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LINGUISTIC SEXISM IN THE IRANIAN HIGH SCHOOL EFL TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

As it is noted by the Iranian Ministry of Education, the number of female school students is almost equal to that of the males. Since textbooks are the only resource for majority of both teachers and students therefore, unbiased textbooks are necessary for students to build up their role in addressing the other gender in their lives and society. Therefore, this study attempted to explore the status of linguistic sexism in the current Iranian high school EFL textbooks (four volumes) published by the Ministry of Education in 2014. This study is a quantitative content analysis to investigate whether both genders (in terms of pronouns, title names and firstness) have been addressed equally or not. Having digitalized the textbooks, WordSmith Tool 4 tabulated the data in numbers then the raw data was transformed into percentages. The results highlighted that males are mostly the focal characters in the texts. The findings also show that male related pronouns 'He' and 'his' outnumbered females by the ratio of 2 to less than 1. The roles of females and their realistic contributions to the society are not well represented in the textbooks. Some implications are advised for teachers, textbook writers and policy makers.

Keywords

Linguistic Sexism, EFL/ESL Textbooks, Hidden Curriculum, Firstness

1. Introduction

“Textbook is the core learning medium composed of text and/or images designed to bring about a specific set of educational outcomes; traditionally a printed and bound book including illustrations and instructions for facilitating sequences of learning activities.” UNESCO (2009:12) According to UNESCO (2009) everybody believes in the crucial role of textbooks which contribute to learning through spreading knowledge and educate children by directly or indirectly (Hidden Curriculum) conveying models of social behavior, norms and values. Therefore, textbooks are a tool for both education and social change. Consequently, considerable care has to be taken in producing and using textbooks. In Iran policy makers and exam designers focus on the textbooks massively then teachers and students have to rely mainly on their textbook, especially in the state schools, where a shortage of budget, teaching aids (e.g. OHP) and equipment (computer with internet access (Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah 2017b) is a great problem. EFL teachers mostly use the textbook as the only means of instruction. This is one of the many reasons why the production of textbooks requires great attention in general and EFL in particular.

In Iran, The education system includes five stages which are pre-school; primary school (mandatory) for 5 years from grade 1 to 5; middle (or junior high school which is also called Guidance) for 3 years from grade 6 to 8; secondary (high school) for 3 or 4 years from grade 9 to 11 or 12; and tertiary (higher education). The Iranian Ministry of Education has announced that a total of 12,500,000 students (Table 1) were enrolled in the academic year of 2012. As Iranian students study English during Junior high school and high school, the total number of students who are exposed to EFL textbooks is 6,740,000 including 3,490,000 (51.8%) males and 3,250,000 (48.2%). This proves that the number of male students is almost equal to number of female ones. If school students confront sexist EFL textbooks, they might assume that not only this is the natural norm but also males and females have all the characteristics mentioned in the textbooks.

Table 1: *Number of Iranian students by gender in 2012*

Stage	Boys	Girls	Total
Junior High	1,710,000 (52%)	1,550,000 (48%)	3,260,000
High	1,780,000 (51%)	1,700,000 (49%)	3,480,000
Total	3,490,000 (52%)	3,250,000 (48%)	6,740,000

Source: <http://www.1600.blogsky.com/1390/03/02/post-20>

Gender discrimination has always been a social issue all over the globe. Quyoom, (2017: 891) highlights that a “woman plays such a vital role of nurturing the future generations, but the irony is that woman is mostly degraded and dominated on the basis of gender”. In addition Zainab Kamran Mirza (2016: 20) mentions that “although women have proved themselves equal to men in all walks of life but their role remains in silhouette and they are considered as second class citizens with less fortunate lives as compare to men”. Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah (2017a) explain that sexism is a term used by feminist critiques to imply how a gender (usually male) is shown superior to the other (always female) in terms of all the norms of society based on no logical assumption. In terms of language, when both genders are treated and represented unequally through language (texts), it is called “Linguistic Sexism” (Bahiyah et al. 2008). Linguistic sexism has been a prominent issue in gender studies because when “one gender is favored over the other makes the classroom context disharmonious” (Steward et al. 2003 and Smith 1988 as cited in Bahiyah et al. 2008).

