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Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks: A Review of Critical Discourse Analysis Research

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Abstract

This review examines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) research on gender representation in EFL textbooks over the past two decades. It reviews studies conducted in different national and regional contexts and shows that, despite considerable progress, readers' responses to gender representation remain underexplored. Because few studies have examined how readers interpret textbook gender representations, the interaction between text producers and readers is still poorly understood. Future research should therefore devote greater attention to readers' responses and to ways of improving gender representation in EFL textbooks.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis; gender representation; EFL textbooks; reader response; literature review

1 Introduction

Textbooks are important teaching materials (Blumberg, 2008) and an essential medium for transmitting knowledge. Wang (2011) argues that textbooks exert an unconscious influence on students. Choppin (2004) further highlights the significance of textbooks as a privileged instrument for constructing identity. However, the content of a textbook may be received uncritically by its readers. Van Dijk (1998) contends that, far from being neutral, textbooks are consonant with the dominant cultural beliefs supported by those in power. The study of gender representation in EFL textbooks is therefore important: by making these biases visible, it can help readers develop critical thinking, encourage publishers to evaluate textbooks more responsibly, and raise awareness of how to create a more equitable educational environment. In recent years, researchers have increasingly applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the analysis of EFL textbooks (Aljuaythin, 2018; Parham, 2013; Salami & Ghajarieh, 2016; Xiong & Qian, 2012). However, to the best of my knowledge, relatively few review studies have synthesized this body of research.

This review aims to contribute to CDA research by examining how researchers have analyzed gender representation in EFL textbooks over the past two decades. The review is organized as follows. It introduces CDA, including its definition, historical development, representative scholars, and role in textbook analysis. It then reviews CDA studies of gender representation in EFL textbooks in China and internationally. Finally, the discussion and conclusion offer suggestions for future research and for improving textbooks.

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2 Critical Discourse Analysis

2.1 Definition of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to discourse that views language as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 2001) and considers the context of language use (Wodak, 2001). It draws on both social and linguistic theory (Flowerdew, 2013, p. 178) and on insights from fields such as sociology, anthropology, and cognitive psychology (Fairclough, 1989, p. 11). CDA identifies discursive practices that reproduce social injustice or inequality and also seeks to denaturalize taken-for-granted assumptions—that is, assumptions that are enduring, often overlooked, and unconsciously accepted.

2.2 Development and Representative Scholars

Although Fairclough first set out CDA in Language and Power (1989), many scholars (Flowerdew, 2013; Wang, 2011; Xin & Gao, 2013) trace its origins to Critical Linguistics (CL) (Fowler et al., 1979). As Flowerdew (2013) notes, the antecedents of CDA are usually traced to CL, a movement that developed at the University of East Anglia during the 1970s. Both approaches arose in reaction to structuralism and sought to reveal how language, power, and ideology interact. Some researchers (Ding & Liao, 2001) now use the two terms interchangeably.

Since the late 1980s, a growing body of research informed by CDA has emerged (Aljuaythin, 2018; Attar & Genus, 2014; David, 2015; Kamasa, 2013; Listo, 2018; Zhou & Qin, 2020). Lin (2014) identifies three scholars who have made especially influential contributions to CDA: Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, and Norman Fairclough. According to Lin (2014), van Dijk attempts to integrate cognitive theories with linguistic and social theories, whereas Wodak and Fairclough respectively adopt the discourse-historical approach and the dialectical-relational approach.

Partly in response to Stubbs' (1997) critique, researchers have also sought to combine corpus-linguistic methods with CDA (Baker et al., 2018; Chen, 2012; Lukac, 2011; Orpin, 2005).

2.3 CDA as a New Perspective on the Study of Language

Some scholars regard CDA as either a research method (Ji, 2011; Lin, 2014) or an approach (Flowerdew, 2013), whereas others (Ding & Liao, 2001; van Dijk, 2015) argue that it offers a new perspective on the study of language. Van Dijk (2015), for example, argues that CDA is not a special method of discourse analysis but rather a critical perspective applicable across all areas of discourse studies. In light of these differing characterizations, CDA may reasonably be understood as a perspective on discourse rather than a fixed method.

3 Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks

The studies reviewed in this section were identified through keyword searches and citation tracking and are intended to represent the main lines of research rather than to be exhaustive. Studies were included if they analysed gender representation in EFL/ESL materials and adopted an explicitly critical or discourse-analytic perspective.

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Gender is socially constructed through human interaction and interpretation rather than biologically determined (Lorber, 1994; Odhiambo, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It refers to the social roles and expectations that societies ascribe to individuals, often on the basis of perceived biological sex. Because these roles are learned rather than innate, the materials that convey them warrant attention, and textbooks are among the most widely used. The roles that textbooks assign to women and men therefore merit analysis.

Research on gender representation in EFL textbooks has a long history. Since the 1970s, scholars have investigated stereotypical representations of gender in EFL materials across a range of national contexts (Aljuaythin, 2018; Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Beebe, 1998; Kanemaru, 1998; Pierce, 1990; Wang, 2011; Wolfson, 1989).

