

# Gender Biasness in ESL Textbooks

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify the status of women in English as a Second Language textbook and to explore the ways in which gender biased attitudes and values are conveyed through these textbooks. For this purpose "Oxford Progressive English 4" by Chris Jacques was investigated to highlight the stereotypical roles of women. Dialogues, examples, reading passages and pictures were examined on the basis of activities, occupations, visibility, and first place existence. Results showed that this book is gender biased which portrays the image of women in such a way which is not justifiable. Such discrimination in ESL textbooks puts women at a distinct disadvantage in society. It is suggested that identification and correction of gender biased language and the use of gender neutral language and attitudes should be an important part of our educational program so that we can move our students beyond gender stereotypes.

**Keywords:** Gender Biased, English as a Second Language, Textbook

## 1. Introduction

The term gender biased refers to the belief or attitude that one gender or sex is inferior to or less valuable than the other. In many societies, it is more commonly manifested in behavior that shows that the male are superior to the female. Feminist analyses have revealed that the English language reflects the assumptions that the females are of less social relevance than the male. They are physically, morally and spiritually inferior to the males.

As we know language is a social, value-loaded practice which reflects a complex network of social, political and cultural relationships within a society. It is one of the most powerful emblems of social behavior. In a community where men are socially superior to women, language used for men and women reflects the extensive differences having to do with the social structure of the community itself. No one can deny that we can keep language separate from society and its values.

It is a fact that education of all kinds reflects not only a society's attitudes, priorities and needs, but political and social aspects of the culture of that society also. Within the fields of English as a second language these factors are reflected in the classroom practices and the textbooks produced for classroom use. Studies about the role of women in ESL textbooks have shown that there is a bias in the representation of men and women in textbooks (Ansary and Babii 2003; Hartman and Judd 1978). Women are presented in passive stereotypical roles while men are shown in more active and dominant roles. Females are represented as mothers and housewives whose sole purpose of life is to serve their families. With the review of literature, we can better understand the areas of problem.

## 2. Literature review

Language is not only a mean of communication rather it fulfills the role to establish and maintain social relations in a speech community. Sex differences are reflected in a language of a particular speech community as there are certain forms of language which are appropriate only for the use of men and others are used only by women. It has been a key issue in sociolinguistic studies to investigate the relationship between sex and language and how it is represented. Actually, the study of language and gender began in 1975 by the publication of three books which have continued to significantly influence sociolinguistic works: *Male/Female Language* (M. R. Key), *Language and Women's Place* (R. Lakoff), and *Difference and Dominance* (Thorne & Henley).

As gender biasness is a worldwide phenomenon, much research has been done in this regard. According to Byrne & Gaff 1978, females are more likely to be restricted to the kitchen than males and more likely to be found at home (Deliyanni-Kouimtzi 1992). Females are usually assigned fixed and settled domestic tasks such as cooking, baking, cleaning, polishing, mending, sewing, and washing, while males do the painting, gardening, repairing, and taking out the garbage (Hartman and Judd 1978; Stern 1976). O'Donnell (1973) found that males in primary-level social studies textbooks never washed dishes or cooked. Mothers also took care of children while fathers took the children for outdoor activities (O'Donnell 1973).

Trecker (1971) makes the point: Texts omit many women of importance, while simultaneously minimizing

the legal, social and cultural disabilities which they faced. The authors tend to depict women in a passive role and to stress that their lives are determined by economic and political trends (cited in Commeyras and Alvermann 1996:34).

Reese (1994) found that a number of key topics in women's history were omitted from the examples given in social science textbooks: for example, the traditional roles of Indian women, and women's lives and activities during the Early Republic period. Hellinger (1980:273) found that in German English-language teaching textbooks, the "presence of intellectual or other achievements of women are ignored, downgraded or described as exceptional".

U'ren (1971:223) found that textbooks give boys physical strength and mental qualities. The emphasis on masculine strength extends beyond physical qualities. Males of all ages are pictured as having greater mental perseverance and moral strength than females. Not only are females more often described as lazy and incapable of independent thinking or direct action but they are also shown as giving up more easily. They collapse into tears, they betray secrets; they are more likely to act upon petty or selfish motives.

In British children's readers, girls are seen as weak, submissive, passive, and home based (Byrne, 1978). In a more recent study, Turner-Bowker (1996) found that females in children's literature were still generally accorded weakness, passivity, negative evaluation, and femininity, while the male attributes included strength, activity, positive evaluation, and masculinity. Females were most frequently described as beautiful, frightened, worthy, sweet, weak, and scared, while men were big, horrible, fierce, great, terrible, furious, brave and proud (Turner-Banker, 1996).

Females showed typical "female" behaviors in German English-language textbooks (Hellinger, 1980): emotionality, passivity, and limited intellectual ability. In US TESOL materials, females are overemotional, easily frightened, easily angered, spend too much time talking on the phone and getting dressed (Hartman and Judd 1978). Mothers in US children's picture books are ineffectual and overwhelmed by problems, while their husbands are capable and have a take-charge manner (Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993).

### 3. Methodology

The study design used in this research is descriptive and qualitative in nature.

#### 3.1 Sample

For this study "Oxford Progressive English 4" by Chris Jacques was selected to investigate the gender biased features. This book is published by the Oxford University Press and has been written according to the Pakistan National Curriculum guidelines. It offers an innovative approach to the learning of the English language. It is consisted of nineteen units. This book is taught to the students of level 4 in primary sections by many private schools in Punjab Pakistan.