‘Hidden Curriculum’ is a term used to describe the unwritten social rules and expectations of behavior that we all seem to know, but were never taught (Bieber 1994). Mohammed Faeiz et al. (2011: 2) mention that the HC implies the implicit demands (as opposed to the explicit obligations of the ‘visible curriculum’) found in every learning institution that students have to discover and respond to, in order to survive within it. Pupils, therefore, can learn other things in school besides the intended curriculum. These aspects are described as the HC which hope to raise awareness in the society in order to change culture as “culture’s values and beliefs may facilitate or hinder the learning process at any level.” (Hefnawi 2017: 457)

As highlighted in Hidden Curriculum Theory, linguistic sexism can directly or indirectly (subconsciously) have negative impacts on students. Almost all the nations of the world agree with gender equality, therefore textbooks is not an exception, and need to be free of gender bias (UNESCO 2005). Holdsworth (2007) emphasizes that education plays a vital role in shaping, questioning, and reinforcing the identities of boys and girls, as well as help shape perceptions

about gender relations, as well as gender equality in society outside the classroom. “At any level, in every subject area, textbooks can be important vehicles for promoting human rights, including the principles and practices of non-violence, gender equity and non-distinguishing characters” (UNESCO 2005). Putting all of these notions together, the importance and necessity of textbooks is obvious for everybody. The controversial issue is whether the textbooks deal with both genders equally or not.

2. Literature Review

It is obvious that investigating language textbooks is crucial in order to shed light on the socio-cultural environment through manifesting gender representation. Gender is one of the issues entangled in the language textbooks, which represent norms and values of societies, ideologies or even cultures. From 1970s to late 1980s, some gender-related books such as Key's (1975) *Male/Female language*, Thorne and Henley's (1975) *Difference and Dominance*, Hartman and Judd's (1978) *Sexism and TESOL Materials*, Helinger's (1980) *For Men Must Work, Women Must Weep*, were crucial in the study of language and gender.

During the last few decades, there have been numerous studies on linguistic sexism. One of the outstanding studies is Lee and Collins (2008) who intended to find out whether during the gender bias elimination following passing of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance in 1995, the current Hong Kong English language school textbooks have evolved in terms of sexism or not. They compared two sets of textbooks: the old series and the recent ones which are being used. They found a great improvement in the recent textbooks in terms of gender equality. Bahiyah et al. (2008) mentioned that in Malaysia, local researchers have indicated occurrences of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in English language texts in Malaysian schools. Despite efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination, there are occurrences of sexism, i.e., prejudice or discrimination based on gender in school textbooks.

In Iran, with the advent of feminism and expanded public awareness of gender inequality, a number of scholars and intellectuals have started investigating the gender status in the textbooks. (Amerian 1987; Feiz Mohammadpour 1999; Kheibari 1999; Shahedi 2001; Ansary & Babaii 2002; Yarmohammadi 2002; Ansary & Babaii 2003; Amalsaleh 2004; Razmjoo 2007; Atashpanjeh & Keshavarz 2009; Ghorbani 2009; Bahman & Rahimi 2010; Alemi & Jafari 2012; Gharbavi & Mousavi 2012a; Gharbavi & Mousavi 2012b; Amini & Birjandi 2012; Kazemi, Asadi Aidinlu, &

Hasannejad 2013; Tahriri & Moradpour 2014; Hall 2014 and Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah 2017a as cited in Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah 2017b).

Feiz Mohammadpour (1999) investigated linguistic sexism in the old series of EFL school textbooks and found them sexist and masculine as males were 2.6 times more visible than females. Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012a and 2012b) scrutinized Iranian high school EFL textbooks and revealed that the frequencies of males for different participant's roles were more than that of females. Hall (2014) investigated gender representation in the EFL textbooks Right Path to English I and II and disclosed the degree of imbalance in gender representation in these textbooks.

