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Gender Representation In EFL Textbooks Used In Lebanon: Gender Bias Or Gender Equality?

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Abstract

Gender representation in EFL textbooks is a critical issue as it influences learners' perceptions of gender roles and equality. This study examines gender representation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook used in Lebanese public and some private schools. It investigates whether genders are equally represented in these textbooks, specifically at the lower and upper elementary levels, by analyzing character roles and activities, descriptive[1] language (adjectives), status, frequency of appearance, and the relative importance assigned to each gender. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the methodological framework, the findings reveal a significant gender bias favoring male characters across both public and private school textbooks. Although both genders are present in most reading passages, female characters are underrepresented, more frequently depicted in secondary roles, and afforded less narrative significance. These findings underscore the need for curriculum reform to promote more balanced gender representation in EFL materials.

Key words: *Gender representation, gender bias, EFL textbooks, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), textbook analysis.*

Introduction

The call for gender equality is gaining momentum across various fields, notably in education, where learning materials significantly influence students' perceptions of social expectations, identity, and gender roles. Despite advancements in empowering women within educational contexts, gender bias persists in numerous textbooks. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook frequently overrepresent male figures at the detriment of female characters, thereby reinforcing gender imbalances in both linguistic and non-linguistic elements (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Nagatomo, 2010; Suleimani, 2017).

Bias in EFL textbooks has been highlighted in various studies. International research indicates that the overrepresentation of male figures limits females' exposure to language practice, adversely affecting their confidence and engagement in learning (Nagatomo, 2010). Although comprehensive analyses have been conducted in several countries, there remains a significant research gap concerning gender representation in Lebanese EFL textbooks. This gap is particularly disconcerting, given the long-term impact educational materials have on students' perceptions of gender roles.

Lebanese public schools have utilized the same EFL textbooks for decades without substantial updates. Conversely, many private schools adopt different materials; for instance,

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approximately 35 private schools across Lebanon use the Fungish and Vitamin EFL books. These books underwent their last updates in 2016, focusing primarily on layout and graphics rather than content. Consequently, numerous Lebanese students, whether in public or private schools, continue to engage with outdated content where gender equality may be overlooked. Therefore, curriculum reform is necessary to align educational materials with contemporary pedagogical approaches and equitable gender representation. This study investigates the representation of both genders in Lebanese EFL textbooks used at lower and upper elementary levels, addressing a notable gap in academic literature.

While global studies have identified gender bias issues in EFL textbooks, research specific to Lebanon remains limited. This lack of scrutiny is critical, as outdated public-school materials and stereotypical private textbooks persist in Lebanese schools. A comprehensive evaluation of Lebanese EFL materials concerning social roles is imperative, given that textbooks significantly influence students' perceptions of gender dynamics. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent is gender bias observed in Lebanese public and private EFL textbooks?
2. How does gender representation in an officially adopted EFL textbook compare to that in two independently authored textbooks widely used in Lebanese private schools?

Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks: Historical Perspective

Extensive research has been conducted on gender representation in EFL textbooks, with significant contributions during the 1970s and 1980s (Suleimani, 2017). These studies employed various content analysis methods to examine the presence of gender bias, focusing on illustrations, visual representations, texts, dialogues, and character roles (Ahmad & Shah, 2019). Despite differing methodologies, most studies concluded that male figures are overrepresented in instructional materials (Ahmad & Shah, 2019, Suleimani, 2017). Recent studies across different contexts have yielded similar findings, highlighting the dominance of male figures in visual and textual content, often occupying leadership and authoritative roles, whereas women are predominantly assigned domestic and passive roles (Ahmad & Shah, 2019, Nofal & Qawar, 2015; Norova, 2020; Suleimani, 2017).

Gender Portrayal in Roles and Activities

Several studies have investigated gender portrayal in EFL textbooks, concentrating on the activities and roles assigned to male and female figures (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Nofal & Qawar, 2015; Norova, 2020). Ahmad and Shah (2019) analyzed fifth-grade EFL textbooks used in public and private schools in Punjab, Pakistan, while Norova (2020) conducted a similar analysis on EFL textbooks in Uzbekistan. Their research revealed gender bias in role assignments, with males frequently depicted as doctors, lawyers, policemen, and politicians, whereas females were predominantly portrayed as housekeepers, wives, mothers, and teachers. Nofal and Qawar's (2015) study in Jordan corroborated these findings, noting that males dominated activities like diving, sports, and computer tasks, while females engaged more in domestic activities. Lee (2014) analyzed two elementary EFL textbooks used in Japan, finding that male figures were highly involved in physical or mechanical tasks such as fighting wars, and fixing bicycles, whereas female figures were depicted in traditional roles like sewing dresses. Additionally, Lee (2014) observed that female characters were often absent from texts or dialogues discussing elections and voting, with male characters being the primary participants. While some activities like tourism, singing, and archaeology featured gender equality, other roles were monopolized by one gender.

