
'A woman's Place is in the Home': Gender Stereotyping in Students' Work

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Abstract: This article reports the findings of a study that sought to examine gender issue in the context of practice materials produced by students training to be English teachers with a view to finding out whether or not the gender bias reported in published ELT textbooks is also reflected in student work. The focus of the study was on the visibility and representation of fictitious characters in domestic and other settings. The study involved an analysis of the content of the portfolios produced by undergraduates as part of the requirement for a course in ELT methodology. The results suggest that the materials produced by students tend to suffer from the gender stereotype uncovered in published materials. Women characters appeared to be more confined to domestic settings and were more likely to be shown performing traditional gender roles. The findings suggest that trainees failed to demonstrate the sensitivity and competence needed to deal with gender issue in instructional materials. It also produced evidence to suggest that both female and male trainees tended to suffer from the potential gender insensitivity observed in the study.

Key words: *gender, unpublished ELT materials, Trainee-made materials, stereotype, gender and instructional materials*

Introduction

Studies of gender in educational settings have looked at a range of gender-related issues. One such issue concerns the nature of the interaction that goes on in the classroom. Research conducted along this line has shown that there are differences in the way boys and girls are treated in the classroom. That is to say, the classroom interaction involving a range of school subjects is characterized by differential treatment of male and female students. For example, the findings of such studies suggest that male students generally receive more teacher attention than females. Moreover, male learners have been shown to talk more than female learners (Kelly, 1988).

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Another issue that has received greater attention by researchers concerns the instructional materials to which students are exposed. Investigators interested in this area have assessed the sexism of ELT and other educational materials such as dictionaries (O'Neill, 1994; Carroll and Kowitz, 1994; Mannheim, 1994; Sunderland, 1994; Hennessey, 1994). The primary tool used to establish the extent to which both sexes are treated fairly involved content analysis. The focus of such analysis was on how male and female human characters are portrayed in textbooks and reference materials. The results obtained from such analysis revealed bias against women in many respects (Porreca, 1984).

The literature has also documented a range of areas where sexism has been uncovered in texts and illustrations. One major finding is that women appeared to be less visible than men in a variety of learning materials (Talansky, 1986). Although females constitute half of humanity, the content analysis revealed that the number of female characters in illustrations, dialogues, in example sentences, in audio-recordings, and texts was far less than males. Thus, the materials were found to have been dominated by male characters with the result that the female sex suffered from heavy bias and under-representation both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

Another major finding that emerged from the content analysis of the English textbooks is that the materials tended to perpetuate occupational stereotyping (Gershuny, 1989). That is, there was occupational disparity between men and women characters not only in terms of the type of jobs they were shown to take but also in terms of the range of jobs they took up. The pattern that emerged from the analysis of the jobs of the characters showed women in fewer and more menial occupational roles than men (Sunderland, 1994). While men were seen performing a wide range of public and professional tasks, women appeared to be confined to performing domestic tasks such as keeping house and raising children.

A further finding is that the way the two sexes are portrayed in the materials tended to perpetuate traditional personal characteristics stereotyping (Gershuny, 1989). Such stereotyping tended to manifest itself in terms of assigning more desirable personal attributes associated with success to men

while damping all those traits associated with failure on women. For example, women were more likely to be shown as being weak, scared, inept and defeated by problems than men. On the other hand, men were more likely to be presented as being strong, capable and logical.

It is also important to note that women appeared to be the victims of relationship stereotyping in the sense that women were more likely to be described in relation to men than men are to women. Finally, women were shown adopting a conversational style or strategy which reinforces the view that women are weaker, and less powerful (Croates, 1998). For example, female characters spoke less than their male counterparts. The discourse roles assigned to females in mixed-sex discourse was also found to be disempowering. Such roles were reflected in the fact that female characters initiated fewer dialogues involving the opposite sex and generally tended to sound less assertive and confident.

Why are such studies of the gender issue in the context of educational materials important? The significance of such research relates to the distinction made by educators between two types of curricula: the overt curriculum, which includes all the things that schools and teachers wish to consciously and explicitly teach students, and the hidden curriculum, all the unintended things that are potentially available for learning. Littlejohn and Wnideatt (1989) identify six main areas that may be available for learning in EFL materials. These are subject knowledge, views of what knowledge is and how it is acquired, views of what is involved in language learning, role relations within the classroom, opportunities for the development of cognitive abilities, and values and attitudes presented in a material. The present study is concerned with the last potential area dealing with social and cultural values implicit in materials intended for educational purposes.