Jannati (2015) examined the Iran Language Institute pre-intermediate textbook. He used a combination of linguistic and visual analyses to examine the reflection of gender in the textbooks. His results indicated gender imbalance in favor of males. Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah (2017a) examined Iranian Junior High school EFL textbooks which are currently being taught at schools. Their findings indicated manifestation of sexism in all aspects (visibility, firstness, generic masculine constructions, and title names) and the textbooks do not represent both genders equally despite the fact that the number of male and female students is almost equal (Table 1). Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah (2017b) also surveyed Iranian EFL teachers' attitude toward linguistic sexism in their textbooks. The results highlighted that the teachers were all aware of linguistic sexism existence and they detested it. The teachers also requested banning sexism from the textbooks because they believed that linguistic sexism has devastating negative impact on students' personality and decision making in future.

3. Research Questions

In order to achieve the objective of the study, the researchers have represented the following research questions:

- 1- Does linguistic sexism exist in the textbooks (based on the frequency of pronouns)?
- 2- To what extent do Iranian high school EFL textbooks represent gender equality?

4. Methodology

This study aims to examine linguistic sexism in the high school EFL textbooks in Iran in order to find out whether they are sexist or not. As the corpus (91000 words as indicated in Table 2) is too large to be analyzed manually and also to avoid human error, WordSmith tool 4 software was applied. A systematic quantitative content analysis was carried out with reference to percentage and frequency of appearance of (a) 'She' & 'He' (b) 'her' & 'his' (c) title names (Mr. Mrs....) and (d) Firstness to investigate whether quantitatively both genders have been addressed equally or not. Therefore corpus linguistic analysis approach which contains frequency, concordance, collocation and wordlist is utilized in this study. Besides, HC theory would be involved in the interpretation process.

4.1 Procedure

The procedure of the research is similar to that of Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah (2017b). In order to make the corpus usable for the software, the data has to be digitalized. The textbooks are first transformed into a digital softcopy in a page by page scanning procedure. As only text document is readable For Wordsmith software, each scanned page of the books has to be converted from JPEG into word document. Later the word document files are to be converted into text files. The conversion process from JPEG to word document is not 100% accurate, which means that manual editing needs to be done to ensure accuracy. Since the process will extract all the pictures and tables, the text files need to be manually adjusted to ensure precision and consistency. During the scanning process each page of a textbook is split to a different file therefore, once they are all converted into text format, they have to be merged with each other to be able to be applied to the software. After the digitalization process, the data was applied to Wordsmith T\$ for analysis.

4.2 Materials

The data used to develop the corpus is taken from EFL high school textbooks published in 2008 by the Ministry of Education in Iran which are four volumes (Birjandi, P. & Soheili, Gh. 2009d; 2009e; 2009f and 2009g):

Table 2: *EFL Iranian high school textbooks*

Grade	Authors	Words
One	4 males	21000
Two	3 males	19000
Three	3 males	17000
Four	3 males	34000
Total	100% Males	91000

5. Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the detailed systematic quantitative content analysis with reference to percentage and frequency of appearance of: 1) ‘She’ & ‘He’; 2) ‘her’ & ‘his’; 3) title names (Mr. Mrs.....); and 4) Firstness are scrutinized in order to investigate whether quantitatively both genders have been presented equally.

5.1 Frequency and Percentage of ‘He’ vs. ‘She’

The results are tabulated (Tables 3) and percentages are calculated for easier and more accurate analysis. Table 3 indicates, in the first grade of Iranian high school EFL textbook, the third person singular pronouns do not represent both genders equally. It highlights that ‘He’ has been used 261 times (74.6%) while ‘She’ has been used only in 89 instances which makes it 25.4% of the total of 350. Therefore, the first grade EFL textbook does not present both genders equally and is considered sexist.

