Readings in English Language Teaching (ELT)

Selected Papers from the Millennium MICELT

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Gender Imbalance in Texts and Its Implications in Classroom Discourse Practices

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Abstract
Early reading texts are powerful manifestations of taken-for-granted norms and practices. They are highly influential sources because they are the earliest contact with books that many children receive, and they are presented within an institution regarded in the community as worthy of trust and carrying official authority. Schools as buyers in the textbook marketplace support material containing gender stereotypes and sexist language. As such, children can encounter widespread and early contact with gender bias and other types of discrimination in such texts, and these are often re-read by generations of children.

This paper looks at the existence of the stereotyping of gender roles in textbooks used in schools which create models for later language use and for children’s perceptions about how the world is. This study indicates that while boys have a very strong preference for male oriented readers, girls seem quite willing to read about boys. It was also found that the gender imbalance in texts has reinforced gender differences in the discourse of school-age girls and boys. Implications of the findings with emphasis in the classroom discourse practices are then discussed.

Introduction
There is a tendency for adults especially parents to perceive books of almost any kind for children as an intrinsic educational good, and to also believe that as long as children are reading it does not matter much what they are reading. But children can encounter widespread and early contact with gender bias and other types of discrimination especially in the textbooks used in schools. It is then the contention of this paper to examine the existence of the stereotyping of gender roles in textbooks that are used in schools which create models for later language use and for children’s perceptions about how the world is.

Schools as buyers in the textbook marketplace support material containing gender stereotypes and sexist language and these are often re-read by generations of children. Hence, early reading texts are powerful manifestations of taken-for-granted norms and practices. They are highly influential sources because they are the earliest contact with books that many children receive, and they are presented within an institution regarded in the community as worthy of trust and carrying official authority.

The Role of Textbooks
The textbook is often the first book to be handled by the child especially one who lives in a rural or remote area. It is highly prized and has a lot of influence on the reader. Textbooks are sometimes the sole property of the teacher who transmits and interprets the content to the learner. As a result, the content of a textbook is indirectly transmitted to them thereby influencing them in some way. Though no research has been done to assess the impact of textbooks on learners; it is a known fact that it influences them greatly.

Almost all studies on textbooks show that textbooks have a positive impact on students’
achievemen...t. The books are image-forming and prominent sources of information on social norms. They shape attitudes and also shape teaching content. They have relative durability as a pedagogical resource.

In Malaysia, the recommended textbooks that are used in schools are written by officers employed by the Ministry or through commissioned writers. The textbooks that are published in the private sectors, which are then approved for schools are usually recommended by authoritative ministerial committees. Textbooks in schools are used for several years before they are changed.

Textbooks are considered one of the important socialising factors in the lives of children especially in Malaysia since they present models of people, their behaviour and thought patterns which they imply are good to copy. The school and the textbook preach social conformity in behaviour and ideology. As such, students who are exposed to a common national curriculum are a captive audience. They are also exposed to a common culture, ideology and a common set of values or norms. Therefore, textbooks are very crucial in our educational systems.

Since textbooks play an important role in educating children in their early years, these books must present both male and female gender fairly. This is because the image that both boys and girls receive in school shapes their self-perceptions and views of themselves. It also shapes what they grow out to be in society.

Existence of the Stereotyping of Gender Roles in Textbooks

Several studies conducted in this field indicate a gender bias in image portrayal of women in textbooks. According to previous studies and surveys especially from the west, in women in children's books are presented only in stereotypical roles such as the following:

- the roles of wives and mothers
- the roles of fairy and fairy godmother
- an underwater maiden (Corson, 1993)
- the females are not in any formal employment (Whyld, 1983)

Lobban (1987) states that the representation of the female world is found almost entirely to focus on domestic activity and childcare, while male adult characters do little in the home but always drive in a car.

In referring to early textbook research, Graham (1975) stipulates that more than seven times as many men as women feature in school age books and more than twice as many boys as girls. The imbalance between female and male actors found in the early research continues.

Brock and Cammish (1991) analysed the images of men and women in Indian textbooks and found that males were the exclusive leading factors in 75% of the lessons with women taking precedence in only 7% of the lessons. Females were most often described for their beauty, obedience and self-sacrifice while men for bravery, intelligence and achievement. Instead of fostering the basic equality between men and women, the messages given to students in textbooks sanction the dominance of males. Instead of freeing individuals from conformity to sex roles, the textbooks fortify a sex-division of labour.

It is unscientific to divide tasks and subjects on the basis of sex and regard them as masculine or feminine. In misrepresenting the real world, these texts promote the perceived wisdom that women are not competent, active citizens and deprive female students off positive role models. This perpetuates a stereotyping, and erroneous view that women contribution to the economy is marginal. Though the texts that we use may or may not succeed in teaching the formal curriculum, they are successful reinforcers of the informal curriculum.
Table 1: Activities engaged by girls in primary textbooks and activity books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities (Girls)</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Playing with toys</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kitchen set and dolls)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Skipping rope</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Swings</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sweeping</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Netball</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Piano</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Singing</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Watering plants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that even textbooks for supposedly objective subjects such as mathematics are also blatant out in their gender stereotyping. For example, a study of sixth grade texts from 1963 - 1974 (Obura, 1991) found that females were significantly under-represented and engaged in different array of behaviour than males. The behaviour characteristic of the females included sewing, housekeeping, food preparation, buying food, and enjoying music.

Instrument of Study and Categorisation of Data

In order to determine the existence of the stereotyping of gender roles in textbooks, a survey of textbooks and some activity books is carried out. The researcher examines the English language and Bahasa Malaysia textbooks and activity books used in the primary schools particularly the first level that is Standard 1 to 3.

Some examples of sexism in these texts are collated and categorised into the following:

a. The portrayal of girls/women on domestic activity.
   The girls are associated with activities such as playing with kitchen set toys, skipping rope, sweeping the classroom or kitchen, play swing, play with dolls, play netball, and play the piano.
   The women would indulge in activities such as shopping for groceries in the supermarket, doing house chores e.g. washing dishes, cooking in the kitchen, hanging curtains, hanging out clothes, ironing, and their professional career would be a typist, teacher or librarian.

b. The portrayal of boys/men engaging in active roles and games depicting physical strength and mental power.
   The boys are associated with activities such as playing with blocks, camping, fishing, playing football, play ball, playing remote control cars or other vehicles, playing the slides, riding horses, handling tools like hammer and screwdriver, engaging in a science project, playing kites, and catching butterflies.
   The men would do gardening, fixing things with their son e.g. bicycles, reading the newspaper in the sitting room, watching television, and washing the car. Their professions are mainly businessmen, postmen, grocers, firemen, doctors, and policemen.
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