributing these differences outright to gender would favor a simplistic interpretation. These differences may well depend on situation (Leet-Pelegrinin, 1980) or on social position (Werner, 1933) (in van Dijk, 2008b, p. 44). Tannen (1998, p. 261) maintains that we cannot simply locate the source of male domination in linguistic strategies such as "interruption, volubility, silence and topic raising". Nor can we spot the source of women's powerlessness in such linguistic strategies as indirectness, taciturnity, silence or tag questions (Tannen, 1998, p. 261). She explains that these linguistic strategies are relative concerning the functions they perform in face to face interactions, but in research on language and gender, it is tempting to assume that "whatever women do result from or create their powerlessness and whatever men do result from or creates their dominance" (Tannen, 1998, p. 268). Similarly, van Dijk (2008a, p. 211) warns that even where we seem to find obvious gender differences, they may still depend on complex contextual factors.

We saw that there *are* differences between the speech of adult males and females and it is very possible to attribute such differences to gender, though we should be cautious. Of course we ought to bear in mind that differences are condemned solely when a balance is expected and regarding any gender difference as a type of bias would be very simplistic. In the following part we review some of the studies that examined the representation of gender in children's books.

Gender bias in children's books has been historically widespread. Past and more recent examinations of print media aimed at children reveal both unequal gender representation and common gender stereotypes. In their study of 200 top-selling popular children's books, Hamilton *et al* (2006) looked at gender representation in pictures, characters, characters' behavior and personality as well as setting and they found out that female characters were under-represented in children's picture books. Another research conducted by Fitzpatrick and McPherson (2010) yielded similar results. They analyzed 56 contemporary coloring books published in the United States and examined them for the prevalence of each gender, stereotyping gender roles, age of characters, and activity level and type and concluded that males were

depicted as more active and gender stereotypes were common. They also found out that gender neutral works were more likely to be done by males. These studies confirm the results of the study Creany had conducted in 1995. She had explored the appearance of gender in Caldecott Award winning children's books. The books were inspected for the appearance of sexism and the results revealed sexual bias in the materials: male characters were depicted more often than female characters and both genders were shown in traditional stereotypical roles.

Tiara Antik Sari studied representation of gender in the framework of critical discourse analysis. She worked on a series of Indonesian primary school English textbooks and again obtained the same result: female under-representation. While most of the studies focusing on gender representation in children's books have examined the illustrations and characters, Tepper and Cassidy (1999) examined gender differences in emotional language as well. In their study books that were read by/to a sample of preschool children were examined for evidence of stereotyping. Like previous researches, they found out that males had higher representation in titles, pictures and central role, but as regards emotional language, no meaningful difference was observed. Under-representation of females is not of course specific to printed books and is found to be the case with educational software as well. Sheldon (2004), for instance, performed a content analysis of educational software for preschoolers and reported the depiction of significantly more male characters than females; he also showed that male characters were more likely than female characters to exhibit several masculine-stereotypical traits. Furthermore, female characters more than male characters exhibited counter-stereotypical behavior, yet were more gender stereotyped in appearance. However, the results are not always consistent; in search of evidence for gender stereotyping in books designated as picture books for young readers, Gooden and Gooden (2001) assessed 83 Notable Books for Children from 1995 to 1999. They examined the gender of illustrations, characters and titles and found that in comparison to some previous studies, some steps towards equality have advanced based on the increase in females represented as main characters.

II. METHODOLOGY

As we discussed earlier, much training in education encourages or is oriented toward the use of a specific discourse which inevitably later affects practices. One of the features that can be investigated in the discourse of educational institutions is the representation of gender and this can be studied at different levels ranging from young children to adults. We argued that adults' sexist discourse can be the consequence of their being presented, in their childhood, with a sexist version of reality and the present day children, if not exposed to bias-free materials, may show equal bias when grown up. Therefore, in the present research we intended to investigate gender representation in a collection of books designed to teach young children English. More specifically, we sought to find whether materials developed to teach English to young children have any signs of gender bias in the conversations, illustrations and the graphic designs of the cover.

A. Corpus

The study focused on a corpus of books designed to teach children English; these books are used in different Iranian language institutes as their main course book:

1. "Family and Friends" which is a six-level primary course written by Tamzin Thompson and published by Oxford University Press. From this series the Pupil's Book for level 5 is selected.

2. "Hip Hip Hooray!" is a multi-level course published by Longman. Using well-known classic stories, it teaches children English from beginner to pre-intermediate. Level 5 of this series is chosen for this study.

3. "English Time" is a communicative course from beginner to intermediate level, written by Susan Rivers and Setsuko Toyama and published by Oxford University Press. Level five (special edition) of this series is used in this research.

4. "New Parade" is a seven-level program developed by Mario Herrera and Theresa Chamot and published by Longman. New Parade 5 is used in this study.