Table 3: *Frequency and percentage of She & He in Iranian high school EFL textbooks*

Grade	He	She	Total
One	261 (74.6%)	89 (25.4%)	350
Two	173 (70.4%)	73 (29.6%)	246
Three	120 (69.4%)	53 (30.6%)	173
Four	88 (54.7%)	73 (45.3%)	161
Total	642 (69%)	288 (31%)	930

Table 3 also shows that in the second grade of Iranian high school EFL textbook from among 246 times in which pronouns ‘she and he’ occurred, ‘she’ has been used only 73 (29.6%) times while ‘He’ has been used 173 times (70.4%). Therefore, the textbook does not represent both genders equally in terms of using ‘she and he’ pronouns. Table 3 also shows that in the third grade textbook the frequency and consequently the percentages of the use of both pronouns ‘She and He’ are not the same. Of the 173 total occurrences of the pronouns only 53 (30.6%) refer to females and the rest (120) refer to males (69.4%). This textbook therefore is also biased and does not represent both genders equally in terms of number of third person singular occurrences. Table 3 indicates that in the grade four EFL textbook, there are 161 instances of the third person singular pronouns. ‘She’ occurs 73 times (45.3%) and ‘he’ occurs 88 times (54.7%). Again there is more emphasize on males. The grade four of EFL textbook is therefore considered gender bias.

All in all, Iranian high school EFL textbooks do not represent both genders equally when it comes to occurrence of the third person singular pronouns (He and She). Table 3 underpins that in the Iranian high school EFL textbooks, ‘He’ and ‘She’ are used 930 times. Of the total ‘he’ occurs 642 times (69%) and ‘she’ occurs 288 times (31%). The ratio of pronoun ‘She’ to ‘He’ is 1 to more than 2. Therefore, as highlighted in Table 1 which indicates that the number of students in both genders in the schools is almost equal, with regard to the third person singular pronouns’ (he and she), the textbooks are considered extremely gender biased.

5.2 Frequency of ‘her’ vs. ‘his’

Table 4 shows the percentage and frequency of third person singular possessive adjectives’ (her and his) occurrences in the Iranian high school EFL textbooks. Table 4 indicates that total number of times that ‘her’ and ‘his’ have been used in grade one textbook is 141. The frequency of distribution is 23 (16.3%) for females (her) and 118 (83.7%) for males. This means for each ‘her’ in the textbook there are more than 5 ‘his’ which do not represent the actual proportion of the gender in the classrooms and schools throughout the country. Therefore, in terms of ‘her and his’ occurrences the textbook is considered extremely biased.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage of Third Person Singular Possessive Adjectives in High School Textbooks

Grade	His	Her	Total
One	118 (83.7%)	23 (16.3%)	141
Two	75 (75.8%)	24 (24.2%)	99
Three	32 (50.8%)	31 (49.2%)	63
Four	47 (56.7%)	36 (43.3%)	83
Total	272 (70.5%)	114 (29.5%)	386

Table 4 shows that ‘her’ and ‘his’ occur 99 times in grade two EFL textbook. Out of 99 uses of the pronouns, 24 instances (24.2%) are ‘her’ and 75 occurrences (75.8%) are ‘his’. This means that the ratio of ‘his’ to ‘her’ is 3 to 1 which makes the textbook biased. The table also highlights that there are 63 instances of adjectives ‘her and his’ in grade three. Surprisingly, the frequency is evenly shared by both genders (49.2% for females and 50.8% for males) and each has almost an equal number (32 times ‘his’ and 31 times ‘her’). This suggests that this textbook is almost biased free in terms of use of the possessive adjectives ‘her’ and ‘his’. The analysis of the grade four textbook shows that there are 83 instances of ‘her and his’. Of the total, 36 instances (43.3%) are ‘her’ and 47 occurrences (56.7%) are ‘his’. Therefore, grade four textbook’s gender representation is not equal.

In total, in the Iranian high school EFL textbooks, ‘her’ and ‘his’ are used 386 times 272 times (70.5%) for ‘his’ and 114 times (29.5%) for ‘her’. This makes the ratio of possessive adjective ‘her’ to ‘his’ 1 to more than 2. In terms of the third person singular possessive adjectives ‘her and his’, the textbooks are considered extremely gender biased except for grade three which treats both genders almost equally (Table 4).

