
Gender representation in Iranian English language coursebooks

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Is sexism still alive?

Introduction

The representation of gender in foreign language teaching has attracted the attention of many scholars and has been investigated in different parts of the world. Due to its potential for deep impact on pupils, it is a matter of great concern. Discrimination against a gender group in coursebooks can lead to harmful impacts on pupils' development as well as on their future academic and career (Lee, 2018). The lack of representation of females in language coursebooks may seriously harm their ability to understand the target language as well as its culture (Rifkin, 1998).

Coursebooks are one of the most important agents of gender socialisation (Tylka & Caloger, 2011). They also play a vital role in language classrooms as it is through them that learners may face the target language for the first time. It is also through the coursebooks that any case of existing gender-biased language would be conveyed to learners, which, in effect, would shape their consciousness of their roles in society according to their gender especially as learners have little agency in the schooling context.

This study examines the gender representation in five English language coursebooks (*Prospect 1–3* and *Vision 1–2*) written in Iran for use in all Iranian secondary schools, for those in education from the age of 12 upwards. The five coursebooks published in 2017 are being phased into use, and a sixth (*Vision 3*) is yet to be published.

ELT in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic was established in 1979, and since then the educational system has changed many times. Before the 1979 Revolution, the educational system was secular. However, after the revolution, the educational system as well as schools, were changed fundamentally and are currently based on

Islamic values (Foroutan, 2012). This change came to force in the 1987 Education Law, which 'gives priority to ethical and religious development in educational and school activities' (Paivandi, 2008: 9) and it is considered to be part of the process of



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Islamisation of schools (Foroutan, 2012). Although there are both state and private schools in Iran, ‘all the syllabuses, materials as well as coursebooks are prepared and developed by the Department of Education and must be followed and used by all teachers and schools across the country. Also, it must be clarified that there is not any coursebook available to Iranian teachers and students other than the ones prepared by the department.’ (Dahmardeh, Parsazadeh & Parsazadeh, 2017: 60). This makes their social and pedagogic content extremely important.

In Iran, at least two foreign languages for six years starting from age 12 are compulsory. English and Arabic are the dominant foreign languages and are offered in almost all schools across the country. Almost all pupils would choose to take these two languages, although other languages, such as German, French, and Spanish are offered in some schools. According to Aliakbari (2004) the English language, probably, is the most important foreign language because:

... the dominant trend in Iran is toward more English language teaching. As a required course from the first grade of secondary school, English is taught three to four hours per week. There is an extensive and still growing private sector of education in the country, a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools functioning within the two levels of general education in Iran, namely primary and secondary schools, English receives striking attention and probably extra hours of practice. (Aliakbari, 2004: 2)

Furthermore, teaching foreign languages has become a very good business in Iran and is booming. It is not an exaggeration to claim that one can find a private language institute on every corner of streets. Although there exists a tremendous number of language institutes across the country, schools are still the main places where students are exposed to foreign languages.

Gender in Coursebooks

Gender representation in language teaching materials has been the subject of many research studies. Probably the first study on gender issues in ELT coursebooks was by Hartman & Judd (1978) and, since that early study, there have been many reports on sexism, gender stereotypes and low representation in ELT coursebooks, whether produced locally or by European and American publishers. Demir and Yavuz’s summary (2017) indicates that in these coursebooks, no matter where they are

published, more males than females are represented. Those females that do appear are presented in a narrower range of roles than males, and mostly in nurturing and inferior jobs, while men are presented everywhere both in texts and in images. Demir and Yavuz (2017) argue that such an approach may force female pupils to limit ‘their social, behavioural, and linguistic roles’, which in turn might lead them into experiencing feelings like exclusion and lower self-esteem. It has been suggested that there is a direct correlation between the contents of coursebooks and the way they portray gender roles (for examples dependent and fearful girls and active and aggressive boys) and how pupils think, feel, and behave. Likewise, it is not clear if the authors’ gender perceptions in the form of texts or pictures are received and accepted by the pupils. However, others suggest that students resist and (re)negotiate such contents (Pakula, Pawelczyk & Sunderland, 2015). A negative reaction to the stereotypes portrayed could demotivate pupils, and even stay with them for the rest of their lives and impact on their careers, social life and values, behaviour.

Coursebooks play an important role in English Language Teaching (ELT), as they expose learners to a new world with people who have their own culture and values. The textbooks make students familiar with other cultures, values, and linguistic forms but also have a wider influence on their own developing values.