Gender Representation in Language Usage

Several studies have examined gender representation in EFL textbooks by analyzing adjectives, nouns, and pronouns associated with males and females. Hamdan (2011) explored nine EFL elementary textbooks used in Jordan, finding that males were described with prestigious qualities such as brave, rich, famous, generous, courageous, strong, clever, creative, professional, punctual, and decisive, whereas females were described with less prestigious adjectives like quiet, polite, good, imaginative, silly, and lazy. Similarly, Ahmad and Shah (2019) analyzed gender references in texts, revealing that males were referred to as kings, CEOs, and uncles, while females were referred to as women, old women, wives, and mothers. Male pronouns such as he, his, and him exceeded the usage of female pronouns, indicating androcentrism in language.

Gender Representation in Dialogue

Other studies have analyzed dialogues in EFL elementary textbooks to determine gender representation. Bilić (2016) found that men initiated 62% of dialogues in the Croatian EFL textbook 'Way to Go Plus,' while women initiated only 38%. In the 'Project' textbook, men initiated 56% of dialogues compared to 44% by women. Hamdan (2009) examined Jordanian EFL textbooks, discovering that males took 63 turns out of 71 in dialogues, while females took only 8. Lee (2014) also noted that females spoke less in dialogues than males, with males having more turns and longer sentences. These findings suggest that males are overrepresented in dialogues, often initiating conversations and taking more turns (Bilić, 2016; Hamdan, 2011; Lee, 2014).

Gender Equality in Order of Appearance

Research has also examined gender representation in EFL textbooks by analyzing the order of appearance in discourse. Ahmad and Shah (2019) found that out of 31 co-mentions of males and females in the same sentences, males were mentioned first 20 times, while females were mentioned first only 11 times. Similarly, Lee (2014) recorded 35 instances of male firstness and only six instances of female firstness in one textbook, and seven instances of male firstness out of eight in another.

The Need for Curriculum Reform

Despite extensive research on gender bias in EFL textbooks, such biases persist, underscoring the need for curriculum reform. Various criteria used to assess gender representation consistently reveal that males are overrepresented across multiple aspects (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Hamdan, 2011; Lee, 2014; Norova, 2020). Many of the criteria analyzed in the aforementioned studies will be employed in this research to evaluate selected EFL textbooks.

Methodology

This study aims to analyze gender representation in EFL textbooks used in Lebanese public schools as well as in some private institutions. The two textbooks adopted by public schools (Let's learn together: Basic education, Grade 2; English in progress: Basic education, Grade 5), were developed under the supervision of the Lebanese Ministry of Education and subsequently published by the Educational Center for Research and Development (ECRD). The other two textbooks, Fungish and Vitamin (Vitamin Level 2; Vitamin Level 5; Fungish Level Two; Fungish Level Five) are used in approximately 35 private schools across Lebanon and are independently authored and published by Lebanese writers. The Lebanese public EFL textbook and the two widely used private school textbooks included in this study are key learning

resources for second and fifth-grade students, making them essential tools for evaluating gender representation in both lower and upper elementary education.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The methodology employed in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Fairclough's model. This linguistic approach views language use as a form of social practice (Andini et al., 2023). Fairclough's CDA is structured around a three-dimensional framework: the object of analysis, the processes through which the object is produced and interpreted, and the socio-historical context influencing these processes (Sulaimani, 2017). CDA was chosen for this study because it provides insights into how language in texts conveys perceptions of gender. Furthermore, it facilitates the exploration of stereotypes, gender biases, and unequal gender portrayals. Importantly, CDA extends beyond content analysis to incorporate the socio-cultural context. In existing literature, CDA is frequently utilized to investigate gender representation, making it an appropriate methodological choice for this research (Andini et al., 2023). Although CDA involves three analytical dimensions, this study focuses exclusively on textual analysis to explore how gender is presented narratively and linguistically in textbooks.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to interpret data. A quantitative component is used to gather numerical data and provides measurable evidence that can be used as a baseline for future investigations, while a qualitative component provides depth, context, and insight into the why and how behind those numbers (Creswell & Clark, 2018). For example, we might find that female characters appear less frequently in EFL textbooks (quantitative), but qualitative analysis explains how their roles are more passive or stereotypical, giving a fuller picture.