5.3 Frequency of Title Names ‘Mr.’ vs. ‘Mrs.’, & ‘Ms.’

For this part of the study the researcher used the Wordlist function of WST4 to find out the frequency of the occurrences of title names ‘Mr. Mrs. & Ms.’ Table 5 highlights the percentage and frequency of occurrences of title names in Iranian EFL high school textbooks. Table 5 shows that grade one EFL textbook contains 18 title names of which 15 (83%) are for ‘Mr.’ and 3 (17%) are for ‘Mrs.’. Based on this the ratio of Mr. to Mrs. is more than 4 to 1. Therefore, the textbook in terms of ‘title names’ is considered gender bias. Table 5 also indicates that grade two textbook

contains 10 title names of these 1 instance (10%) is for ‘Mrs.’ and 9 occurrences (90%) are for ‘Mr.’ The ratio of Mr. to Mrs. title name is 9 to 1. For this reason, grade two EFL textbook is considered extremely biased.

Table 5: *Frequency and percentage of title names in high school textbooks*

Grade	Mr.	Mrs.	Ms.	Total
One	15 (83%)	3(17%)	0 (0%)	18
Two	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	10
Three	13 (81%)	3 (19%)	0 (0%)	16
Four	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	4
Total	39 (81%)	9 (19%)	0 (0%)	48

Table 5 shows that in the grade three textbook, there are 16 occurrences of title names from which 13 (81%) are for ‘Mr.’ and 3 (19%) are for ‘Mrs.’ As the ratio for title names of ‘Mr.’ to ‘Mrs.’ is more than 4 to 1, the textbook is considered gender biased. The table also indicates that in the grade four textbook, there are 4 instances of title names of which 2 instances (50%) of ‘Mr.’ and 2 occurrences (50%) of ‘Mrs.’. This highlights that the textbook does address both genders equally in terms of human title names ‘Mr. & Mrs. and in regards with this the textbook is not considered gender biased. However, Table 5 underpins that in the Iranian high school EFL textbooks, there are 48 occurrences of title names of these 39 occurrences (81%) are ‘Mr.’ and 9 instances (19%) are ‘Mrs.’ Based on the findings, Iranian high school EFL textbooks are considered extremely gender biased except for grade four which addresses both genders equally. Obviously, as the ratio of male title names to female ones in the textbooks is 4 to 1, they do not address both genders equally and need to be modified.

5.4 Firstness

As it was mentioned earlier, ‘Firstness’ is one of the areas that the researcher is to highlight in order to help to answer the research questions. This is to highlight whether male characters are used prior to females or not. For this reason, Concordance function of WST4, with the searching word ‘and’, has been used.

Table 6 presents the frequency and percentage of occurrences of Firstness in the Iranian EFL High School textbooks. There is also a ‘Neutral’ column which can neither be considered as ‘male then female’ nor ‘female then male’. For instance: “*doctors and nurses*” is considered neutral because it does not mention the gender. Table 6 shows that in the grade one textbooks, there no occurrences of ‘Firstness’. In the grade two textbooks, there are 7 occasions of ‘Firstness’ from which 6 instances (84%) are ‘Male then Female’ and the rest (14%) are ‘Female then Male’ one (Table 4.6). In terms of ‘Firstness’ the book does not treat both genders equally. The table also mentions that in the grade three textbooks, there are 2 occurrences of ‘Firstness’ and both (100%) are ‘Male then Female’ category. For this reason, the grade three textbook, in terms of ‘Firstness’, does not treat both genders equally and is extremely biased. In the grade four textbooks, there are 2 occurrences of ‘Firstness’. One is ‘Male then Female’ category and the other is ‘Female then Male’. This suggest that the textbook, in terms of ‘Firstness’, is not gender biased.