3.1 Studies of Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks: International Contexts

Unequal representation of women and men has been documented in EFL textbooks in a range of national and regional contexts (Aljuaythin, 2018; Lee, 2018; Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008; Mustapha, 2012; Otlowski, 2003; Stockdale, 2006). Studies of EFL textbooks used in the United Kingdom (Stockdale, 2006) and in Malaysia (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008) reported a pronounced bias in favor of men. After analyzing seven junior high school EFL textbooks, Mustapha (2012) found that male characters were not only depicted as more active outside the home than female characters but also portrayed as possessing more desirable qualities.

Otlowski (2003) examined the English textbook Expressway A, used in Japan, and found that female characters were largely confined to the home, whereas male characters were shown working outside. More than a decade later, Lee (2018) reported that gender inequality and stereotyping remained widespread in Japan. These findings suggest that gender inequality in EFL textbooks has persisted over time. They reinforce calls for efforts to promote gender equality, but they also indicate that progress in this area has been slow.

Some studies have identified covert gender-biased messages rather than overt differences, suggesting that the representation of women and men may appear relatively balanced on the surface (Mineshima, 2008; Sano et al., 2001). As Salami and Ghajarieh (2016) observe, content analysis remains the most common approach despite a rich body of literature on gender issues in EFL textbooks (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Lee & Collins, 2008), and most investigations focus on quantitative differences rather than on the interaction between text producers and readers in particular sociocultural contexts. Studies that report employing CDA mostly combine content analysis with qualitative interpretation (Aljuaythin, 2018; Amerian & Esmaili, 2015; Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Within CDA, Fairclough's three-dimensional model has been a frequently used framework for investigating gender representation in EFL textbooks. Few studies, however, have used interviews to elicit readers' views. One exception is Salami and Ghajarieh (2016), who interviewed three male and three female students about gender representation; the responses were largely non-committal, and the authors suggested that this might reflect the students' lack of critical thinking. These limitations indicate that textual inspection should not be confined to describing linguistic features. Fairclough (2003) cautions that the features of a text do not in themselves bring about particular social or political changes.

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3.2 Studies of Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks: The Chinese Context

Several studies have applied CDA to examine gender representation in EFL textbooks used in China (Li, 2019; Wang, 2011; Xiong et al., 2017). Xiong et al. (2017) examined the Success with English series used in Chinese primary schools and found a marked numerical imbalance: male characters (n = 98) outnumbered female characters (n = 61), accounting for 61.64% and 38.36% of the total, respectively. One volume (6B) contained 26 male characters and no female characters. Li (2019) examined junior high school English textbooks published by People's Education Press under the new curriculum standards and found that although the compilers had made some effort, gender bias persisted. Male characters, for example, outnumbered female characters overall, in reading passages, dialogues, illustrations, and audio scripts alike. Wang (2011) examined the New Horizon College English textbooks, which are widely used in Chinese universities, and found that unequal treatment of women was widespread. Many masculine generic constructions appeared in each textbook examined, and Wang further argued that such constructions are offensive and exclusionary toward women. Existing work on the Chinese context has concentrated largely on textual analysis of gender representation, with comparatively little attention to how learners and teachers interpret or respond to textbook content.

4 Discussion

The studies of EFL textbooks reviewed here have yielded broadly similar findings. On this basis, it can be concluded that gender bias in EFL textbooks is a widespread issue across the contexts reviewed. Yet this bias is rarely visible to ordinary readers, as it seldom takes the form of an explicitly sexist statement and is instead carried by cumulative patterns of representation. CDA helps bring these patterns to the surface, along with the norms and values they embody. Moreover, the growing availability of corpus tools addresses the limitations that Stubbs (1997) identified in CDA, namely insufficient data and unsystematic sampling. The combination of corpus linguistics and CDA thus enables researchers to draw more reliable generalizations. As a result, an increasing number of researchers are able to uncover and demystify the legitimized and naturalized ideologies underlying officially endorsed texts.

Although most of the studies reviewed above entailed close analysis of texts, the voices of teachers, students, and textbook compilers have rarely been heard. Some scholars have stressed the importance of fostering readers' critical thinking, but such emphasis alone does not reveal how readers actually interpret texts. Future research should therefore include teachers, students, compilers, and educational authorities. Interviews and questionnaires could capture the perceptions of teachers and students and the views of compilers and officials, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings.

In terms of textbook production, publishing revised editions can improve gender representation to some extent. However, even revised editions that contain less sexist material continue to exhibit gender imbalance (Esen, 2007; Lee & Collins, 2008). Achieving genuinely gender-balanced textbooks may therefore require sustained, long-term effort.

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5 Conclusion

This review indicates that the perspectives of learners who use EFL textbooks remain underrepresented in existing research. Few studies have explored how learners respond to gender representation or how educational authorities and textbook compilers perceive gender imbalance in EFL textbooks. Consequently, the interaction among texts, learners, and text producers remains poorly understood. Future researchers could usefully employ interviews and questionnaires to capture information that textual analysis alone cannot reveal, thereby enhancing the validity of their findings.

With the continued spread of English as a global language, the number of EFL learners is likely to keep growing. Given the potential for gender bias in EFL textbooks, learners should remain alert to such bias and engage critically with the textbooks they use. Textbook compilers, publishers, and editors should critically examine their assumptions about gender. Coordinated efforts among all stakeholders are necessary; only through sustained efforts of this kind can further improvements in gender representation in EFL textbooks be achieved.

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