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Gender-Positioning within the Visual Network: How (Non-) Inclusive Can EFL Materials Get?

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Abstract: Much of the research on gender representations in language teaching materials has focused on providing frequency-based accounts of character appearances, familial/occupational role attributions and sexist language use. However, gender discrimination, when communicated visually, might more readily drop off the already overburdened teacher's radar. Therefore, this study concentrated not just on the depiction of coursebook images but also on their relation to the learners, and aimed to discover the latent sexism in three thematically similar units from one global and two locally-produced coursebooks widely used in the Turkish and Iranian EFL contexts. A critical analysis of 41 images with Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework revealed that male overrepresentation prevailed throughout all three resources, though to a lesser extent in the global coursebook. The characters mainly avoided direct contact with the viewers by averting their gaze and offered themselves as visual cues for denotative meanings. The global and Turkish-made series tended to position them both closer to the young readers and at their eye level to help build intimacy with more relatable role models. In their Iranian counterpart, the male and female characters were yet socially distanced from them through long shots taken from low and high angles respectively, in which case men were portrayed as authority figures to be looked up to, and women as the diminished other to be looked down on by the students. While both genders were oftener seen frontally in the Turkish EFL material with mixed-gender authorship, the all-male author teams preferred to show the male characters from an oblique angle to further detachment in the global and Iranian contexts. In establishing relatively closer, more personal and engaging interactions with both boys and girls visually, the global and Turkish EFL materials can be claimed to encode a more inclusive and equitable worldview than their Iranian counterpart.

Keywords: EFL coursebooks, Gender representations, Image analysis, Inclusiveness

Introduction

Despite long being a bone of contention especially in foreign language education, published coursebooks still remain indispensable for assisting teachers with the provision of core content for both advantaged and disadvantaged students as economically as possible. In that regard, they make lifelong teaching/learning partners independent of the content-area being studied. And when considered as any other component of mass media, such pervasive influence requires careful examination of not only their texts, as is often the case, but also the visual elements that encode knowledge and ideologies simultaneously. There are some that concentrate on the role of textbooks in the reproduction of existing gender bias within the society through explicit and implicit messages they convey, whereas others are more concerned that ESL materials, in particular, are produced by one culture (i.e. the UK/US) but often "absorbed" in a very different context from their source culture, with culture-specific gender roles and power structures (Bag & Bayyurt, 2015; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2019; Giaschi, 2000, p. 33). In either case, the linguistic and nonlinguistic choices made in the content of the materials can seriously affect the moulding of students' attitudes towards their own and others' social positions, as well as their academic, personal and eventually professional development, and any form of gender bias in their texts and images should therefore be scrutinised and challenged by gender-sensitive teachers in the EFL classroom (Giaschi, 2000; Lee, 2018; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Mustapha, 2012).

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Much of the research on gender representations in language teaching materials has relied on documenting frequency-based accounts of gender inequality predominantly in the written texts, as reflected by the male-to-female ratio of total character appearances, central characters, character mentions, familial and occupational role attributions, and also by the number of sexist linguistic realisations, i.e. in the use of pronouns, names, titles, generics, firstness and adjectives (e.g. Bag & Bayyurt, 2015; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2019; Lee, 2014a; Lee, 2014b; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Simsek, 2022a). If, besides the written texts, their illustrations were subjected to content analysis, ample examples of stereotypical visualisations and mostly superficial information as to the population and concentration of men and women in different social settings were then provided again based on character counts (e.g. Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2019; Lee, 2014a; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Simsek, 2022b). However, visual communication should not be subordinated to verbal communication, for the image, embodying a thousand meanings and “nonrational, nonlogical nature”, can surpass the printed word in expressive power, and prove “even more difficult to challenge” (Giaschi, 2000, p. 35; Mustapha, 2015). As a result, gender discrimination, when communicated visually, might more readily drop off the already overburdened teacher’s radar in the EFL classroom.

It may be true that compared to the written texts, their illustrations have received less attention in the EFL coursebook literature, but the role of the images as part of the hidden curriculum should not be underestimated in gender-positioning (Mustapha, 2015). A closer look at recent research also indicated that in only a few studies from non-European contexts, coursebook images were rigorously evaluated in terms of genderedness, and two different analytical frameworks by Giaschi (2000) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) were mainly adopted for deciphering the hidden messages in men’s and women’s activities, eye-directions, body language, clothing styles, social distance, status and spaces (e.g. Adel & Enayat, 2016; Azad, 2020; Bakhtiari & Saadat, 2015; Levine & Sullivan, 2010; Mustapha, 2015). Unlike existing studies, which tended to focus on the critical image analysis of one set of EFL materials and depiction of the illustrated people in either global or locally-produced series, this study sought to reveal latent sexism in three thematically similar units also through the relation of the depicted coursebook characters to teenage learners as the viewers and demonstrate how gender-(non)inclusive both types of EFL materials can get in comparison to another. The research questions were thus formulated as follows: How do male and female depictions differ in visibility and attribute assignment? How do their relations with the viewers differ in distance, angle and contact?

