



A Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation in a Cameroonian ESL Textbook

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a Cameroonian ESL textbook – *Mastering English: Student's Book for Form 1*, with the aim of investigating gender representation in this textbook. The study employed a document analysis design because data for the study was collected exclusively from the textbook. Data was collected by observing the images and by reading through the passages, dialogues and sentences in the textbook, and noting the various representations of the male and female genders. The study adopted the Critical Discourse Analysis approach to analyse data related to visibility, occupational roles and firstness in presentation in order to unveil the inequalities and power imbalance between the representation of the male and female genders in the textbook. The findings revealed that the male gender is given more visibility above the female in terms of pictorial and lexical representations. Besides, more occupational roles are assigned to males than to females in the textbook. Males equally dominate the first position in dialogues, common noun, proper noun and pronoun pairs. The study concludes that the dominance of the male over the female gender observed in the textbook is a replication of the gender imbalance that exists in the Cameroonian

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society. This study therefore brings to the limelight these gender imbalances in Cameroonian textbooks, and recommends that curriculum developers should always endeavour to strike a balance between the representation of the male and the female genders when designing educational materials.

Keywords: Gender representation; visibility; occupational roles; firstness; imbalance.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to UNWOMEN Africa [1], Cameroon's political, economic and social environments are conducive to gender equality and women's empowerment since the country has signed most international and regional conventions and treaties on the promotion and protection of women's rights. This conduciveness is not however replicated in the day-to-day life of the country as gender inequality can still be noticed in so many domains of national life. According to Atanga [2], "traditional gender ideologies condition and limit women's empowerment in Cameroon. These gender ideologies ascribe dominance and powerful positions to men and subservient social positions to women." (para.1). A number of studies and projects have been carried out to identify the main areas where gender imbalance can be perceived in Cameroon (Arrey, Njeassam, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Fouthé) [3-6]. The main objective of this study is therefore to examine the English Language textbook *Mastering English: Student's Book for Form 1*, which is used in the first year of secondary school education in Cameroon, in order to determine how the male and female genders are represented in the textbook. The rationale is to unveil the gender ideologies that are presented to the young adolescents who use this textbook all over the national territory, given that they obviously shape the learners' perceptions on gender rules in the society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. According to Van Dijk [7] "Critical Discourse Analysis is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately challenge social inequality." (p.466)

Critical discourse analysts therefore have a role of investigating peculiar social ideologies that manifest inequality and abuse of social power to the detriment of the minorities or the underprivileged in society. Their focus is to present the various ways in which these inequalities are enacted by the privileged and resisted by the underprivileged.

Consequently, studies in CDA are not only limited to the description of text and talk but involve relating them to the societies in which they are produced because the main concern is to understand how the discourse is constructed and the reasons for incorporating certain linguistic structures, rather than others, in realizing particular texts or talks [8].

Studies in CDA can therefore take many dimensions, one of which is focusing on ideologies framed and propagated in various discourse in social contexts. "Ideology, for CDA, is seen as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations. CDA takes a particular interest in the ways in which language mediates ideology in a variety of social institutions" [9]. Social institutions are noted for using particular patterns of language in their discourse to mediate various ideologies. CDA aims at deciphering these ideologies because "ideologies are typically, though not exclusively, expressed and reproduced in discourse and communication, including non-verbal semiotic messages, such as pictures, photographs and movies" [10].

Ideologies framed and sustained in various discourse equally establish and maintain power relations because the linguistic forms that mediate them also express and manipulate power. "Power is signalled not only by grammatical forms within a text, but also by a person's control of a social occasion by means of the genre of a text" [9].

According to Fairclough, CDA should be done at three levels: description, interpretation and explanation [11]. Based on this model, CDA should first of all offer a linguistic/semiotic

description of the structures that have been used to construct the discourse (grammar, lexis, strategies, etc.). These structures are then interpreted and explained in relation to the social contexts of their use in order to decipher the various ideologies that they communicate.

Previous studies have examined gender representation in various textbooks in different contexts across the world. In a review of studies on gender representation in primary school textbooks in India, Kadri observed that most of these studies have revealed the underrepresentation and marginalization of women and girls relating to visibility, portrayal, gender qualities and gender roles in these textbooks [12].

In a study on gender representation in the Grade Ten English Language textbook in Ethiopia, Bachore revealed that while females are underrepresented in language use (particularly in proper nouns and common nouns used), visibility/illustrations (images and pictures) and occupational roles mentioned in the text, males dominate the first position (firstness) in dialogues, points of view opinion, common noun pairs, pronoun pairs and proper name pair, but are underrepresented in the adjectives and pronouns used in the text book [13].