5. "Bravo!" is an eight-level course for children from complete beginner to intermediate level. The series is developed by Judy West and published by Heinemann. Level 5 of this series is selected for the corpus of the present study.

6. "English Adventure" is a six-level course of English for young learners. The series is developed by Izabella Hearn and Longman is the publisher. Level four of this series is chosen for this research.

7. "Backpack" (second edition) is published by Pearson Education and written by Mario Herrera and Diane Pinkley. Packpack 5 is used in this study.

8. "Let's Go" (third edition) is another seven-level course written by Pitsuko Nakat *et al* and published by Oxford University Press. Student Book for level five is analyzed in this study.

9. "New Let's Learn English". From this last series developed by Ballas and Pelham and published by Longman, again level five is used.

B. Procedure

Critical discourse analysis looks for manifestations of bias and inequality at both micro and macro levels. Micro level deals with the text and macro level with whatever surrounds the text such as illustrations, graphic design of cover, font,

color, size, etc. The corpus developed for this study was examined at both micro level (part one) and macro level (parts two and three) and analyzed six differing variables.

In the first part, the representation of gender in conversations was investigated. Since the books comprising the corpus were designed to teach English to young children, the chapters and units in all books had a variety of activities such as puzzles, songs, matching tasks as well as conversations. Therefore, the number of conversations was limited to normally one per unit. However, some unites had no conversation at all and in few others, there were more than one conversation. Four variables were examined in all conversations; the first one was the number of participants; to collect data on this variable, the researcher used a coding sheet specifically designed for this study. When the number of male and female participants was equal, the conversation was coded as 'M=F' (M stands for Male and F stands for Female); for conversations with larger number of male participants 'M>F' was used and those with greater number of female participants were coded as 'M<F'. The second variable was the initiator of the conversation which could be either male (coded as M) or female (coded as F). To decide on the gender of the participants, we used different clues including the illustrations, the names of the characters as well as their voices (the conversations of the pupil's books were recorded on audio CDs accompanying each book). Listening to the conversations was particularly helpful in determining the initiator of the conversations because due to the nature of children's books, the turns in a conversation are not necessarily arranged in a sequential order and were sometimes printed in bubbles all around the characters in an illustration and thus difficult to decide on the initiator. The third variable studied was the number of turns that males and females take in a conversation. In cases where more than two characters were involved in the conversation, all turns of each gender were considered in a single category. The data on this variable were collected using the same coding system as the number of participants: 'M=F', 'M>F' and 'M<F'. The length of the turns was the last variable investigated in conversations. This was to see if there was any difference between the length of the turns that males and females take in conversations. The coding system for length of turns was the same as that for the number of turns.

In children's books, besides humans, animals to a greater extent and objects to a lesser degree are used too. In this study we focused merely on the conversations between humans, and since the variable in question was gender, the conversations between participants of a single gender (either all male or all female) were excluded. The conversations between animals were not studied either. Moreover, in some conversations there were a human character and a non-human one (either an animal or a robot). These were excluded too. All in all, sixty-three conversations were analyzed and those eliminated comprised only 10% of the total number of conversations in the corpus.

The second part of the present research sought to find how gender was represented in illustrations. Two variables were examined. In the first place, the number of male and female characters in illustrations was counted. This was done using coding sheets with the following six items: 'M=F', 'M>F', 'M<F', 'M only', 'F only' and 'unclear'. The last category 'unclear' refers to those illustrations where either the gender of the character could not be determined based on visual and verbal clues or those which portrayed a large number of people and it was not possible to count their number. The second variable analyzed in illustrations was prominence. By prominence we mean whether the character is foregrounded or backgrounded in the illustration. However, after the analysis of this feature in four books, it became obvious that this variable cannot be studied in the corpus of this study because almost all illustrations were for teaching purposes and they showed either the state or the action to be learned, and consequently were all of more or less equal prominence.

In the last part, the representation of gender in the cover design of the books was examined and with reference only to the number of male and female characters present.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Since children's books, besides performing teaching and entertaining functions, serve as a socializing tool and affect the way children perceive themselves, it is expected that the materials developed for young children present to them a version of reality with no bias and discrimination against either female or male population. The analysis of sixty-three conversations extracted from the corpus revealed that in 36 conversations (57%), there were as many male as female participants. 13 conversations had more male participants compared to 14 with more female participants. The next variable was the number of turns. In 35 per cent of conversations, both male and female participants had an equal number of turns. This is while in 33% male participants had more turns and in 32% the number of turns females took was higher. The analysis yielded a similar result for the length of the turns: in 49% of conversations males' turns were longer than females' and in the rest 51% females took longer turns. The results so far suggest that male and female characters have more or less equal presence in conversations and contrary to some of the previous studies, females have achieved an equal visibility. The last factor examined in conversations was the initiator and contrary to our expectation, in 62% of conversations the initiators were female characters compared to 38% male initiators (Table 1).