The Present Study

Much of the findings discussed in the above section came from the analysis of published textbooks. Thus, they may be considered as reflections of sexism as they relate to the textbook writers who may be unaware of this. However, it would be wrong to assume that teachers are 100 percent

dependent on a prescribed textbook written by experts outside the school. In fact, a good teacher is expected to use the prescribed textbook flexibly and creatively instead of being a slave to it. This, among other things, requires the ability to critically evaluate textbook materials and modify, replace or skip parts of it if judged defective or unproductive in some ways. It is not unusual for teachers to produce their own materials to either supplement existing materials or replace them by what they consider better. Thus, helping teachers develop the ability to design their own practice activities and other instructional materials has been considered as one of the legitimate aims of teacher education programs. Accordingly, pre-service teacher training programs require trainees to write their own materials as a preparation for the real life task that they are expected to carry out in the course of executing their professional duties when they go to schools as teachers.

The present study is, therefore, an attempt to explore the issue of sexism as reflected in the work of undergraduates English teacher trainees of the Addis Ababa University. More specifically, it looks at the extent to which trainee-made materials reflect traditional gender bias in terms of the setting in which males and females are shown. In other words, the objective of the study is to assess whether or not such trainee-generated materials perpetuate specific gender stereotype which tends to allow men unrestricted access to the world outside home and to what it offers while condemning women to live in the confinement of home settings.

Methodology

Data source: The data was drawn from 24 portfolios produced by third year students enrolled in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of Addis Ababa University. They were training to be high school teachers. The portfolio was produced as part of a requirement for the first part of a methodology course entitled *Skills Development Methodology I (FLEn 305)*. The content of the portfolio is expected to include notes from lectures and reading, reflections of learning, lesson plans, tasks and other practice activities that are designed by the students. Nineteen of the portfolios were produced by male students while the remaining were prepared by female students. The portfolios were selected based on availability sampling in the

sense that those that had not been claimed by students were used. The length of the portfolio ranged from 50 to 90 handwritten pages. The materials in the portfolio revolved around topics in language teaching methodology such as presenting and practising a new language item, techniques for oral practice including drills and communicative activities, teaching grammar and teaching listening.

Data Collection: The procedure involved the following steps: To begin with, pieces of student work that involved the use of fictional human characters including imaginary or hypothetical students were identified. The focus of this study being on the visibility and role of male and female characters in domestic and non domestic settings, the next step was to locate pieces which one way or another made specific reference to the setting. Although fictional characters were also used in sentence level examples, only those that formed part of a longer discourse were considered for the present study.

Data Analysis: The data was then subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The basic technique used in generating quantitative data for the study involved frequency count.

Results

Quantitative Data

Part of the study task required establishing the relative frequency of female and male fictitious characters shown at home and outside. Below is a table of a raw count of the number of times male and female characters were shown at home and outside.

Frequency of Male and Female Characters in both Settings

Sex	At home	Outside
Male characters	4	30
Female characters	25	16
Total	29	46

The data on frequency would suggest that the vast majority of male characters are likely to be portrayed doing something outside home. Male characters shown outside are approximately six times as frequent as those shown at home. The data on female characters, however, appears to suggest the absence of such a wide gap between the two settings. In fact, female characters are as likely to occur in both settings. It is also interesting to note that the likelihood of female characters being shown at home is far greater than that of male characters. That is to say, the pattern that emerged from the quantitative analysis would seem to indicate that female characters occur more frequently in domestic settings than their male counter parts.

The distribution of male and female characters in the two settings reflects the gender stereotype in which men are assigned a range of social roles to be performed in public settings. It is, however, interesting to note that women are not always confined to their home as they are also seen leaving home and accomplishing some tasks outside. While the numerical data seems to suggest a better image of women, a closer look at the data would, however, reveal the traditional bias against women. In the following section, I will discuss evidence from qualitative analysis of the data.

Qualitative Data

What follows is a selection of quotations drawn from the sample materials. The quotations represent a mere reproduction of the original material and are thus taken in absolute verbatim. That is, no attempt has been made to correct errors in the quotes and the reader is urged to bear with them and consider the data in terms of what it suggests about gender stereotypes only.

Men and Women Stay at Home for Different Reasons

The data contains no evidence of the extreme view which tends to confine females exclusively to home only. Nor does it present the image of a man as always being away from home. Both sexes are shown in both settings, albeit with a varying degree and for different reasons. A further examination of the data also suggests that women are more likely to be shown on their own at home than men. Men are hardly shown on their own at home. However, the sort of things that the two sexes do at home tends to differ greatly.