Foroutan (2012) examined gender representation in the Persian, Arabic and English language coursebooks of Iranian schools, concluding (781) that the ‘male dominance model persists as a main pattern throughout all textbooks’. Hall (2014) addressed the topic of gender representation in Iranian ELT coursebooks. She also found an imbalance in representation of gender in Iranian ELT coursebooks, such that females suffer ‘from low visibility’.

Methodology

The present study investigates gender representation in five new locally developed ELT coursebooks¹ which have been recently developed (September 2017), which are being phased in to all Iranian schools, for both male and female audiences. The *Prospect* series are for lower secondary (age 12–15) and the *Vision* series are for upper secondary (age 16–18).

These coursebooks are the first school coursebooks in the country that have been written based on the new Iranian national curriculum, which

was published in 2013, and to the best of our knowledge, have not previously been analysed.

The Framework Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the texts, messages, themes, ideas, and photos throughout five English language coursebooks of secondary school. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), content analysis is an objective and reliable method in studies like this as clear instructions are followed during the grouping and categorising data. Foroutan (2012) argues that the content analysis can be conducted through two ways: latent content and manifest content. For the purpose of this research, manifest content analysis is chosen as it ‘refers to the visible and countable elements in the books or other instruments of social communication ... studied; for instance, pictures and names for men and women or images identifying gender roles, which are countable as they are physically present in the texts’ (Foroutan, 2012: 775). In order to examine the research issue in question, photos, images, names, roles, and the frequency of appearance as well as female/male-oriented topic presentation in conversations and reading passages were studied. As for the analysis of images, following Love and Park’s work (2013), the number and gender of individuals were examined. Accordingly, the genders (i.e. male/female) were identified by studying their clothing, physical appearance, and contexts. Furthermore, following Kress and Leeuwen (2006), this study is based on frequency of appearance and it was decided to set the unit of analysis as individuals. Therefore, in each photo or image, the number of individuals was counted. Moreover, following Cunningsworth’s (1995) work, roles and occupations were also studied bearing in mind the gender differences.

It is worthwhile to mention that our purpose was to approach the coursebooks in as many ways as possible (i.e. studying images, names, roles, etc in order to record every possible instance in which males and females might be represented). As explained earlier, since these coursebooks are the sole resources within the school education across the country, this echoes the essential role that these materials can play in the socialisation process in Iran (Foroutan, 2012).

Data Analysis

Data collection, coding, and analysis were done by the authors. To ensure the reliability of the analysis,

two postgraduate (PhD) students were asked to independently code four units taken from the coursebooks. Their results were then compared with the authors’, and differences were discussed to reach agreement before proceeding further. In addition, a university professor in Applied Linguistics agreed to review the final report. As an example of data collection and analysis, the following figure (Table 1) gives extracts of the data collected from Prospect 3 (the numbers next to some entries indicate the frequency of appearance).

Results & Discussion

The first thing to note is the gender of the 10 authors. Each book is written by a team of four to six authors. The two senior authors (Seyyed Behnam Alavi Moqaddam and Reza Khair Abadi), were involved in every book. Both are male. Only one of the two other authors is female. *Prospect 3* has two male and two female authors, but every other book has only one female author to three to five males.

The dominance of male authors could have had an impact on the unequal and stereotyped gender representation that has been revealed in this study and it is possible that if the number of females had been higher, we might have seen different results. Although both men and women are capable of being sexist, increasing the number of female authors may alter the situation.

One of the first things that pupils see is the book cover (Figure 1). The cover of *Prospect 1* shows seven individuals holding colourful blank signs. Although the people’s faces are not shown, based on physical appearance and clothing it can be said that only two of them are females. Out of

Table 1: Extracts of data from Prospect 3

	Males	Females
Unit 01		
Name	Ehsan Parham Reza Ali Mohsen Vahid	Zahra 2 Samira Farzaneh Nadia Anita Zahra
Role	Firefighter 2 Student Soldier Clown	Teacher 3 Student 7 Mother
Photo	20	11