Furthermore, quantitative data alone may miss contextual nuance, while qualitative data alone may lack generalizability or statistical support. Hence, a mixed methods approach balances these limitations (Johnson et al., 2007). Finally, a mixed methods approach tends to be more persuasive for policy and practice because reforms require evidence that is both measurable and meaningfully interpreted (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Data Collection Process

A coding framework, specifically a tabular format, was developed to guide systematic data collection. Once the table was created, each dialogue, story, and exercise in the selected textbooks was reviewed. During this review, every occurrence of male and female characters was documented in spreadsheets. Information recorded included the roles of the characters, their descriptions, and the activities in which each gender was involved. To ensure reliability and enhance accuracy, the data collection process was conducted twice for each textbook under review.

The data was gathered from the Lebanese public EFL textbook as well as the Vitamin and Fungish EFL textbooks for Grades 2 and 5. Based on the collected data, comparisons and analyses were conducted to determine whether genders are equally represented in these textbooks. A more detailed explanation of the data collection process is outlined below:

- **Number of female and male characters:** During text analysis, the frequency of appearance for male and female characters was calculated. Each mention of a male or female character was counted as a separate occurrence.
- **Status of the characters:** The status or role assigned to each character was examined to assess whether both genders were depicted with equal importance or authority.

- **Description of the characters:** Adjectives used to describe characters were recorded to determine whether descriptive language was equally applied or showed bias based on gender.
- **Activities genders are involved in:** For each text, activities performed by male and female characters were logged to assess whether both genders were engaged in roles of equal significance.
- **Major/Minor characters:** The gender of the central or primary character in each text was identified to evaluate the prominence of each gender in narrative focus.

Results

Representation of Female and Male Characters

An analysis of the number of male and female characters across the selected EFL textbooks reveals a noticeable gender imbalance favoring males (Table 1). In the Public EFL textbook for Grade 2, males constitute a slight majority, with 87 out of 164 characters, compared to 77 females. Similarly, in the Vitamin EFL textbook for the same grade, 10 of the 18 characters are male, while 8 are female. The Fungish EFL textbook for Grade 2 presents a relatively balanced distribution, featuring 7 male and 8 female characters. However, the disparity becomes more pronounced at the upper elementary level. In the Public EFL textbook for Grade 5, 78 of the 129 characters are male, while only 51 are female. The imbalance is even greater in the Vitamin EFL textbook for Grade 5, which includes 17 male and just 7 female characters. The Fungish EFL textbook for Grade 5 also favors male representation, with 12 male and 9 female characters. From a CDA perspective, these numerical disparities reveal underlying gender ideologies that normalize male dominance and visibility within the educational discourse. The higher presence of male characters, particularly in upper grades, suggests that textbooks continue to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies rather than promote balanced representation.

Table 1 Distribution of Male and Female Characters Across EFL Textbooks in Grades 2 and 5

Textbook	Grade level	Males	Females
Public EFL textbook	Grade 2	87	77
	Grade 5	78	51
Vitamin EFL textbook	Grade 2	10	8
	Grade 5	17	7
Fungish EFL textbook	Grade 2	7	8
	Grade 5	12	9

Character Importance and Depicted Activities

An analysis of character prominence reveals a consistent imbalance between male and female representation, with males more frequently occupying major roles. In the Public EFL textbook for Grade 2, males appear in 87 instances, 20 of which are major roles, while females appear in 77 instances, with only 16 major roles. A similar pattern is evident in the Vitamin EFL textbook, where 3 of 10 male characters and 2 of 8 female characters hold significant roles. The Fungish EFL textbook for the same grade shows near parity, with 3 of 7 males and 3 of 8 females assuming primary roles. However, the imbalance becomes more pronounced in the upper elementary level. In the Public EFL textbook for Grade 5, 25 of 78 male characters play leading roles compared to only 8 of 51 females. Likewise, the Vitamin EFL textbook includes 3 major male roles versus 2 major female ones, while the Fungish EFL textbook portrays 5 major male characters and just 1 major female character. This recurring pattern suggests that

male characters are afforded greater narrative centrality, while females are more often confined to supporting or peripheral roles, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies within educational discourse.