Method

For comparative purposes, a total of 41 images were selected from three thematically similar units in one global (G) (i.e. OUP’s best-selling series for teenagers, *Solutions*) (Falla & Davies, 2018) and two locally-produced coursebooks (i.e. Turkey’s MONE-approved material, *Count me in*, and Iran’s state textbook, *Vision 1*) (Cimen et al., 2021; Moghaddam et al., 2020) that were widely used by pre-intermediate secondary students in the Turkish (TR) and Iranian (IR) EFL contexts. Since the units on science were considered capable of providing role models to whom tenth-graders would aspire to become, the corpus of this study was comprised of all gendered images featuring human characters – 9 images from *Unit 9* of the global EFL material, 18 images from *Theme 9* of the Turkish EFL material, and 14 images from *Lesson 3* of the Iranian EFL material, to be more precise (Cimen et al., 2021, pp. 108-116; Falla & Davies, 2018, pp. 96-105, 116; Moghaddam et al., 2020, pp. 73-95).

Due to its practicality in capturing the intricacies of visual communication, Van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework was employed in the current image analysis. Despite the previous emphasis on the depiction of the people in the pictures, Van Leeuwen (2008) identified a parallel dimension of visual representation, the relation of the depicted people to the viewers. Accordingly, the interactions between the represented participants and the viewers are determined by these three parameters: the social *distance* they keep from the viewers, *angle* from which the viewers see them, and finally the *gaze* the depicted people offer/demand in the pictures (Van Leeuwen, 2008). It becomes possible to position certain groups (i.e. women) as others through the systemic choices the image producer makes between: *close* and *long shots*, views from above (*high angle*), below (*low angle*), or at *eye level*, and from the front (*frontal angle*) or sideline (*oblique angle*), and also looks at (*direct address*) and away from (*indirect address*) the viewers (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Therefore, all the gendered coursebook images were assigned at least one functional label during their analysis on all three levels of visual representation, and their occurrences were also counted to concretise observations on male and female depictions. As a unit of analysis, the image can still be “difficult to challenge on a rational basis”, and its examination inevitably involves discussion of “feelings and impressions” (Giaschi, 2000, p. 36). Because of the subjective nature of image interpretation, a primarily qualitative approach was taken in this study, but quantitative indicators, i.e. male-to-female ratios ($m/f_{G/TR/IR}$), were calculated and presented where appropriate.

Results and Discussion

The critical image analysis with Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework revealed that independent of coursebook origin, women were always outnumbered by men ($m/f_G= 8/6$; $m/f_{TR}= 12/7$; $m/f_{IR}= 19/14$) and tended to be negatively stereotyped in varying degrees as the weaker sex because of their liability to agitation (e.g. the mother figure returning a hand mixer to a shop) (Falla & Davies, 2018, p. 104) depression (e.g. Mary, feeling homesick and complaining about her new city life to Susan) (Cimen et al., 2021, p. 113) overexertion (e.g. "Melika try[ing] hard to learn English") (Moghaddam et al., 2020, p. 77) and victimisation (e.g. Leila, an unlucky pedestrian, getting hit by a male motorcyclist) (Moghaddam et al., 2020, p. 88). Although a variety of science careers (e.g. astronauts, chemists, doctors and engineers) were thematised across the texts, it was women that were still assigned subservient positions as white-aproned, lace-hatted waitresses and heavily-painted airline clerks (Falla & Davies, 2018, p. 99) in the images of the global coursebook.



Figure 1. Negative stereotyping of women in coursebook images

As can be seen in the above collage from the global (Falla & Davies, 2018, pp. 97, 104) Turkish (Cimen et al., 2021, pp. 110, 113) and Iranian (Moghaddam et al., 2020, pp. 77) EFL materials respectively, men were, on the other hand, presented as the epitome of jollity (e.g. converting doors into ping pong tables), commitment and success (e.g. Iran's male youth donning PPE and conducting lab experiments). In bearing and wearing innovative technologies (e.g. *Google Glass* on a middle-aged man's face) (Falla & Davies, 2018, p. 100) and also defeating their country's rivals in sports and elsewhere (e.g. Turkey's Olympic and World champion wrestler, Taha Akgul, and martyred soldier, Omer Halisdemir) (Cimen et al., 2021, pp. 108, 110) the male characters were elevated to heroic status, and served to suggest that progress in science and many other areas owes more to men than women.

