

International Curricula; the Case of Sexism in ELT Textbooks

Seyyed Ali Kazemi^{1*}, Nader Asadi Aidinlu², Mohammad Reza Hasannejad³

1. Department of ELT, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad, Iran
2. Department of ELT, Ahar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran
3. Department of English Language and Literature, Iranshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iranshahr, Iran

Corresponding author: Seyyed Ali Kazemi

ABSTRACT: This study was an attempt to examine the status of sexism in the Interchange textbooks. To do so, two types of analysis were performed to examine the manifestations of sexist attitudes and values in four textbooks. First, a systematic quantitative content analysis was carried out with reference to sex visibility and female/male topic presentation in conversations, reading passages, and illustrations. Secondly, a qualitative inquiry was made into sex-linked job possibilities, sex-based activity types, stereotyped sex roles, firstness, and masculine generic conception. Results revealed that these textbooks turn to be sexist in terms of invisibility of men. This can be a step forward in material preparation to consider women as first-class citizens. Meanwhile, in Islamic countries, it can be considered as an instrumental look at women to make these books more attractive and popular. Interestingly, these books cannot be considered sexist in terms of stereotyping a particular sex.

Keywords: course content, sexism, stereotyping, textbooks

INTRODUCTION

There may be some differences between explicit and implicit curriculums. Some of the concepts that students learn are implicit and unwritten. Teachers may not be aware that they are transmitting implicit or hidden ideas but learners may sense it faster because some of these ideas force them to behave in a particular way. They learn quickly that they have to conform to the rules of the school if they want to receive approval (Anderson, 2001).

In line with the advent of language centers and their population of students from diverse cultures, curriculum problem emerged. Teachers were concerned about the inappropriateness of national curricula for providing a truly global dimension and international experience in the academic program. The informal relationships between culturally diverse learners in an international setting should be enhanced by formal recognition in the academic subjects, methodological approaches and international comparisons which can enable learners to see their own cultural identity in relation to the rest of the world. The relationship between sex and language and how it is represented is an important issue in sociolinguistic studies. The study of language and gender began in 1975 by the publication of three books which have continued to significantly influence sociolinguistic works: *Male/Female Language* (M. R. Key), *Language and Women's Place* (R. Lakoff), and *Difference and Dominance* (Thorne & Henley). Since then, sociolinguists have fundamentally shown too much interest in sex/language relationship mostly with respect to the appearance in a few languages of linguistic forms that are used only by speakers of just a particular sex.

Sexist practices demean or ignore women (or men) or stereotype either sex. Stereotyping is considered as one of the most important types of bias, which attributes rigid characteristics to a particular sex, race, etc and portrays a set of people exhibiting a particular set of values, roles and behaviors. In some cases, sex differences depend not only on the sex of the addresser, but also on the sex of the addressee. In a nutshell, sex-linked linguistic variation involves "the differential use of certain status-marking forms by sex" (Fasold, 1990, p. 115).

It is assumed that students subconsciously learn things from the stereotypical images presented in the selected educational materials. These learning experiences influence the students' acculturation process. It is sanctioned that males are good with elaborate tools and technology, they are good at devising and fixing things and that females, for another thing, are only good for light work like cooking, cleaning and tending babies. Stereotypes can also influence learners' worldviews. Some of the most relevant studies of sexism and their manifestations in ELT textbooks are mentioned below:

(Graham ,1975), describing the development of a school children's nonsexist dictionary, discusses nouns used to describe women and men. Before compiling their dictionary, the lexicographers analyze five million words from American children's textbooks. They found that although there are actually more women than men in the real world, these textbooks contained over seven times as many men as women and more than twice as many boys as girls. Yet, the word mother occurred more frequently than father. There were also three times as many wives as husbands, indicating that all in all the main character or speaker in the text was male.

(Porreca ,1984) investigated how sexism is manifested in ESL textbooks and with what consequences. In a content analysis of 15 widely-used ESL textbooks, she focused on the categories of firstness, omission in texts and illustrations, occupations, the frequency of male nouns to female nouns, female-exclusive masculine generic constructions, and the types and frequency of adjectives for men and women. In every category of her study, she found that "there is evidence that sexism continues to flourish in ESL textbooks" (p. 718). She reported that "although females comprise slightly over half the population of the United States, they are represented only half as often as males in both texts and illustrations."

