

HOW GENDER REPRESENTED IN VIETNAMESE ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE

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Ngày nhận bài (received): 3/4/2022

Ngày nhận bản sửa (revised): 15/4/2022

Ngày nhận đăng (accepted): 16/4/2022

Abstract

The article examines gender representation in a series of high school English textbooks, English 10, English 11, and English 12 in Vietnam in terms of stereotyping, and the other two related types of bias - invisibility and imbalance in conversations and illustrations. A combination of critical qualitative analysis with analyses of quantitative methods is applied to collect and analyzed the data to provide triangulation in this study. The findings contribute to helping speakers realize that language textbook is not only a mirror reflecting gender differentiation but also a tool shaping the way people think about gender and gender equality. The view about having “women’s language” as the previous researchers have claimed might not be so natural and inevitable if we identify the primary factors, such as language textbooks which affect the ways of speaking between women and men. The findings help linguists and language educators build a complete and authentic picture of socio-linguistics contributing to language planning and eliminating gender differentiation in textbooks and language teaching.

Keywords: Gender, bias, English textbooks, critical discourse analysis.

Vấn đề giới trong sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam từ quan điểm phân tích phản biện

Tóm tắt

Bài báo nghiên cứu vấn đề giới thể hiện qua cuộc hội thoại nhân vật và hình ảnh minh họa trong sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh lớp 10, 11, 12 Việt Nam, về quan điểm mặc định; thiên kiến giới hữu hình, vô hình. Sự kết hợp phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính và phương pháp định lượng qua tổng hợp các cuộc hội thoại và hình ảnh từ đó phân tích phản biện đối chiếu thấy sự khác biệt thể hiện về giới. Kết quả nghiên cứu góp phần khẳng định thực tế sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh không chỉ là tấm gương phản ánh cách nhìn nhận phân biệt về giới, mà còn góp phần hình thành cách nghĩ về giới và bình đẳng giới. Quan điểm tồn tại có ngôn ngữ dành cho phái nữ mặc nhiên

không phù hợp nếu nhận rõ nguyên nhân căn bản cho nhận định về giới. Từ đó giúp các nhà ngôn ngữ học xã hội, nhà giảng dạy ngôn ngữ có cách nhìn chính xác, hoàn chỉnh để kiến tạo ngôn ngữ, loại trừ phân biệt giới tồn tại trong sách giáo khoa góp phần hạn chế tư tưởng ngôn ngữ thiên kiến về giới.

Từ khóa: Giới, thiên kiến, sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh, phân tích phản biện.

1. Introduction

Language is the tool through which people reflect thoughts, conceptions, feelings, attitudes, and standpoints. In addition, language is also the means to propagate and maintain current views about gender differentiation. Despite some major changes over years in the status of feminism that have brought more favorable conditions for women's lives within society. Global patterns have shown that women still experience issues such as gender-related violence (Mills, 2012). Holmes (2002) especially, found in early times, when women were restricted from educational opportunities, they used more standard and prestige forms than men did. This clarifies the role that education plays in the equality of women and men in their speech. It is argued that texts and illustrations embedded into textbooks determine models of thought. Some researchers, such as Vu and Pham (2020) claim that gender bias still exists in Vietnamese textbooks. Being a Vietnamese teacher of English, I have been interested in how genders are represented in English class. Furthermore, I have also been very aware of the unawareness of numerous foreign language teachers to address this issue of equality in language teaching. As a result, limited research in the area has been carried out in Vietnam. Especially regarding fields related to gender differences as well as the source of gender discrimination in social linguistics. I have therefore chosen this topic hoping to help teachers of English to realize textbooks as an inquiry space where gender bias may be detected.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Distinction between “sex” and “gender”

The notions of “sex” and “gender” and their relationship have attracted numerous researchers with many contradictory views. However, in general, “sex” is defined as a biological distinction, a matter of genes and hormones and physical development. Whereas, “gender” refers to social construction, which is learned, nurtured (Lakoff, 1973), and something we do and perform. So researchers who have belief in sex differentiation might generate differences and inequality in language. And when explaining “gender” linked to “sex” it means to agree that socially determined differentiation in linguistic forms used by women and men is natural and inevitable. To prove “gender” does not build on “sex” Jule (2008) explains that her mother did not perform gender in the 1980s in the same ways that the author did when young, and what she now does in terms of gender at a young age is different from her daughter does. Thus, emphasizing that women of the same age living in different cultures have variable experiences.