TABLE I
STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATIONAL FEATURES IN THE CORPUS OF THE STUDY

No	Conversation Features / Books	Participants			Initiator		Turns - Number			Turns - Length		
		M=F	M>F	M<F	M	F	M=F	M>F	M<F	M=F	M>F	M<F
1	Bravo	2	0	4	2	4	0	0	6	0	1	5
2	Backpack	4	1	1	2	4	4	1	1	0	3	3
3	New Parade	5	0	1	2	4	5	1	0	0	3	3
4	English Adventure	5	5	1	7	4	6	4	1	0	8	3
5	Family & Friends	8	3	2	4	9	2	4	7	0	4	9
6	English Time	5	0	4	1	8	3	2	4	0	4	5
7	Let's Go	4	0	0	3	1	0	3	1	0	2	2
8	New Let's Learn English	3	4	1	3	5	2	6	0	0	6	2
Total		36	13	14	24	39	22	21	20	0	31	32
		%57	%20.5	%22.5	%38	%62	%35	%33	%32	--	%49	%51

There were 2435 illustrations in the whole corpus of which 5% belonged to the category of 'unclear' and excluded from analysis. The rest of the pictures were coded for the number of male and female characters depicted in each and classified into five categories (see Table 2). In about one fourth of the pictures examined (24%) an equal number of males and females were depicted. In 9% of illustrations depicting both males and females, there were a bigger number of males and in 7.5% of the same category of illustrations, female characters were depicted in a larger number. Males thus appeared 1.5 per cent more times than females. The rest of the illustrations were classified as containing either only male characters or only females with the former comprising 32% and the latter 22.5 per cent. These results demonstrate that unlike conversations, illustrations under-represent females (10% less than males).

TABLE II
STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION IN ILLUSTRATIONS

No	Book Title	No of illustrations	Number of males & females depicted in illustrations					
			M<F	M>F	F = M	F only	M only	Unclear
1	Bravo	213	15	4	44	38	92	20
2	Backpack	264	17	15	76	59	73	24
3	New Parade	139	12	9	38	27	43	10
4	Hip Hip Hooray!	461	19	54	129	96	158	5
5	English Adventure	168	5	19	47	33	58	6
6	Family & Friends	249	31	43	39	30	90	16
7	English Time	279	42	24	73	75	63	2
8	Let's Go	261	8	7	43	103	93	7
9	New Let's Learn English	401	31	43	94	87	115	31
Total		2435	180	218	583	548	785	121
			%7.5	%.9	%24	%22.5	%32	%5

In the last part of the study we examined the graphic design of the front covers of the books. The designs of two books out of nine depicted non-human characters (an object and an animal). "English Time", "Let's Go" and "Family & Friends" had an equal number of males and females on their cover design. In "Hip Hip Hooray!" if we ignore the tiny figures in the background, again there is an equal number of males and females (Fig. 1). "English Adventure" has a photo of a young boy on the cover and no female character. On the other hand, "New Let's Learn English" depicts the picture of a young girl in the center, and another girl and a boy in smaller size on either side. The last book "Bravo!" had two non-human pictures in smaller size and two human illustrations in larger size. One of these human illustrations shows a boy playing football and the other a crowd of nine people of both sexes on the beach. We can conclude that there was no meaningful difference in the representation of males and females in cover designs.
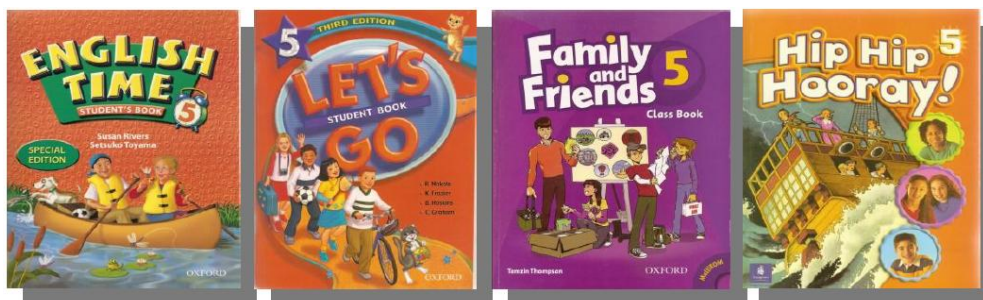

Figure 1. Gender representation in cover designs

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrated that conversations in EFL books for children have moved toward a more egalitarian representation of females and males, and females have achieved equitable visibility in conversations. The results, however, further showed the under-representation of female characters in illustrations of the books studied.

Children, according to Gooden and Gooden (2001) are not passive observers and as they develop, they look for structure in their lives and are driven by an internal need to fit into this structure. The stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and under-representation of female characters contribute negatively to children's development, limit their career aspirations and frame their attitudes about future roles (Hamilton *et al*, 2006). Therefore, it is essential to present young children with non-sexist and gender-fair reading materials so that they construct a true and balanced picture of their gender identity and get equal opportunities to reach their full potential as human beings.

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