Table 6: Frequency and percentage of names in order of firstness in high school textbooks

Grade	Male/Female	Female/Male	Neutral	Total
One	0	0	2	0
Two	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	1	7
Three	2 (100%)	0	1	2
Four	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	1	2
Total	9 (82%)	2 (18%)	5	11

Generally, as shown in Table 6, there are 11 instances of ‘Firstness’ in the textbooks from which 9 (82%) are ‘Male then Female’ and the rest (18%) are ‘Female then Male’ group. For this reason, the Iranian EFL High School textbooks, in terms of ‘Firstness’, do not treat both genders equally and are biased toward males.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The examination of results revealed that since the male pronouns outnumber females and are mostly the focal characters which do not represent the ratio of both genders studying at schools (1 to 1), the Iranian high school EFL textbooks can be considered sexist. The roles of females and their realistic contributions to the society are not well represented in the textbooks because there is

an imbalance in gender representation. Although this study showed improvement to some areas of the textbooks when compared with the results of the previous researches (Feiz Mohammadpour, 1999; Gharbavi and Mousavi, 2012a and 2012b) which examined the same textbooks (1999 edition), there are still further for improvements in order to avoid negative impacts of Hidden Curriculum and to provide an equal learning opportunity for all students. According to HC theory as the textbooks present students with texts which emphasize on males importance and more frequent appearance, students might take it as a norm that males are superior and more dominant and intelligent.

This indoctrination of a false belief can affect students massively on their decision making about their desired study field or a favored job (Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah 2017a). In a long term, this imbalanced representation can affect the society and the future of the nation. Since females include 50% of the nation who would be required to join the work power of the nation, they need to feel equal and this equality does not happen unless been truly experienced. Future wives and mothers must believe in themselves and their equality with males, otherwise the feeling of being inferior, weak, indecisive and less intelligent can have devastating impact on the society.

6.1 Implications

It needs to be highlighted that the implications of the study are not against religious, socio-cultural or sociopolitical factors, but against a social disorder. The social problem of gender inequality can be decreased (Lee & Collins 2009) and hopefully eradicated by taking some simple precautions against linguistic sexism. The findings of the present study are beneficial for language teachers, textbook writers, and policy makers.

Although textbooks must not be the only source in the classroom, unfortunately as explained earlier the Iranian state schoolteachers do not have many choices. Therefore, the Iranian teachers have a more important role and need to euphemize the textbooks in the class in a way that students would not realize the negative effects of gender bias textbooks in terms of hidden curriculum. Therefore, teachers (either EFL or other subjects) need to be more careful and can choose supplementary materials more cautiously, in order to avoid, or decrease the negative impacts of linguistic sexism. Since teachers are the only people who can tackle this problem in this first place in the classrooms, those who are teaching female students, have a bigger responsibility because the textbooks are male dominant.

Gender bias free textbooks can help to minimize the negative impacts of hidden curriculum on the pupils at schools. Textbook writers need to note that the textbooks are the only source of information and the only window through which they can see the real world outside their family and home. In order to show a clear and fair view of the society, in which they are eventually going to step out into, textbook writers have a huge responsibility. This responsibility includes displaying a society that will provide equal opportunity for both genders. This would not happen unless they experience equality in the textbooks that unfortunately does not exist in the current textbooks. Therefore, the negative effects of linguistic sexism can influence students' lives and mindsets forever. (Vahdatinejad & Bahiyah 2017a)

Besides, the findings of this study may also be of interest to policy makers since the effects of market ideology and the norms and values inculcated through textbooks should be considered in order to prevent cultural misunderstanding. In order to avoid gender discrimination, we need to start with our education system because it essentially constructs the mind and mentality of the people who are going to be the future of our society (i.e. students). To do so, policy makers need to rethink about the school textbooks that we use which are major source of information for students. Iran needs a Ministry of Women's Affairs like all other nations (even Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Afghanistan, etc. have such Ministries). The Ministry of Education needs a Gender Department to avoid gender discrimination. This department can be in charge of controlling textbook materials. Gender experts must be employed for the editing and production of textbooks to avoid sexism in textbooks.

6.2 Further Studies

Further research needs to be undertaken on a wide range of current high school textbooks in other subjects to explore issues of linguistic sexism and gender representation. The methodology that was used in this study can be simply generalized further for other textbooks (e.g. Mathematics and Science which was done by Mohamad Subakir et al. 2012) to monitor whether the other textbooks are gender biased or not.

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