A closer examination of the activities assigned to characters further illuminates gendered patterns. In the Public EFL textbook for Grade 2, male characters are depicted performing public and occupational tasks such as driving, managing a school lab, and extinguishing fires, while female characters engage in domestic or social activities such as cooking, shopping, and storytelling. Similar trends appear in the Vitamin and Fungish textbooks, where male figures are more often associated with active, outdoor, or intellectual pursuits, and female figures with caretaking or household-related roles. The Public EFL textbook for Grade 5 continues this trend, presenting male characters as builders, inventors, and travelers, while females are largely depicted in domestic or supportive roles like cleaning, recycling, or volunteering. Although some textbooks, such as Fungish Grade 5, include a few shared activities like reading or teaching, these remain limited. From a CDA perspective, such representational choices reflect and reproduce gendered ideologies that privilege male visibility and agency while normalizing female subordination and domesticity.

Description of the Characters

The analysis of character descriptions across all EFL textbooks reveals clear evidence of gendered language, reinforcing traditional gender ideologies through linguistic choices. In the Public Grade 2 textbook, male characters are frequently associated with power, intelligence, and agency, described as “rich,” “handsome,” “special,” “very famous,” “very clever,” “great inventors,” “strong,” “funny,” “helpful,” and “not afraid.” Conversely, female characters are predominantly defined through emotional or passive adjectives such as “caring,” “smiling,” “happy,” “shy,” “sick,” “old,” and “bored,” with occasional negative portrayals like “bad witch” and “interrupting.” The Vitamin Grade 2 textbook maintains similar gender distinctions, describing male characters as “angry,” “helpful,” and “trying their best,” while depicting female characters as “sad,” “happy,” and “always shouting.” Likewise, the Fungish Grade 2 textbook characterizes male figures as “excited,” “objecting,” and “inattentive,” whereas females are portrayed as “angry,” “upset,” “tired,” and “kind.”

At the upper elementary level, these gender patterns persist. In the Public Grade 5 textbook, male characters are depicted through dynamic and authoritative descriptors such as “wealthy merchant” and “strong-willed,” while female characters remain confined to appearance-based or emotive terms like “very nice,” “beautiful young woman,” and “smiling a lot.” Similarly, in the Vitamin and Fungish Grade 5 textbooks, male characters appear as soldiers or royalty, roles symbolizing leadership and dominance, whereas female characters are described through emotional expressions and subdued behaviors, such as “happy,” “playful,” or “soft-spoken.” From a CDA perspective, such linguistic contrasts construct and reproduce gendered power relations, where males embody action, intellect, and authority, while females are linguistically confined to emotionality, beauty, and passivity. These patterns subtly perpetuate gender stereotypes within educational discourse and position male experiences as the normative standard.

Status of the Characters

An examination of character status across all educational levels demonstrates a persistent gender hierarchy, with male characters consistently occupying positions of authority, expertise, and social prestige. In the Public Grade 2 textbook, men are depicted in esteemed professional and public service roles such as “policeman,” “fireman,” “reporter,” “heart doctor,” and “inventor,” emphasizing activity, leadership, and social value. In contrast, female characters

are portrayed in nurturing or supportive occupations, including "nurse," "teacher," "flight attendant," and "mother," thereby reinforcing traditional domestic and caregiving roles. The Vitamin Grade 2 textbook mirrors this division by assigning male characters the roles of "captain" and "police officer," while female characters are limited to familial identities such as "mama" and "grandma." Similarly, the Fungish Grade 2 textbook perpetuates this binary through simple familial labels like "dad" and "mom."

At the upper elementary level, gender disparities in occupational representation become even more pronounced. In the Public Grade 5 textbook, male figures occupy prestigious and influential positions such as "President of the United States," "king," "superhero," "Minister of Education," and "fireman," whereas female characters remain largely confined to roles emphasizing care and education, including "teacher," "mother," and "nurse." The Vitamin and Fungish Grade 5 textbooks follow similar trends, assigning males titles such as "professor of medicine," "doctor," "king," and "astronaut," while females are represented as "teacher," "mom," "niece," or simply "girl." From a CDA perspective, these hierarchical role assignments linguistically and visually reproduce patriarchal ideologies, presenting men as agents of power and intellect while positioning women as relational, dependent, or peripheral. Such portrayals contribute to the normalization of gendered occupational hierarchies within educational materials, subtly influencing learners' perceptions of gender roles and societal expectations.