This position once more disputes the relationship between sex and gender. It seems not to refuse the interactive relationship between these two notions when explaining many other phenomena. However, in terms of gender differences in linguistic features used by women and men, the position about “sex” as the foundation of “gender” is not satisfactory as this might contribute to determining the view of inequality in language. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the variable claims about gender differences in languages, the factors as well as the need to carry out language planning starting from eliminating gender bias in textbooks.

2.2. Factors that affect the language use of women and men

Smith (2003) researching gendered forms in Japanese, an eastern Asian country with many similar characteristics of culture to Vietnam, found the originating factors emerged from culture and ideology. The latest researcher, DeFranza and Mishra (2020) point out gendered languages had more gender prejudice than genderless languages, and geographic, cultural, and demographic covariates influence gender equality.

Gender differences in Vietnamese linguistic forms performed by women and men are not a popular topic for study and have not appealed to many researchers. Duong (2001) is not hesitant to show the problem originates from war, poverty, ideology, and paradoxical values. In the study about politeness in Vietnamese women’s and men’s styles of speech, Le (2011) emphasize kinship terms as the primary effect and concludes that women are more polite than men in producing speech. Nguyen (2015) focuses on men’s sources of family income and social status to maintain their face. Meanwhile, women are only supposed to maintain their men’s faces. Phuong (2013) refers to the position of Hélène Cixous, a French feminist in the 1970s who deconstructed Phallogocentrism which believes that language is the product of a male-powerful society. Recently, Hoang and Phan (2019) argue that gender discrepancy is ultimately rooted in a traditional and social hierarchy.

Teaching materials among others, are significant factors in shaping and promoting discrimination. Mai and Pham (2020) are ones of the rare researchers who clarifies textbooks as the essential impact on gender discrimination. As can be discussed, gender bias in textbooks has not been appealed to numerous Vietnamese researchers and the view about having “*women’s language*” as the previous researchers have claimed might not be so natural and inevitable if we identify the primary factors which affect the ways of speaking between women and men. With these considerations, there is a need for investigating the representations of gender issues in textbooks.

2.3. Gender bias in English textbooks in prior research

Gender bias in English textbooks is still considered one of the dominant factors which need to be eliminated with many findings claimed. This study only focuses on research since the 1990s when the roles of women have changed in many aspects, in which

their voice in language has been analyzed and named by many famous researchers. It is first necessary to have a look at the prior research from around the world about gender differentiation in English textbooks. Many studies emphasized that foreign and second language textbooks continue to reproduce gender biases (Paivandi, 2008; McCabe et al., 2011) even presented and published in a society where gender equality is highly appreciated. Similarly, Ullah, Ali, and Naz (2014) analyzing Pakistani language textbooks found that the number of gender-specific pronouns counted was considerably higher than the number of those referring to females. Nevertheless, Paivandi (2008) evaluated discrimination and intolerance in Iran's textbooks and concluded that all these textbooks are loaded with religious and ideological points of view.

Analyzing English textbooks in Eastern countries with many cultural features which are quite similar to Vietnam, the study found that Japanese textbooks present highly stereotypical linguistic "norms" based on the hegemonic ideologies of class, language, and gender (Lee, 2019). However, Yang (2011) studied English textbook series in Hong Kong and revealed that males and females were almost equally represented and were portrayed in a similar range of activities. The phenomena of females being underrepresented and male dominance did not exist in the textbook series examined, though males were still mentioned first when two nouns were paired for gender. This also demands language planning and social policy contributing to gender elimination in textbooks. Yasin et al. (2012) analysed Malaysian English school textbooks revealed a clear gender imbalance in favor of males mostly. female participants are still dominantly relegated to the private sphere of indoor activities while male participants are predominately represented in the public sphere usually outdoors. Ullah, Ali & Naz (2014) highlighted that not only are females portrayed less often than males in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical gender roles as well. They realized this significantly predominated men than women in text contents and illustrations across nations, especially developing countries. Mai and Pham (2020) carried out a study on textbook series for lower secondary education currently in use in junior secondary schools in Vietnam. They claimed that not only males are more prominent in terms of presence, but they also dominate the conversation. With an insight into the gender representation at a higher level, high school, this research might contribute to some different findings of gender bias in textbooks.