When the interactive meanings gendered images conveyed in these EFL materials were further analysed with respect to the first dimension of *gaze*, it was found that the majority of the represented participants, irrespective of their sex, did not look directly in the eyes of the viewers, and basically offered themselves as visual cues for denotative meanings ($m/f_G= 7/4$; $m/f_{TR}= 9/4$; $m/f_{IR}= 15/12$). For example, the photo of a graying black man, whose hands were resting on an old white man's arm and shoulder, was used in the pre-listening activity of the global material for creating an authentic situation where the students, as oblivious onlookers to their existence, were led to match the speaker's intention (e.g. "to comfort") with a given sentence (e.g. "Don't worry, everything will be fine") (Falla & Davies, 2018, p. 99). In the few instances, where women were able to establish direct contact with the viewers, other representational choices in illustration style and social distance could also impede visual interpersonal relationships.

In Figure 2, of the three portraits, belonging to inspirational women like Ada Lovelace (Falla & Davies, 2018, p. 116) Idil Biret (Cimen et al., 2021, p. 110) and Tahereh Saffarzadeh (Moghaddam et al., 2020, p. 82) only the first two were addressing the students directly, while the last one was shown totally engrossed in her work. In preference to her two known photos, the global coursebook used Ada Lovelace's drawing in a Victorian evening dress with a coquettish mantilla, red blush and lipstick, and demanded that the world's first computer programmer would rather be regarded preliminarily as a popular romantic figure (i.e. Lord Byron's daughter, *Countess of Lovelace*). In Idil Biret's case, further distancing, despite her broad smile, had a moderating influence on her communicativeness, however.



Figure 2. The female gaze in coursebook images

The systemic classification of the interactive meanings of the coursebook images by the second dimension of *distance* also demonstrated that the represented participants, whether they were celebrities or noncelebrities, were shown more frequently in close-up ($m/f_G = 6/3$; $m/f_{TR} = 8/5$; $m/f_{IR} = 9/4$), as if they were actually acquainted with the young readers of the global and Turkish-made series, whereas their Iranian counterparts were shown more impersonally in long shot ($m/f_G = 2/3$; $m/f_{TR} = 4/2$; $m/f_{IR} = 10/10$), as if strangers would keep their distance from each other in real-life communication. Friendly encounters with the viewers were also made more interactive in the global and Turkish case through the dominant use of the eye-level perspective, and the students were consequently provided with more accessible role models that they could relate to rather than revere alone ($m/f_G = 7/6$; $m/f_{TR} = 12/7$; $m/f_{IR} = 10/5$). However, the Iranian EFL material did not use the eye-level perspective for representing almost half of the male characters and over half of the female ones. Instead, power differences were encoded through the use of low- and high-angle pictures as in the below collage (Moghaddam et al., 2020, pp. 75, 84).

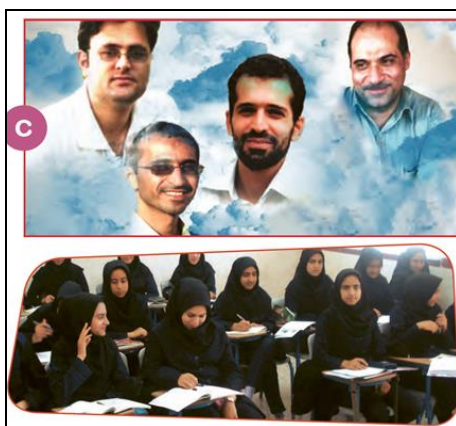


Figure 3. Othering women in coursebook images

It can be observed from Figure 3 that despite both being close shots, the four male scientists were photographed from a lower angle than the coursebook's feminine ideal, Tahereh Saffarzadeh in Figure 2, and by literally looking down from the heavens, they stood a better chance of exerting power over a teenage audience than their more down-to-earth female peer. These male authority figures also stood in sharp contrast to the female students in Figure 3, who were apparently photographed from a higher angle, and would thus be looked down on by the viewers of their own kind, i.e. girls who had to learn English using the given material. In Figure 3, two more strategies of othering were used to diminish women's image, namely, homogenisation and cultural categorisation. Compared to the four male scientists, depicted as specific individuals (i.e. distinguishable by their haircut, facial hairstyles and eyewear), the female students were depicted as a generic group of look-alikes, and further robbed of their individuality through the exaggerated focus on their all-black clothing and head coverings. Nevertheless, two girls on the right still managed to stand out in the crowd with their direct gaze/address, as the rest were typically seen shying away from the viewers.