Akay Şahin and Açıkalın carried out a visual content analysis of gender representation in elementary and middle school social studies textbooks in Turkey and came out with findings revealing that women are underrepresented compared to men as the appearance of male figures in visuals is approximately twice as high as the appearance of female figures in visuals in the textbooks. Besides, the roles attributed to women in the visuals are related more to house chores, caregiving and subordinate positions under men in the professional work arena [14].

In another study on gender representation in EFL textbooks in Basic Education in Mexico, Aguilar examined the distribution of males and females in terms of visibility in illustration and photos, and display of male and female occupational roles in the visuals. Her findings revealed that there is an imbalance in the representation of male and female characters in the textbooks examined. Males are significantly more frequent than female characters in the illustrations. Besides, occupational gender stereotypes are also identified in the textbooks examined [15].

These studies and many others have revealed imbalances in gender representation, gender equality and stereotyping in a variety of school textbooks used in different countries, especially in Africa, Asia, The Middle East and Latin America. For the case of Cameroon, very limited literature is available on gender representation in school textbooks.

Chuh and Nkwetisama [16] carried out an analysis of gender representation in Mathematics textbooks for Cameroonian primary and secondary schools and discovered that there is gender imbalance as males are over represented in most cases while females are stereotypically depicted and marginalized. In these textbooks, males occupy more paying jobs while females occupy menial jobs. Males are presented as the strong and domineering group whereas females are downgraded and illustrated as weak.

Given the paucity of research on gender representation and equality in Cameroonian textbooks, this study seeks to examine one of these textbooks in order to throw more light to the question of gender imbalances in Cameroon, as represented in the textbook.

3. METHODOLOGY

The design adopted for this study was a stand-alone document analysis because data for the study was collected exclusively from a document, specifically *Mastering English: Student's Book for Form 1*. This textbook was selected because English Language textbooks usually contain texts and illustrations that reflect the daily realities and practices of societal life; especially given the Competency Based Approach to teaching, which is currently applied in Cameroonian secondary schools. The gender ideologies presented in these textbooks therefore contribute in shaping the perceptions of the learners who use the books. Besides, given that English Language is a compulsory subject in Cameroonian schools, all the learners are usually expected to have a copy of the textbook. Data was collected by observing the images and by reading through the passages, dialogues and sentences in the textbook, and noting the various occurrences of the male and female genders. The male and female genders were identified on the pictures from the physical features, dressing and hairstyle, and in the texts from the names, nouns and pronouns used. The data collected was analysed based on three different variables relating to gender representation: gender

visibility, occupational roles and firstness. The data was first analysed quantitatively by establishing frequency tables to show statistical representation of the two genders in the textbook, and then qualitatively by offering interpretations and explanations on the representation of both genders.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed under three sections: the visibility of the male and female gender, the occupational roles assigned to the genders, and the firstness of the genders in the textbook.

4.1 Gender Visibility

The main preoccupation here is to determine which gender is given more visibility in the textbook. This is done by examining the pictures, images and the words used in the book.

4.1.1 Pictorial representation

The Table 1 presents statistics on the representation of the male and female genders on the pictures and images identified in the textbook.

The statistics on the Table 1 show that out of the 97 pictures and images identified in the textbook,

47.42% of them had only males while on 16.49% had females only. Furthermore, on the pictures and images that had both males and females, 19.6% had equal males and females while 13.4 had more males, and just 3.09 had more females. All these show a gross underrepresentation of the female gender in the pictures and images used in the textbook.

Besides, we counted the total number of males and females appearing on the 97 pictures and images and still realised that the female gender is underrepresented as can be seen on the Table 2.

It can therefore be concluded here that the pictures and images used in the textbook examined project the male gender above the female gender thereby presenting an imbalance in the representation of the two genders.

4.1.2 Lexical representation

We equally examined the words used in the textbook in order to determine the representation of the male and female genders. The analysis focused on gender sensitive words such as nouns and pronouns. The Table 3 presents the statistics of the results obtained.