The data would seem to perpetuate the traditional view that routine housework is the reserve of women. There are a number of instances which tend to portray women as being confined to the domestic sphere doing household chores such as cooking and caring for other members of the family while male characters are shown doing none of such things. In fact, male characters are shown enjoying the food prepared by female characters or entertaining themselves or 'doing some odd things'. Men are at home to eat rest, enjoy and entertain themselves, not to help with the housework.

The following is an excerpt from an activity produced by a male student in response to a task that required trainees to write a controlled oral practice activity aimed at helping students use the structure "going to do something" accurately. The student outlined the following imaginary exchange to show what he would say to the class and the kind of response he would expect from students. (*Please note that the letters M and F that appear in the brackets following Ethiopian names in the data for this study indicate the sex of the person*).

Example 1

Teacher: *Belay (M), what are you going to do after class this evening?*

Belay (M): *Watch television.*

Teacher: *Belay (M) is going to watch television this evening. What about you Tigist(F)?What are you going to do this evening?*

Tigist (F): *I am going home to prepare food for dinner. What about you Abebe(M)?*

Abebe (M): *I am going to do my homework.*

Teacher: *Look, Abebe (M) is going to do his homework. And you, Teklu (M)?*

Teklu (M): *Reading a book.*

Teacher: *Right. Teklu (M) is going to read a book this evening. What are you going to do this evening Almaz (F)?*

Almaz (F): *I am going to help my mother with cooking food.*

When males are at home they are shown doing none of the household chores traditionally left for females. Instead, they are more likely to do some school-related tasks, as suggested in the following example drawn from the work produced by another student in response to the same task - i.e. writing a drill for practicing the structure "going to".

Example 2

T: Here is Girma (M) (shows picture of a boy). After 30 minutes, he is going home. What do you think he is going to do at home?

S1: He is going to have a nap.

S2: He is going to study.

S3: He is going to do his homework.

The following example is from a drill intended to give practice in using the structure "should do something"

Example 3

T: Abebech (F) is a new servant in W/ro Densie's(F) home. W/ro Densie (F) is describing what she should do with in a day. She said, you should fetch water early in the morning. You should clean the house after that. What do you think Abebech (F) should do?

S1: She should wash clothes.

T: Good all of you... she should wash clothes.

SS: She should wash clothes.

T: What more do you think?

S2: She should make the beds.

Male characters helping female characters with the housework are hard to come by. In fact, they tend to be portrayed enjoying themselves or doing some odd things.

Example 4

Teacher: Look at this tape recorder (shows a picture). It is Daniel's (M) tape recorder. One day he wanted to record his voice speaking with his little sister without her knowledge but he failed to record and asked his older sister to help him but he still didn't succeed in recording. What do you think was the problem?

S1: May be the tape was broken.

S2: May be he forget to play the recorder.

Men have less visibility at home as they tend to also be more mobile than women. That the woman is generally confined to home and the man is usually away is suggested by the following telephone exchange.

Example 5

Telephone conversation between Mulugeta (M) and Nebiat (F).

M: Is it 61-04-32?

N: Yes, what can I help you?

M: May I talk to Ato Ayalew (M)?

N: Sorry, for the moment Ato Ayalew(M) is out. Who are you please?

It appears that the introduction of new technology at home has led to the expansion of the domestic work and the creation new tasks for the woman staying at home. The woman is there to provide new services to the man.

It is also interesting to note that the patterns of gender roles and relationships revealed in the analysis of student work do not seem to vary as a function of the sex of the writer.

The following two drills (See example 6 and 7 below) drawn from the portfolio produced by a female student may help to illustrate how deep-rooted and shared the stereotype is and that women themselves are responsible for its perpetuation.

Example 6Drill 1 (ought to)

T: Students, Abebech (F) is going to the market to do some shopping. There is no food in the house but she has a lot of money. She would also like to invite her friends for lunch. Well, students, you are going to help Abebech (F) with her shopping list. What do you think she ought to buy?

S1: She ought to buy some meat.

S2: She ought to buy some cakes.

The following example from work by the same female student places the male in a qualitatively different context.

Example 7Drill 2: (I think he should)

T: Sisay (M) wants to improve his English. What do you think he should do?

S1: I think he should read more.

The Range of Public Places in which Women are Shown is too Narrow

A prominent feature of the way women are portrayed in the material produced by the trainees concerns the tendency to show women are confined to home settings. Thus, women tend to be less visible in a range of public places. In fact, women are shown performing tasks that are extension of the domestic work they do in settings outside the home. **For example, there is evidence to suggest that shopping seems to account for a vast majority of reasons for women to leave home. When women are shown outside, their motive is often to obtain the foodstuff that they need in order to carry out the domestic activities.** Thus, the reason for going outside has a lot to do with traditional social role involving domestic work.