3. Methodology

In the prior studies, gender differentiation has been measured in different ways with the hope to achieve the aims of the research. Sadker and Zittleman (2007) propose a framework of seven types of bias that possibly emerge in instructional materials, namely: Invisibility, Stereotyping, Imbalance, Unreality, Isolation, Linguistic bias, and Cosmetic

bias as the effective to study gender differentiation in textbooks. Using Sadker and Zittleman (2007) as the framework, and based on a particular context in Vietnam, this study’s scale selects stereotyping, and the other two related types of bias - invisibility and imbalance/selectivity in focus, because they have widely been used as an analytical frame in a textbook study (e.g. Yang, 2016; Carlson & Kanci, 2017; Namatende-Sakwa, 2018). A combination of a systematic multimodal critical qualitative analysis with analyses of quantitative methods is applied to collect and analyzed the data to provide triangulation in this study. The content analysis is used to identify the existence of the gender-based on the categories or provide quantitative results. Three Vietnamese English textbooks published by the educational publisher - ministry of education and training, in 2014 were selected for analysis, including English 10, English 11, and English 12. The units of analysis consisted of images in the books and the inclusion of each image was determined by two main criteria: the presence of human participants, males or females, and the numbers of males and females. In addition, the conversations and topics of the units were also analyzed. The study with Critical discourse analysis looks for bias and inequality at both the texts and the level with whatever surrounds the texts such as illustrations, graphic design of the cover, etc. Concerning the texts, the representation of gender in conversations was investigated. The conversation was coded as “M” and “F” (M stands for Male and F stands for Female). The number of turns that males and females take in a conversation is studied, and the length of each gender’s turn and which gender initiates each conversation. The result might contribute to showing whether existing gender bias in Vietnamese English textbooks.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Gender representation in conversation

Table 1. Conversational features in the series of English textbooks of the study

No	Conversat ion feature Books	Participants			Initiator		Turn-number			Turn-length		
		M=F	M>F	M<F	M	F	M=F	M>F	M<F	M=F	M>F	M<F
1	English 10	5	6	2	5	7	5	6	2	4	7	2
2	English 11	6	2	7	3	7	2	1	7	4	3	3
3	English 12	14	3	3	12	5	9	4	4	11	3	3
Total		25	11	12	20	19	16	11	13	19	13	8
		52%	23%	25%	51%	49%	40%	27%	33%	47%	33%	20%

Apparently, in addition to performing teaching and educating functions, English textbooks serve as a socializing tool. The study analyses forty-eight conversations that have gender participants (excluding the listening conversations) extracted from the corpus,

revealing that, as table 1 shows, there are as many males as female participants. Of eleven conversations with males dominating women, five conversations have only male participants. It is also found that males and females do not have equal first-place occurrences in the areas investigated. The proportion of male initiators 51% is higher than the proportion of female ones which is 49%. This gender bias is slightly faded away. In addition, men take a higher number of turn-length in almost conversations, with 33% while the female only 20%. Whereas females have more turns, this gender makes 6% different compared to the male gender (Table 1). From this general overview, there is a bias related to the visibility of gender. These findings support Parham (2013); Yasin et al (2012); Ullah, Ali & Naz (2014), and many prior researchers who yielded that there was slight gender bias in studied English textbooks with respect to gender representation. However, this study argued Mai and Pham (2020) studied four levels of English textbooks in Vietnam, including English 6, English 7, English 8, and English 9, and found a big gender bias difference. They claimed that male characters are given 423 chances to speak (63.8%) whereas female characters only have 240 turns (36.2%). As for various topics and different settings, the study is also in favor of Mai and Pham (2020) and Ullah, Ali & Naz (2014) in the Malaysian context that men are still found to predominate in topics in public realms such as education, environment, community, invention, life story. One essential finding is there is a conversation between two men about housework, an indoor duty in the textbook, the dad was cooking, which was mentioned by one man usually done by the mother. However, the reason for this was that his mom was working late today. Additionally, the topics related to famous and successful people are written about males. Male in the textbooks analyzed receive more opportunities to act as a more experienced person, a successful businessman who seems always busy and is in charge of challenging duties. Whereas, the conversations in which the participants are only females or female-dominated are the topics on becoming independent, caring for those in need. The domination of male-related topics denotes female-oriented issues existing in text contents, the gender imbalance despite slight emergence.

4.2. Gender representation in illustrations

There are 457 illustrations in the series of textbooks, of which 29 % belongs to the category of 'unclear' and excluded from the analysis. The rest of the pictures were coded for the number of male and female participants and classified into five categories (Table 2).