#### 3.2 Procedure

The book was analyzed on the basis of activities, occupations, visibility, and first place existence. In order to fulfill the purpose, dialogues, examples, reading passages and pictures from this book were examined.

### 4. Data Analysis

#### 4.1 Activities

The book contains nineteen units. In these units the ratio of the participation of males in dialogues is more than double as compared to females. Fifteen examples are about male characters while nine examples are about female characters. As this book consists of lots of pictures, seventy-eight pictures depict males and only twenty-five depicts females. As far as the reading passages are concerned only eight passages give the information about female characters while male characters are given place in fifteen passages. (Table 1)

Table 1. Female & Male Characters (dialogues, examples, reading passages, pictures)

Activities	Female	Male
Dialogues	15	20
Examples	9	15
Reading passages	8	15
Pictures	25	78

#### 4.2 Occupations

Females are shown in fewer occupations than the males in the book. Their professions are only nursing, teaching and film making. While males are doctors, engineers, publishers, reporters, farmers, advisors, waiters and builders. This book depicts more working males than working females. Males have been portrayed as capable of working in a wide variety of sectors as compared to females. For example, they are digging trenches, cutting woods, building houses, selling clothes and running offices. Males have been portrayed more active and

dominant than women. For example, they can be seen as driving a car, going on working trips and running the office. They have been shown as the primary source of income. (Table 2)

Table 2. Female & Male Characters (Occupations)

	Female	Male
Occupations	nurse, teacher, film maker	doctor, engineer, publisher, reporter, farmer, advisor, waiter, builder, driver, wood cutter

### 4.3 Visibility

As far as the visibility is concerned males can be seen more visible than females in this book. Even the title page of the book shows no representation of females. The ratio of the visibility of males as compared to females is more than double with regard to dialogues, examples, pictures and reading passages. Females are mostly found in household settings. They are shown cooking in their kitchens, serving their family, washing and hanging clothes. For example, the Unit 4, Lesson 1 of this book

**Mrs. B:** I've made a pot of tea, Nadia. Would you like a cup?

**Nadia:** Yes, please.

**Mrs. B:** How would you like it? Black or with milk and sugar?

**Nadia:** With milk and sugar please.

**Mrs. B:** Would you like biscuits with it too?

**Nadia:** Yes, please. What are you cooking?

**Mrs. B:** I'm making your father's breakfast.

**Nadia:** Oh! When did he come back from Australia?

**Mrs. B:** He arrived home last late night. He's still sleeping. I'll go and wake him up now.

Outdoors, they are found in markets or supermarkets. While males can be seen catching fish, riding bicycles, washing cars, working in gardens, building roofs, playing football, cricket, hockey, basketball etc. They are mostly busy in outdoor activities.

### 4.4 First place Existence

In this book when a male and a female are mentioned, the male is almost always put first. For example, father and mother, sir and madam, uncle and auntie. Many adjective are used to portray male characters. For example, athletic, sporty, brave and super-clever. Only one adjective is used for female that is "artistic". Males are involved in many adventurous activities such as they are "Diving for Treasure", "At the Seaside Activities Camp", "Dan and Jack are going on a School Expedition" and "The Adventure of Steve Fossett". For example in "The Adventure of Steve Fossett",

*"Steve Fossett loves adventures! In 1985, he swam across the English Channel. In 2005 he made the first non-stop solo flight round the world in a plane. It took him 67 hours. He started and landed in the USA. He flew over many countries including Pakistan."*

The analysis showed that "Oxford Progressive English 4" by Chris Jacques is a gender biased textbook which gives learners the exposure to the sexist language.

### 5. Discussion & Conclusion

After investigating the role of woman in this book, it has been proved that women are presented in traditional stereotypical roles in ESL textbooks. They are given less importance in terms of their presence or participation in outdoors activities. They are shown busy in passive indoor activities while men are allocated more active and dominant roles. Females are given the roles of mothers and house-wives that take care of their children and serve their families. In every society, there are certain common believes about the ways each sex should behave. In our society, the women have traditionally been considered, as compared to men, tender, sympathetic, less aggressive and more submissive, not having strong opinions, weak and need a man to help them do things. Men are regarded more competitive and less emotional than women. Language of our textbooks supports this outdated view.

This false ideology needs to be changed. There are lots of social psychology studies that show that learners' imaginations are indeed limited by the models they are presented with in texts. For example, females who read about only male pilots are less interested in flying than females who read about both male and female pilots. In fact language acts to change the perception of its users. Sexism in textbooks can quietly reinforce gender images in learners. This reinforcement influences the learners not to question about existing social status of both genders. As we can observe that cultural changes have taken place in our society so language in textbooks should reflect new attitudes towards the role of men and women in our society. Textbooks having the language and images that conflict with gender stereotypes can be helpful for learners by providing the opportunity to re-examine and re-think about their gender beliefs and assumptions. Such books can inspire the learners to avoid gender bias attitudes. Now-a-days men and women can do jobs once considered inappropriate for their gender but the

language in our ESL textbooks does not support this view. We need to eradicate sexism from ESL textbooks so that we can get rid of psychological and emotional problems that produce in men and women from its use. Educational authorities should realize this is a problem that they should work hard to remove it by using gender neutral language.

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