Example 8

Abebech (F) went shopping yesterday and bought 15 eggs for 8 birr at Shola, 3 loaves of bread at Showa bakery, 2 kilos of sugar for 16 birr at the corner shop, 5 kilos of onions for 20 birr at the market and 2 chicken for 30 birr at Sholla.

Women are often accompanied by men when they leave home for reasons other than shopping. The image of women as lacking experience in certain public areas is also a common place. Most of the time, women are escorted by men when they go to public places other than shops, markets, schools and friends' house. Women appear to be portrayed as being inexperienced and needing the help and protection of males outside home. The following two examples from students' work in response to a task that required trainees to create a context for presenting the *simple past tense* illustrate this view.

Example 9

Daniel(M) and Aster(F) went to the zoo last Sunday. It was Aster's first visit.....

Example 10

Belay(M): Where were you during the holiday?

Tsige(F): We were away. Dawi(M)t and I went to Jimma.

Belay(M): How did you get Jimma?

Tsige(F): Oh, we get it fine.

Belay(M): what did you do in Jimma?

Tsige(F): We did a lot of things?

Belay(M): Where did you sleep.

Tsige(F): We slept in different room

The world outside home is unsafe, unfriendly and uncomfortable for women.

The pattern that emerged from the analysis of the data suggested the tendency for students to show women suffering, failure and mishaps in their life outside home.

Example 11

Yesterday Lakech (F) went to a restaurant and ordered “dorowot” (a popular traditional dish in Ethiopia). However, she didn't enjoy the “dorowot” because it was too salty for her. Besides, it contains too much pepper in it. So she went out without eating much and entered a nearby cafeteria. She ordered orange juice but she found the juice too sour for her to taste. She felt unhappy.

More over, the message conveyed by the fictional characters created by students tends to suggest that women are less likely to succeed in the world outside home. The following example depicts female learners suffering from incompetence.

Example 12

Look at this picture of Almaz (F) (a picture appears under this). She is a student. She is weak academically. Her homeroom teacher advised her that she should do the following. She should study. She should come to class on time. She should ask questions if she has any problem. What else do you think she should do?

S1: She should do assignments.

S2: She should come to class regularly.

The data contained little evidence to suggest that male characters are as likely to be portrayed in failure situations outside their home.

Conclusion

Based on the data, the following observations can be made. The first thing to say is that the picture that emerged from the analysis of the materials produced by trainees was consistent with the overall pattern reported in the literature on sexism in published ELT materials. The findings that suggest

the tendency to confine women to domestic settings and their relative invisibility in public places which has been documented in the literature of published EFL materials were reproduced in the unpublished trainee-made practice materials analyzed in this study.

Another important observation to be made is that the image of women portrayed in students' work does not differ as a function of the sex of the writers/trainees. This suggests that the trainees tend to be gender insensitive and unaware of the potential bias that instructional materials might convey to students. This, in turn, suggests that trainees lack the requisite sensitivity and skill needed not only to write their own materials but also to critically evaluate and adapt specific teaching materials in the prescribed published textbooks which they are expected to use in their future career as teachers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations may be made:

Given the trainees inability to detect and correct gender-bias in teaching materials, there is a clear need for teacher education programs to adequately address gender issue in education in general and the ways in which gender stereotyping is reflected in ELT materials in particular. Pre-service teacher education programs have to review the content and process of training with a view to correcting gender-bias and providing input to trainees needed to remedy unfair treatment of women in instructional materials.

In view of the finding of the present study which is based on a sample of trainees drawn from the biggest and oldest university which has been a major supplier of English teachers in the country, it would not be wrong to assume that the bulk of the teaching force in the country may be suffering from the lack of gender awareness and incompetence observed in the present study of under-graduates. Thus, intervention programs of various types may be explored and launched as an integral part of in-service teacher training programs and other teacher development schemes in the country. A further recommendation is for textbook writers in the country, who received their training in the university and teacher training program focused in this

study. Given the possibility of similar insensitivity of earlier graduates from the program and university, one may hypothesize that the materials produced by them would not be free from gender bias. Thus, it would be useful for textbook writers in the country to exercise caution and high sensitivity both in revising existing textbooks and in writing new sets of teaching materials for use by schools in the country. It is also important to point out the need for materials writers in the country to familiarize themselves with the guidelines for non-sexist language available in the literature on gender and language.

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