Table 1. The representation of males and females in pictures and images

Gender in pictures and images	Number	Percentage
Males only	46	47.42
Females only	16	16.49
More males	13	13.4
More females	3	3.09
Equal males and females	19	19.6
Total	97	100

Table 2. Total number of males and females on the pictures and images

Gender	Number	Percentage
Males	175	62.72
Females	104	37.28
Total	279	100

Table 3. Lexical representation of the male and female genders

Lexical category	Males		Females		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Proper names	150	54.95	123	45.05	273	100
Common names	180	50.42	177	49.58	357	100
Pronouns	161	57.71	118	42.29	279	100
Total	491	54.02	418	45.98	909	100

As can be seen on the table above, out of the 273 proper names identified in the textbook, 54.95% of them are male names while 45.05% are female names; showing a slightly higher representation of the male gender over the female. As concerns the use of common names such as *brother*, *sister*, *father* and *mother*, the representation of both genders is almost the same in the textbook as 50.42% of the 357 of such names are male while 49.58% are female names. In the case of pronouns, 57.71% of the 279 pronouns identified in the textbook are male, while 42.29% are female pronouns; still indicating a higher representation of the male gender. In total, out of the 909 gender sensitive words identified in the textbook analysed, 54.02% are male, while 45.98% are female words. It can therefore be concluded here that at the lexical level, more visibility is given to the male gender than the female gender in the textbook analysed; although the difference is not very significant.

Giving more visibility to the male over the female gender in terms of the pictures, images and lexical choices used in the textbook is a reflection of the gender biased ideological mind-set of the textbook designers and the Cameroonian society at large. The young learners who use this textbook obviously end up assimilating this ideology and consequently keep on perpetuating gender inequality in their daily lives.

4.2 Occupational Roles

In the course of the analysis, we equally examined the occupational roles assigned to the male and female genders in the textbook. The Table 4 presents statistics of the analysis.

As can be seen on the Table 4, out of the 19 occupational roles identified in the textbook, 14 were assigned to more males than females, only 4 assigned to more females, and just 1 assigned to an equal number of males and females. This shows a gross under-representation of the female gender in the professional milieu. The ideology communicated here is that the world of work is male dominated. Unfortunately, the young learners who are the primary consumers of this textbook will obviously end up assimilating this ideology because that is what is presented to them every day in their English language lessons.

4.3 Firstness

Firstness here relates to the positioning of the male and female genders in dialogues, points of views, texts, common noun pairs, proper noun pairs and pronoun pairs. The Table 5 presents the statistics from the analysis.

Table 4. Occupational roles of males and females

S/N	Occupation	Males		Females		Total	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1	Teacher	2	66.67	1	33.3	3	100
2	President	3	75	1	25	4	100
3	School Principal	1	100	0	0	1	100
4	Engineer	1	50	1	50	2	100
5	Chemist	2	100	0	0	2	100
6	Lab Technician	1	100	0	0	1	100
7	Doctor	1	100	0	0	1	100
8	Journalist	1	100	0	0	1	100
9	Translator	1	100	0	0	1	100
10	Actor/Actress	6	85.71	1	14.29	7	100
11	Administrator	0	0	1	100	1	100
12	Writer	1	100	0	0	1	100
13	Publisher	1	100	0	0	1	100
14	Film Maker	2	100	0	0	2	100
15	Footballer	2	100	0	0	2	100
16	Librarian	1	100	0	0	1	100
17	Sales Clerk	0	0	1	100	1	100
18	Minister	0	0	1	100	1	100
19	Gynaecologist	0	0	1	100	1	100
Total		26	76.47	8	23.53	34	100

Table 5. Firstness in presentation

S/N	Firstness	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male first	48	85.71
2	Female first	8	14.29
Total		56	100

As can be seen on the table above, out of the 56 instances in which both the male and female genders are presented together in the textbook, the male gender is positioned before the female in 48 of the instances, representing 85.71%, while the female gender is positioned first in only 8 of the instances, representing just 14.29%. This continues to show the projection of the male gender above the female gender as has been observed in the other areas of the analysis. Examples of such bias in positioning drawn from the textbook include:

1. *John and Mary are having lunch in the restaurant.*
2. *Look at the picture of John getting up from bed after a peaceful night. What would he say to the following people?*
 - *His father*
 - *His mother*
 - *His brother, Charles*
 - *His sister, Irene*

The high frequency of such patterns in the textbook reflects the ideological mind-set of its authors – the projection of the male gender above the female. These authors therefore use the power and control they have over the genre to disseminate this ideology to their audience.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that there is an imbalance in the representation of the male and female genders in English Language textbooks in Cameroon. Findings from the textbook under study show that the male gender is given more visibility above the female with regards to pictorial and lexical representations. This bias is equally noticed at the levels of the occupational roles assigned to both genders, and firstness in presentation. Given that these English Language textbooks are designed to reflect real-life communicative situations, we can conclude that the gender inequality perceived in the textbooks is just a replication of the ideological mind-set of the Cameroonian society – the dominance of the male gender over the female gender. In order to redress such imbalances, we therefore

recommend that curriculum designers in general and textbook writers in particular should always strive to strike a balance in the representation of the male and female genders in educational materials, as this will help in shaping the gender perceptions of learners thereby contributing to ensuring gender equality in the society at large.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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