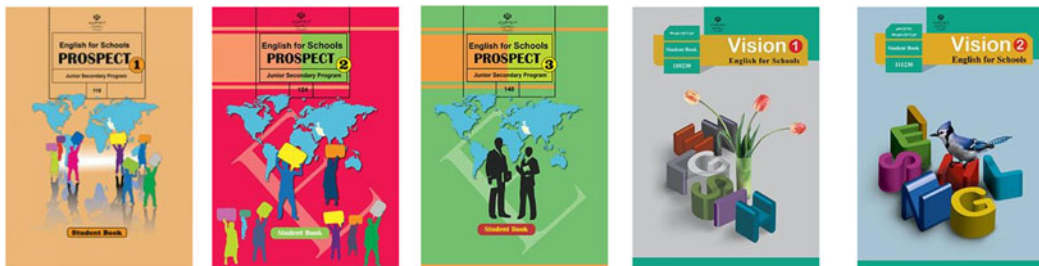


Figure 1. The covers of the five coursebooks

eight people shown on *Prospect 2*, only three are female. As for *Prospect 3*, there are two individuals being portrayed and both are males. No individual is shown on the covers of *Vision 1* and *2*.

On the covers, males outnumber females 12:5 which in effect does not portray a positive picture for female audience. The first impression that they would receive is that there are very few females or even none on the book cover and that those female pupils who are going to start learning the English language, very likely for the first time in their lives, must face this reality for the next six years. We do realise that students are able to critically engage with the semiotic content, but this imbalance may be a factor in shaping their identity.

Names

Although the number of names fluctuates throughout the coursebooks, the number of male names is always greater than number of female names. The results are in line with Foroutan's (2012) findings in his analysis of the previous coursebooks. Foroutan found that more than two-thirds of the names were male, and in present study 62% of names are male. There is still a large gender imbalance. The imbalance is worst in the two upper secondary books (i.e. *Vision 1* and *2*).

In the studied coursebooks, there are references to 31 famous people. 24 of them are Iranian politicians, scholars, artists, etc., and the rest are non-Iranians. Surprisingly, out of 31 names, only two of them are female (Tahereh Saffarzadeh and Marie Curie, Figure 3). The impression given is that males are to become well known, and females are supposed to look up to males. Also, this results into lowering female pupils' self-esteem. Accordingly, Renner (1997) argues that 'the impact of this reality may affect classroom practices and restrict female learners' language learning opportunities' (8).

Roles

Roles in two categories were studied: occupations and family roles (brother, mother, etc). 69 roles were named, the most frequent being: Teacher, Father, Mother, Uncle, Athlete, Receptionist, Scientist, and Artist. The references that are given to males and females are illustrated in Figure 4.

Roles for males in the coursebooks are wide and varied, while for females, they are very limited. Both men and women are shown in some social roles (such as student, passenger, tourist and customer), but the portrayal of occupations is very unbalanced (Table 2). Of the 53 named or visually portrayed occupations, only 12 are shown as

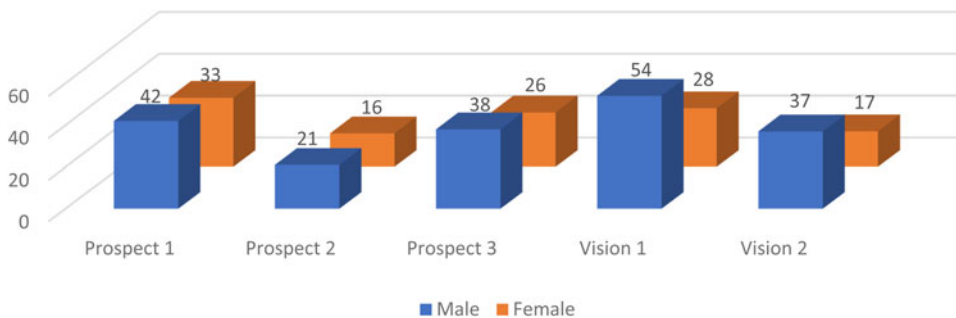



Figure 2. Names

Grammar

A. Read the following texts.

Tahereh Saffarzadeh was an Iranian writer, translator and thinker. When other kids **were** still **playing** outside, she learned reading and reciting the Holy Quran at the age of 6. As a young student, she **was working** very hard to learn new things. She also **was writing** poems at that time. She published her first book while she **was still studying** in the university. She got interested in translating the Holy Quran when she **was studying and teaching** translation. She published her translation of the Holy Quran in 1380. Saffarzadeh passed away in 1387.



Alexander Fleming was a great researcher. He **was doing research** in his laboratory in winter 1928. He **was trying** to find a new medicine to save people's lives. He found a new medicine when he **was working** on antibiotics. This was the amazing penicillin. Many other doctors **were** also **working** on this medicine in those days. They helped the first patient with penicillin in 1942 when the flu **was getting** around.