What about the invisible or stereotyped sex in society? To put it differently, where are the women/men in any social context? Why are they absent? If they are present, what activities are they doing? How do they experience the situation? What do they contribute to it? What are their roles? What does the situation mean to them? The present study also aims to answer these questions and extend previous work in the field of sexism.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Recently there has been more English language teaching all over the world. Language teaching centers have also been mushrooming around the world. The most important difference between the private institutes and the public schools is the teaching materials: in public schools, "home-made" English books must be used as materials, which represent a "sanctioned view" of the language, but in private institutes, "imported" English books are widely taught. Needless to say, this can do some irreparable damage to the accepted standards and values by the students. This is what should not be overlooked especially in Islamic countries where values and standards are of high importance. In light of the assumption that English language education materials *may* provide students with biased ELT materials, this study aims to determine whether, after many years now, we are still using biased EFL materials which conveys power and superiority of a society. It seeks to prove stereotyping a sex, imparting the values, culture, and ideology of a particular society directly or through hidden curriculum that can be regarded as violation of ethical standards of particular societies. In this study, some illuminating light will be shed on the areas of concern.

1.2. Research questions

This study, especially, tends to answer the following questions:

1. Are the Interchange books biased in terms of sexism?
2. Do these EFL materials violate the ethical standards of Islamic countries like Iran?

1.3. Significance of the study

This study is to review Interchange ELT textbooks to investigate possible negative aspects of them like sexist practices that may be imported. The results of this study may raise awareness of teachers in teaching and introducing EFL materials. It offers EFL teachers more options to customize their uses and provide more culturally inclusive instruction of their students. Moreover, it outlines effective strategies for confronting possible existing biases and countering the development of new misconceptions so that prevents stereotyping a particular sex. Finally, it also helps book producers to produce more neutral materials free of biases, misconceptions, and taboos.

And what are some of the ways in which social values and attitudes are conveyed through language in ELT materials or textbooks?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Corpus of the study

The ELT Materials selected for analysis are the internationally distributed Interchange textbooks (Interchange Intro, 1, 2, and 3). What follows are the main reasons why Interchange series of EFL textbooks were selected. Firstly, these books are widely used in academic and non-academic language institutions in Islamic countries. Meanwhile, there has always been controversy over the suitability of these textbooks for students in Islamic countries. Secondly, they are written by well-known applied linguists including (Richards ,2005) and they are in their fourth edition. Thirdly, they have been published by a leading and internationally popular publisher (Cambridge University Press). They are also four-skill communicative textbooks that are readily available on the market.

2.2. Procedures

In order to investigate sexism, two types of analysis were performed. First, a systematic quantitative content analysis was carried out with reference to sex visibility in conversations, reading passages and illustrations. Secondly, a qualitative inquiry was made into sex-linked job possibilities, sex-based activity types, stereotyped sex roles and masculine generic conception to detect orientation or stereotyping.

Different manifestations of sexism were examined in the analyses. First, the number of occurrences of females and males in conversations, reading passages and illustrations was counted and tallied. Second, instances of female/male topic presentation– the number of times that male-related or female-related were presented in conversations and reading passages were tallied and summed. Next, the type of jobs for females and for males was identified. Furthermore, the type of portrayed activities in which females and males often participate was recorded. Then, all traditional female-inclusive stereotyped sex-roles were paired with its male-inclusive counterparts. Finally, in an attempt to document whether masculine generic constructions are truly intended to be generic (including both sexes) or they are merely male referenced, the association between all pronouns and their referents were determined.

Since scoring was not simple, in order to avoid biasing and make sure that the classification of the data and the resulting categories are reliable, a second rater categorized data. Then, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for each category as a measure of inter-rater reliability. The results were reported together with other statistical data in the related tables. In no case an alpha of less than 0.70 ($\alpha < 0.70$) was found.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.2. Results of quantitative and qualitative sexism analysis:

As for sexism concept, the corpus of study was examined both quantitatively and qualitatively as presented below.

3.2. 1. Results of quantitative analysis on sexism:

The analysis of the data revealed that, based on the frequency of occurrence, men suffered from low visibility. The percentage of female-only visibility in texts was, in fact, 14% while the percentage of male-only visibility in texts was 12%. Table 5 below presents the frequencies of female/male visibility rates in conversations, reading passages and illustrations of the textbooks.

Table 5. Sex Visibility in Individual Textbooks and in All Textbooks as a Whole

Sex Visibility	textbook	Interchange Intro			Interchange 1			Interchang e 2			Interchange 3			total	Inter-rater reliability
		C	R	I	C	R	I	C	R	I	C	R	I		
	Male only	1	1	4	3	0	5	3	2	9	1	2	7	38(12 %)	0.81
	Female only	7	2	8	2	1	3	4	2	10	0	1	3	43(14%)	0.74
	Male/ Female	24	6	30	27	3	29	9	3	13	15	4	17	180(58%)	0.74
	Sex-neutral	0	3	2	0	12	11	0	9	0	0	9	5	51(16%)	0.87
312															

Note 1. C= Conversations, R= Readings, I= Illustrations
 Note 2. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

3.3.2. Results of qualitative analysis on sexism:

An examination of conversations, reading passages and illustrations of the textbooks demonstrated that from the total 312 topics, 0(0%) topics were male-dominated or female-dominated. Table 6 offers a detailed display of topic presentation in the textbooks. A close qualitative look into sex-linked job possibilities, addressing way, and superiority of a particular sex indicated that the occupational capacities in which both sexes were portrayed didn't appear to be restricted to particular occupations or stereotypes although, few examples of firstness were observed. That is to say, given two nouns paired for sex, such as brother and sister, boys and girls, the masculine word usually came first. There wasn't confusion over masculine generic conception in texts and illustrations. 'Generic' items are basically intended to include both sexes. However, they did not seem to work the way they are supposed to, e.g. parts of the human body or objects that are often not restricted to one single sex such as shape of body were presented in association with the pictures of men's body shape.