Figure 4. Masculine detachment in coursebook images

The coursebook images were ultimately examined in terms of the degree of detachment expressed by the horizontal angle. In Figure 4, pioneers such as Thaddeus Cahill (inventor of the world's first electrical musical instrument) (Falla & Davies, 2018, p. 103), Elon Musk (the world's richest tech entrepreneur) (Cimen et al., 2021, p. 108), and Rhazes (medieval Persian polymath and head of a Ray hospital) (Moghaddam et al., 2020, p. 76) were all presented in a totally opposite fashion to those in Figure 3. In placing them sideways, the image creators got these male figures to reciprocate the viewers' intent looks with utter indifference. Perhaps, they wanted to give the impression that unlike women keener to face the audience, men as people of purpose remained aloof because they were engaged with professional transactions in the textbook world, too. It was also worth noting that the male-authored global and Iranian EFL coursebooks had a greater tendency to adopt an oblique point of view in the visual representation of the male characters ($m/f_G = 6/3$; $m/f_{TR} = 3/0$; $m/f_{IR} = 12/3$), whereas the Turkish EFL coursebook, having been authored by more women than men, chose to position both genders more frontally, perhaps due to their feminine interest in involving (learners) and getting involved ($m/f_G = 2/3$; $m/f_{TR} = 9/7$; $m/f_{IR} = 7/11$).

As a result of the current image analysis on textbook sexism, the global and Turkish-made series can be claimed to establish relatively closer, more personal and engaging interactions with both boys and girls visually, and encode a more inclusive and equitable worldview than their Iranian counterpart. At the same time, it was once again observed that neither the global nor locally-produced coursebooks managed to ensure 50/50 gender equality in character portrayals, and male overrepresentation, though to a lesser extent in the former, continued to be the foremost strategy for institutionalising male supremacy in the visual sphere. Two other image analyses of the same series produced in Iran also demonstrated that men occupied two-thirds of the pictorial space, and discrimination against women survived in new editions and through coursebook levels (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2019; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahruei, 2020). In Simsek's (2022a) corpus-based comparison of L2 reading materials for refugee learners, the change in the type of learning context (TSL/ESL) made no change in the outcome, for the locally-produced storybooks for young learners of Turkish were similarly outperformed by their New Zealandian peers for young learners of English in both increasing the visibility of women (i.e. through more female illustrations) and supporting equal sharing of the visual sphere (i.e. through mixed-gender illustrations).

Negative stereotyping through role-relationships was another common strategy that came to be applied by the present EFL coursebooks in the visual representation of women. Previous research, too, have shown that in spite of a slight increase in the overall number of female appearances, English language learning materials, especially produced in the periphery, still imposed male dominance by assigning the more diverse and powerful roles to men, and confining women to positions of lesser prestige (Bag & Bayyurt, 2015; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2019; Lee & Chin, 2021; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahruei, 2020). In Mustapha's (2015, p. 161) and Azad's (2020) visual analyses of Nigerian and Iranian L2 materials, men made more active, "inherently superior" participants, especially in the work-environment, while women became the goal of others' actions except in domestic activities. The situation appears to have not much improved since the early 2000s, when Giaschi (2000) firstly focused on agency in the images of the mass-market ESL coursebooks, and discovered consistent placement of men as the doers in managerial positions and women as the passive receivers except in the field of fashion. Since textbooks do not necessarily mirror the actualities of gender realisations in a given community, the persistence of gender stereotypes through visual imagery demands urgent attention in the (L2) classrooms of developing countries due to their more insidious influence on female students' career choices (Bruegilles & Cromer, 2009; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2019; Simsek, 2022b).

Apart from male overrepresentation and negative stereotyping, the analysed language teaching materials exploited different combinations of Van Leeuwen's (2008) three major strategies of othering. The first of these, *objectivation*, concerned the direction of gaze. Although indirect address was the dominant pattern in the coursebook characters' interactions with the viewers, overall men still turned out to be looking away from the viewers more frequently than women in the present study. Adel and Enayat (2016) who explored gender-positioning in the images and texts of the UK-produced ESP series on commerce, nursing, technology and

tourism, likewise found that women were more inclined to gaze at the viewers, especially in technology and tourism texts, and regarded the female gaze at the viewers as a sign of weakness. Giaschi (2000, p. 40) also indicated that where men were “looking off into the distance” and women “usually up at them”, such portrayals, as “a photographer’s trick”, served to intensify their status differences, and entailed female dependency in juxtaposed images. The current finding was, however, in direct contrast with Azad’s (2020) results in that while indirect address again became the norm, more female than male characters looked away from the viewers, and their visual presentation was yet appreciated as culturally appropriate in the case of Iran’s *Prospect* series.