Figure 3. *Vision 1*, p. 82

undertaken by both genders (e.g. [Figure 5](#)), five by females only, and a massive 36 by males only (e.g. [Figure 6](#)). Some are predictably on a prestige

hierarchy: only female nurses, male and female doctors and only male surgeons; male mechanics and female nurses. Others are more unexpected: is



Figure 4. Roles

Table 2: Careers assigned to males and females

Males and Females	Only Males	Only Females
Teacher	Mechanic	Nurse
Doctor	Police	Librarian
Dentist	Officer	Observatory
Farmer	Secretary	Staff
Office Employee	Labour	Researcher
Actor	Cook	
Scientist	Taxi Driver	
Receptionist	Engineer	
Volunteer	Painter	
Driver	Florist	
Artist	Postman	
Athlete	Waiter	
Scholar	Pilot	
	Shopkeeper	
	Baker	
	Patient	
	Photographer	
	Champion	
	Firefighter	
	Soldier	
	TV Host & Guest	
	Border Force Officer	
	Street Sweeper	
	Reporter	
	Baker	
	Clown	
	Cleaner	
	Zookeeper	
	Bullfighter	
	Museum Visitor	
	Assistant	
	Park Ranger	
	Rider	
	Travel Agent	
	Translator	
	Ticket Seller	
	Surgeon	

floristry a typically male profession? Are women especially likely to work in an observatory? In modern Iran, females form a high proportion of the workforce, and are occupied in a wide range of occupations, including in professions. However, the coursebooks suggest that most careers are associated only with men. Many previous studies found similar patterns of gender role stereotyping rather

than realism in school coursebooks throughout the world, including Hall's (2014) study of the of the previous Iranian national coursebooks. In terms of jobs and occupations there has been no improvement in the new coursebooks. Generally speaking, the previous studies also support the fact that gender role stereotyping has been portrayed in school coursebooks throughout the world. Renner (1997) has found that in most English coursebooks females are fewer and have got more limited jobs and roles than males.

This discrepancy is less apparent when it comes to family roles (Table 3). Even in absolute numbers, the genders are strikingly equal in portrayals of the family. Females are not under-represented in the family setting. The only notable difference in the symmetrical treatment of the genders is that only women are 'housewives' – a role that could be described either as a career or a family role, and which is socially realistic.

Images

Images and illustrations are probably one of the most obvious parts of a coursebook that would give an impression of gender representation at first glance. After all, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. Research findings have proved that learning is more effective when texts and illustrations are used together instead of using texts alone (Levie & Lentz, 1982). Similarly, illustrations play an important role in gender identity development in children.

We might expect that coursebook writers would think about gender equity in pictures, but it seems not. For example, in Spanish language coursebooks in Dominican Republic images portray men than women (Karasiak, 2010), as do ELT coursebooks in Saudi Arabia (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014) and in Hong Kong (Lee, 2014).

Studies of the old coursebooks from Iran showed that males outnumbered females in photos and other illustrations (Foroutan, 2012; Hall, 2014). As the following figure shows, the newly published coursebooks still suffer from the same gender imbalance. In photos and other illustrations, just as in the text, 67% of individuals are male, regardless of level. At the upper secondary level, there are fewer pictures than in the earlier levels, but the gender imbalance is the same.

As argued in the reviewed literature, when female pupils feel that members of the same sex less represented in textbooks they may get the impression that their accomplishments or even their presence are not important enough to be included (Porreca, 1984). Furthermore, the exposure to these gender



Figure 5. *Prospect 3*, p. 30



Figure 6. *Prospect 1*, p. 6

Table 3: The number of family/relative roles

Males	Females
Father 19	Mother 22
Uncle 9	Aunt 7
Brother 9	Housewife 7
Grandfather 8	Sister 7
Son 4	Grandmother 3
Cousin 1	Daughter 4

inequalities would strengthen ‘perpetuation of gender stereotyping and hinder learners’ personal development’ (Lee, 2018: 383).

Conversations and Reading Passages

Male and female references in dialogues and texts seem to be less investigated by Iranian scholars and we only managed to find few studies in this regard (Figure 8 & Figure 9).

Although Hall’s (2014) findings suggest that the male-referenced texts increased in one coursebook and stayed the same in another between the 1999 editions and the 2012 editions, analysis of the collected data reveal that the number of references to, or about, or in between the male individuals is greatly higher than the females.