Table 6. Stereotyping in Individual Textbooks and in All Textbooks as a Whole

textbook	Interchange Intro			Interchange 1			Interchange 2			Interchange 3			total	Inter-rater	
	C	R	I	C	R	I	C	R	I	C	R	I			
	Sex	Male only	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			0
	Female only	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0(0%)	0.87
	Male/ Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0(0%)	0.83
	Sex-neutral	32	12	44	32	16	48	16	16	32	16	16	32	312(100%)	0.87
													312		

Note. C= Conversations, R= Readings, I= Illustrations

To round up, results indicated that the internationally distributed interchange textbooks can be considered sexist and unfair in terms of invisibility of men while they comprise almost half the population of the world. It is suggested that this sexism seems to reflect the institutionalized unjust sex discrimination to the disadvantage of men in western societies. But the books can't be considered sexist in terms of orientation and stereotyping a particular sex.

4. Discussion, conclusion and implications

The main research questions were about the existence of sexism (stereotyping and visibility) in the internationally distributed interchange. We were also going to investigate violation of ethical standards of Islamic countries in these textbooks.

In general, women are traditionally regarded as second-class citizens in ELT textbooks. But, interestingly, women are not less visible than men in the internationally distributed interchange textbooks. Although the invisibility of man is no way acceptable, in one sense the visibility of women can be a step forward in material preparation. Furthermore, to some people in Islamic societies, the visibility of women can have a negative implication which is the instrumental look at women to add attraction to the textbooks and make them more popular. Examination of the treatment of women in Interchange textbooks revealed that in every category of this study, women didn't appeared less visible than men. Evidence was also found that English was basically taught through the presentation of female-orientated topics. In addition, a much closer look at the data demonstrated that male firstness was not prevalent, females were not placed in traditional stereotypical roles. In light of these findings, one may claim that since the first study of sexism in these textbook materials, much has changed in a comparison with previous works. It is remarkable that ESL/EFL teachers still, in the modern age, use materials which are loaded with a lot of female/male-as-norm elements and are fraught with the unfair and inexcusable language of a female/male-dominated society.

International education imparts an ethic for the future of humanity. It shouldn't impose but allow students to discover and reflect for themselves. It should provide students with material on global issues, responses from some of the world's most creative thinkers and the opportunity to discuss. However, agreement on such universal values does not necessarily mean that different nations or ethnic groups will act in the same way. But to what extent the internationally distributed Interchange textbooks are faithful in shouldering this burden? All that can be offered is an often-neglected perspective, asking what is the content that we teach unintentionally, and how by adopting this perspective we may seek to reinforce valuable process messages and diminish the others. To conclude this heading, the internationally distributed Interchange textbooks don't look to be careful about this fact. While, an international education must go well beyond the provision of information and is involved in the development of attitudes and values which transcend barriers of race, class, religion, gender or politics.

Teachers should make their learners aware of the fact that language is not merely grammar, but that it is also a system of communication for sharing ideas *and* a way of controlling people and influencing actions and thoughts.

Language use involves making choices about grammar, lexis, discourse structure, register, and so forth which are made for certain reasons.

REFERENCES

- Anderson T. 2001. November-December). The hidden curriculum in distance education. November 8, 2004, from <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi>
- Ansary H & Babaii E.2010. Subliminal Sexism in Current ESL/EFL Textbooks. Article presented at Shiraz University, Iran.
- Fasold R. 1990. The sociolinguistics of language. Cambridge, MA.: Basil Blackwell.
- Graham A. 1975. The making of non-sexist dictionary. In B. Thorne, & , N. Henely (Eds.), Language and sex: Difference and dominance, (pp. 57-63). Rowley, MA.: Newbury House Publishers.
- Key MR. 1975. Male/female language. Metuchen, NJ.: The Scarecrow Press.
- Lakoff R .1975. Language and women's place. New York: Harper and Row. Lewy, A. (1991). The International Encyclopedia of Curriculum. New York: Pergamon Press, 41-42.
- Porreca KL. 1984. Sexism in current ESL textbooks. TESOL Quarterly, 18(4), 704-724.
- Richards J. 2005. Interchange 1(3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards J. 2005. Interchange 2(3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards J. 2005. Interchange 3(3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards J. 2005. Interchange Intro (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ur P. 1996. A Course in Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.