Table 2. Gender representation in illustrations

No	Book title	No of illustrations	Number of males & females depicted in illustrations					
			M<F	M>F	F = M	M only	F only	Unclear
1	English 10	161	9	10	22	33	31	56
2	English 11	145	14	22	17	32	19	32
3	English 12	151	7	12	16	50	25	41
Total		457	30	44	55	115	75	129

Apparently, male outnumbers female in terms of appearance times. The number of

the illustrations of women holds just two third compared to those of men, 17% and 25% respectively. Although efforts had been made to ensure the presence of both genders' illustrations, men's representation still dominated women even when appearing in the same picture. The number illustrated with more women than males makes 7% while the ones with more males than women take 10%. Though this significant bias favoring males might be conscious and unconscious, this study supports Mai and Pham (2020)'s claim on one of the factors resulting from Vietnamese patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, this study excludes the reason of religion as Paivandi (2008) yielded. The finding in this research is also in favor of Parham (2013) and the prior results regarding gender bias in illustrations.

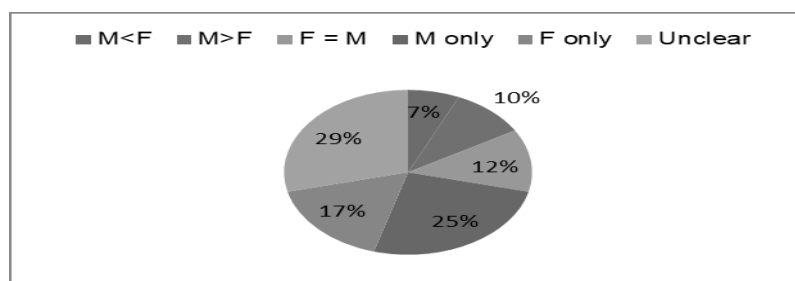


Chart 1. Number of males and females depicted in illustrations

Regarding the stereotypes depicted in the images, it seems there is a stereotype in fields or jobs that are considered as belonging to the male gender. Illustrations of the topics related to work, education, success, and outdoor, such as science, journalism, business, and building are mostly men. Whereas, topics on housework, indoor duties, or soft skilled activities are illustrated with most of the pictures of more women than men. Females are seen as participating less in jobs requiring strength and outdoor physical stability. They are shaped by the ideology of looking after children, such as feeding babies, washing, shopping, and cooking. With respect to the lessons which refer to learning life skills, the pictures of people are often an older man and a boy. Topics about standard family for example a nuclear family or family reunions are illustrated with the picture of parents and one son and one daughter as an ideology of a happy family with gender-number balance. Apparently, as Farooq (1999) confirmed if a textbook neglects the achievements and presence of females or disapproves of females, or ascribes stereotyped roles to both genders, this textbook is gender-biased. Moreover, the illustration of successful and national figures are only male, holding 13 illustrations of famous figures in English 10, without any female pictures. Especially, this study finds a similar interesting result to Kress and Van (1996) in the Malaysian textbooks. The textbooks analyzed in two studies highly paid attention to reading words. Visual images are often treated as “decoration”, or are dismissed altogether. With respect to the illustrations on the covers of the corpus, gender equality manifests very well with both gender balances.

5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed a significant amount of literature about the concepts of “sex” and “gender”, their relationship, and the impacts on the ways of speaking between women and men. The history of studying gender and language has been undertaken by a range of well-known names such as Lakoff (1973), Holmes (2002), and so on. These researchers take different positions to explain gender differences in language. Some explain it in light of physical factors; others consider social problems in which textbooks as the essential contribution to eliminating and propagandizing gender discrimination. Gender differentiation expressed in language should be explained in terms of physical or social conception is still a controversial issue. Moreover, not many prior works have studied gender in Vietnamese textbooks. The insights into how gender is portrayed in a series of English textbooks, with a critical analysis perspective in this study, indicate that to some extent, gender equality is presented and encouraged in terms of topics, conversation features, and illustrations. Nevertheless, through qualitative critical analysis and quantitative method emerges superiority of males outnumbers females related to types of bias - imbalance, invisibility, and stereotyping. The findings, therefore, might shed light on curriculum designing and planning, teaching attitudes about genders, selecting materials, and the ways Vietnamese ELT teachers handle the gendered content of textbooks.

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