Distanciation was the second major strategy that the given EFL materials exploited to distinguish friends from strangers, and enjoyed much popularity with women rather than men, and even more with the Iranian female characters within the textbook corpus. Van Leeuwen (2008) on the other hand, identified it as a common technique in school textbooks concerning social issues like immigration. In his example, a Dutch secondary geography textbook depicted three women with headscarves in a long shot, but an interracial couple in a close-up, thereby estranging the former party from the world of the (host) students (Van Leeuwen, 2008). According to Azad (2020) the same technique was, this time, used for keeping women away from the viewers and emphasising male prominence through the Iranian coursebook images. Lee and Chin (2021) who investigated gender imagery in Hong Kong’s English readers for primary schools, similarly revealed that fathers were placed at a greater distance from children and made less visible than mothers so as to naturalise women as the default caretaker in the family.

In addition to differential use of social distance and the gaze, *disempowerment*, displaying people from beneath our eyes, and/or from the front, was the last strategy that got to be used more efficiently in the representation of women across the given texts (Van Leeuwen, 2008). In point of fact, all the materials, whether global or local, had their share of downplaying women’s presence in visual communication by either sparing low-angle pictures for male scientists, and high-angle ones for look-alike Iranian schoolgirls, or aligning the viewers more with female figures overall. Van Leeuwen (2008) observed a similarly unfair treatment of women after 9/11, when a large, culturally homogenised group of Muslim women were photographed from a high angle, and so looked down upon by the *Guardian Weekend*’s readers. In Bakhtiari and Saadat’s (2015) study of gender portrayals by 16 random photos from another global English coursebook (*Interchange*), women were viewed not only as the leading agents of trivial and domestic activities, but also from the front, as part of the viewers’ world, so that men, even if they were nursing or cooking, could be shown from the oblique angle, as no agreed-upon reality.

Conclusion

On the basis of evidence from the current image analysis of global and local EFL coursebooks, neither type of English language learning materials can be claimed to achieve at least 50/50 gender balance within their character networks, and though to a lesser extent in the global course, male dominance was still imposed overtly through two well-known techniques, overrepresentation of men in powerful/prestigious positions, and negative stereotyping of women with vulnerabilities and subservient roles. Independent of the particular learning context they were produced for, all the materials used in different combinations Van Leeuwen’s (2008) more covert strategies for othering women. The coursebook characters mainly avoided direct contact with the viewers by averting their gaze and offered themselves as visual cues for denotative meanings, but overall, slightly more men than women became the subject of objectivation. By positioning them both closer to the young readers and at their eye level, the global and Turkish-made series helped build intimacy with more relatable role models. *Distanciation* was nevertheless found most popular with the Iranian female characters, and long shots, when coupled with high-angle pictures, further served to portray women as the diminished other to be looked down on by fellow students/citizens. While both genders were oftener seen frontally and so more involved with the viewers in the Turkish EFL material with mixed-gender authorship, the all-male author teams preferred to show men from an oblique angle to empower them with detachment in the global and Iranian contexts.

It can thus be concluded that in establishing relatively closer, more personal and engaging interactions with both boys and girls visually, the global and Turkish EFL materials endeavoured to present a more inclusive and equitable worldview than their Iranian counterpart. Considering that all the choices the coursebook teams make in the verbal and visual contents are more or less value-laden, even the most diverse materials, in terms of gender representations, may hurt the feelings of others that are not foreseen by their writers, illustrators and publishers. However, despite lack of control over coursebook compositions most of the time, the reflective teacher’s choice between coursebook candidates is not ideology-free, either. For this reason, starting with their pre-service education, L2 teachers as the immediate arbiter of classroom justice should be trained to diagnose

gender-biased textbooks, and armed with the essential skill set for adapting materials in order for their learners to fight against more subtle forms of inequities in and beyond their schooling.

Recommendations

Since the present study focused on exploring the latent sexism in the human images of only three thematically similar (science-themed) units from one global and two local secondary English textbooks, the size of the corpus (41 images), sampling method (purposive sampling), the origin, proficiency (pre-intermediate) and grade level of the selected materials can be listed among its limitations. Therefore, future researchers might consider replicating the analysis with a larger corpus of more diverse materials (e.g. with different skills focus, or for lower-level/grade students), involving not just selected units but all the coursebook texts and images in the analysis, and comparing gendered realisations across different learning contexts both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPSS journal belongs to the author.

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