Discussion

The analysis of Lebanese EFL textbooks for Grades 2 and 5 reveals a persistent gender bias favoring male characters across representation, prominence, occupational status, and descriptive language. Educational materials, while intended to promote linguistic competence, simultaneously act as vehicles for disseminating socio-cultural ideologies that sustain traditional gender hierarchies. The findings of this study confirm that Lebanese EFL textbooks subtly reinforce societal norms privileging male dominance, echoing observations made by Ahmad and Shah (2019) and Norova (2020) in comparable contexts.

Across all textbooks, male characters dominate narrative spaces, assuming central roles that guide plot progression, while females are relegated to supportive or peripheral positions. This reflects what Hamdan (2011) describes as the androcentric foundation of language education, wherein male experience serves as the normative reference point. The diminished visibility of female characters restricts learners' exposure to balanced social representations and limits opportunities for both genders to envision equitable participation in public and private spheres.

Depictions of gendered activities reinforce enduring stereotypes. Male characters are associated with adventure, exploration, and leadership, while females are tied to domesticity, emotional expression, and caregiving. This dichotomy aligns with the global patterns identified by Nofal and Qawar (2015) and Lee (2014), where men dominate public domains and women are confined to private spaces. The scarcity of collaborative or role-integrated depictions, particularly in the Fungish series, underscores the lack of progress toward gender-inclusive learning environments. Such early exposure to stereotyped portrayals constrains children's understanding of gender possibilities and shapes their identity development in restrictive ways.

Adjectival and narrative language choices reveal a deep linguistic asymmetry. Male characters are frequently described as intelligent, brave, and influential, whereas females are characterized through emotional or aesthetic traits. This imbalance, consistent with Hamdan's (2011) analysis of Jordanian EFL textbooks, demonstrates how discourse encodes patriarchal

power structures. Through selective lexicalization, textbooks normalize male authority and rationality while portraying females as passive, dependent, or ornamental.

The occupational hierarchy evident in these materials further sustains gender inequality. Men occupy prestigious and intellectual roles – presidents, doctors, inventors, and leaders – while women appear predominantly as nurses, teachers, or mothers. These patterns, also observed by Ahmad and Shah (2019), reinforce a worldview in which authority and expertise are male domains. The persistence of such content, particularly in public school textbooks that have remained unrevised for decades, reflects institutional inertia and the absence of gender-aware curricular review.

Taken collectively, these patterns demonstrate how textbooks, as ideological tools, shape learners' perceptions of gender identity and social hierarchy. As argued by Suleimani (2017), discourse not only mirrors but actively constructs social realities. The implicit normalization of male dominance through EFL materials limits female learners' self-efficacy and professional aspirations while perpetuating unequal gender norms among all students. Addressing such imbalance requires critical textbook evaluation and reform grounded in CDA principles that view language as a site of ideological struggle and social transformation (Andini et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This study revealed systematic gender bias in Lebanese EFL textbooks at the lower and upper elementary levels, where male characters dominate in visibility, occupational prestige, and agency, while female characters are underrepresented and linguistically confined to emotional or domestic roles. These findings align with international research (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Nofal & Qawar, 2015; Norova, 2020), confirming that EFL materials continue to reproduce patriarchal ideologies rather than challenge them.

Meaningful curricular reform is therefore imperative. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with authors and publishers, must prioritize gender-balanced representation through inclusive language, equal visibility, and diverse occupational depictions. Commercial publishers such as Vitamin and Fungish, used in over thirty private institutions, also bear responsibility for eliminating implicit bias and promoting gender-sensitive pedagogy.

Beyond content revision, gender equity in education should be elevated to a national research and policy priority. Persistent representational imbalance affects not only language learning but also students' psychological development, engagement, and sense of possibility. A gender-equitable educational framework – beginning with the textbooks children read – can cultivate critical awareness, foster inclusive values, and empower future generations to envision and inhabit more balanced social roles.

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