Concerning the dialogues, while Hall (2014) claims a very positive improvement towards female-referenced dialogues from the 1999 editions to the 2012 editions, the findings of our study seem to show a very disappointing result. Based on the collected data, the number of conversations that are between males in each coursebook is slightly higher than the ones that are between females.

Therefore, it can be argued that not only have the conversations and passages been moved towards

gender equality but the newly published coursebooks seem to suffer greatly in terms of gender references.

Concluding Remarks

There is an imbalance in gender representation in current Iranian English coursebooks. The results of this study are in line with much other research into gender representation in ELT coursebooks, which suggest that examples of gender parity are hard to find. According to Florent and Walter (1989: 182), ‘[s]exism is so deeply engrained in our culture, our language, and our subconscious that it is difficult for us to avoid it in the production of language-teaching materials’ and the coursebooks analysed here are no exception.

The imbalance and stereotyping of females and males is consistent across the world, and over time, in Iran as elsewhere. Hall (2014) indicated that there was some improvement towards more female-referenced dialogues between the 1999 edition of the coursebook and the 2012 edition, but our analysis suggests no further improvement in the 2017 books. There are cases of successfully developed coursebooks around the world, e.g. South Korea (Litz, 2005). However, the question remains of why gender bias has not been addressed in these new coursebooks published by the Iranian Department for Education.

Roughly half the current population of Iran are female², and roughly half of the students who will use these coursebooks will be female³. Yet the representation of the genders in the ELT coursebooks does not reflect this reality. Given that there are almost equal numbers of males and females in Iran, ELT coursebooks should be expected to represent both genders equally. The representation of females and males in these coursebooks is neither realistic nor fair.



Figure 7. Images

Sounds and Letters

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

Listen to the teacher greeting her students in class.

Teacher: Hi, class! I am Moradi, your English teacher.

Class: Hello, Mrs. Moradi.

Teacher: Now you say your names one by one. You, please.
What's your name?

Kimia: I'm Kimia Komijani.

Teacher: Excuse me. How do you spell your last name?

Kimia: Komijani, K-O-M-I-J-A-N-I.

Teacher: Thank you, Kimia. Now, you please say your name.

Student: My name is.....

Can you spell your name?

Talk to Your Teacher
How do you spell?



Figure 8. *Prospect 1*, p. 8

While the issue of gender discrimination does exist, it can be improved. We recommend that more females should be involved as authors and that they should stand up for their own rights. Policy makers and the developers of educational materials need to realise the negative impacts of the imbalanced representation on pupils – especially on female pupils – and acquire an understanding of how this could affect their future lives and careers.

It is important to understand that every language and culture is unique, and coursebook designers are likely to want to reflect their own culture in gender representation. When it comes to countries like Iran where they are claimed to be ruled under Shariah law, there might be some arguing that the Islam is to be blamed. It would be a mistake to argue that religion, Islam in particular, is against women's rights, and wants to ignore the presence of women in society. On the contrary, Islam, like many religions,



Conversation

Listen to the English teacher and the student talking.



- Teacher:** Are you OK?
- Student:** No, I'm not. I have a headache.
- Teacher:** Oh, you have sore eyes, too.
You should go home and rest.
- Student:** Yes, but we have one more class.
- Teacher:** Don't worry. I'll talk to your teacher.
- Student:** Thanks for your help.
- Teacher:** Let's go to the office and call your parents first.
Class, be quiet! I'll be back in a minute.

Figure 9. *Prospect 2*, p. 34

promoted a better status for women in society. For instance, it is stated many times in the Holy Quran, that men and women are equal⁴. So, an imbalanced and unfair representation of women and men arises from deeply ingrained sexism, or from misunderstandings and misinterpretations of religion.

Finally, although this study investigated and analysed gender representation in the English coursebooks of Iranian schools, there are other issues worth considering that were beyond the scope of this research. Different types of interactions either

in texts or images could be investigated in further studies. We could analyse adjectives attributed to females and males. It would also be interesting to undertake a longitudinal study that looked at the impact of gender representation on pupils.

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Notes

- 1 These coursebooks are available to view online via <http://chap.sch.ir/>
- 2 According to latest census of the country in 2016 (<https://www.amar.org.ir/english/Population-and-Housing-Censuses>)
- 3 <https://newsmedia.tasnimnews.com/Tasnim/Uploaded/Image/1396/08/14/13960814094446935124157510.jpg>
- 4 ‘Men will have a share of what they earn, and women will have a share of what they earn.’ (4:32) ‘And according to usage, women too have rights over men similar to the rights of men over women.’ (2:228)

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