The Representation of Social Actors in the EFL High School Textbooks in Iran[1]

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Abstract

The present study investigates how language as a social practice has been employed in EFL high school textbooks to expose the underlying ideology, representing certain social groups in Iran. More specifically, it aimed to find out how the representations used in the texts construct certain social and normative realities. As such, the study intended to know whether the curriculum developers or the authors of the textbooks, consciously or unconsciously, have given a special priority to a particular social group, such as a special gender, social class, or race in developing the content of the texts.

The analysis of the text materials showed that females are significantly under-represented, with the ratio of 6:1. Further, the frequency and type of activities males and females engage in are significantly different. Implications for curriculum developers and EFL students are discussed within a critical discourse theory perspective.

Introduction

A curriculum is defined in the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (1989) as "subjects included in a course of study…" (p.293). The definition implies that a curriculum is a preplanned program for the transmission of knowledge in a particular field of education; it is just a transmitter of the related knowledge. However, the critical linguistic perspective considers a curriculum to be "a representation: not only a site in which signs that are produced in other places circulate, but also a place of signs in its own right" (Tadeu Da Silva,1999, p.1). In fact, signs do not just represent things; rather, they construct things, reality, etc. (Foucault, cited in Tadeau Da Silva, 1999). A curriculum, to Kress (1996), is never neutral: the creation or even the preservation of the status quo can be accomplished through the creation or development of the desired curriculum. A curriculum, by playing a role in shaping certain ideology, can no longer be

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considered an empty place for reflecting ideas from different perspectives. In this connection, Tadeu da Silva (1999) maintains that a curriculum "is always [an] authorized representation" (p.1), implicitly, legitimating and disseminating a certain ideology. The implicitly intended impact of a curriculum goes further to cover fields other than education, such as the relevant society as well. "A curriculum is a design for future social subject, and via that envisioned subject a design for a future society" (Kress, 1996, p.16). Accordingly, a curriculum is expected to construct the community of the future.

It is actually the authority behind the curriculum that intentionally manipulates it to achieve certain prefabricated objectives, and treats it as a means of fulfilling such ends. That's why Roberts (1998) indicates that "debates over changes in school curricula frequently provide a window from which to view larger political battles" (p.1)*.* Therefore, exposing the ideology within a curriculum is a necessary task. Generally speaking, the critical perspective views the curriculum as a means through which the power relation in a society is constructed and preserved, leading to the oppression of one social class or sex by the other. The curriculum could pose a particular ideology, albeit not directly. "School recreate[s] the forms of consciousness necessary for social control to be maintained without dominant groups having to use explicit mechanisms of domination" (Skelton, 1997, p.181). Given that such assertions on the function of curriculum are valid, a critical linguist is justified in investigating the discoursal causes of the domination/oppression and bringing them to the level of consciousness. Such an investigation is concerned with the curriculum as a place where signs are produced. Identifying the content of this production is a matter of concern in this study.

One of the relevant media of the curriculum where social control is exerted implicitly has been shown to be text materials and books forming the content of the courses offered to junior and senior high school students (McCoy 1997, Moughrabi 2001). Skill-based English textbooks are used for practice at different levels in the EFL courses offered to high school students (Junior and Senior) in Iran. It goes without saying that students are subjected to a range of other textbooks on different subject areas that are beyond the scope of this study. The textbooks, forming the content of the English courses nationwide, are developed and published in Iran, under the auspices of educational authorities and, hence, could be used as a proper medium of implicitly maintaining the type of social control indicated by the critical perspectives like Skelton (1997).

In this connection, this study investigates how language as a social practice has been employed in EFL textbooks to represent a particular society. Also, it investigates how the representations construct certain social and normative realities, such as subjectivity and identity. More specifically, the present study is intended to investigate whether the curriculum developers or the authors of the textbooks under study have, consciously or unconsciously valued a special gender, social class, or race over others in developing the content of the

texts. To do so, we identify the principal ways through which the texts employ social actors. These social actors are those who perform the active role in a social practice, whether they are linguistically realized as 'actor', passive 'agent', or otherwise.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study, in van Leeuwen's (1996) term, is to see "what [are] the principal ways in which social actors can be represented in discourse" (p.65). To accomplish this we:

1) identified the ways the English textbooks under study have been employed to represent social actors

2) investigated the extent of such representations in the curriculum designed to teach English as a foreign language in schools in Iran; and

3) analyzed the nature of such representations

Regarding the nature of materials under study, textbooks are assumed to be good representatives of the curriculum, and they are the most tangible, publicly accessible, curriculum-based productions which students are routinely subjected to. Moreover, text materials easily lend themselves to objective investigations.

Method

Sources of the Data

The present study examines English textbooks used in various levels of high schools in Iran. There are three sets of books employed at three levels of (a) junior high school (jhs), (b) senior high school (shs) and (c) pre-university high school (phs); each level is intended for subjects at different years of high school education. The numbers of the books used at each level are 2, 3, and 1, respectively. The English textbook, used at the third level, i.e. the pre-university high school textbook, comprises two parts, devoted to "pre-university one" and "pre-university two", and hence, is regarded as two books. The books that are written, printed and revised exclusively under the supervision of officially appointed educational authorities in Iran could serve as effective means of indirectly disseminating certain norms and views supported by such authorities. Content-wise the books under study seem to be highly culture specific as they mainly attempt to present Iranian life and culture in English.

The Procedure for data analysis

As part of data analysis procedure, inter/intra coder reliability was achieved by asking two colleagues (familiar with Van Leeuwen's framework) to score 20 percent of the whole data two weeks after the first coding session. The results indicated a high correlation for both the researcher and coders on the one hand and the first and second coding process on the other (r **=** 8.5 and r = 8.9, respectively). All the sentences in the reading passages of the books were individually coded to identify the social actors they represented and the type of actions they referred to. In addition, the gender of the social actor, as well as ethnicity and social class were analyzed. Further, the processes the social actors performed were identified. These representations were then analyzed quantitatively to determine the number and proportion in relation to other codings. The pictures in the textbooks were also analyzed separately to identify the type of social actors they represented and the nature of their representation.

Theoretical Basis for Analysis

The English textbooks were analyzed under the rubric of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) using van Leeuwen's (1996) framework. He proposes a "network" by which one can categorize social actors. The network makes the systematic analysis of discourse possible. The textual representations in van Leeuwen's framework are classified into three linguistic transformations, namely deletion, rearrangement and substitution, each with a particular linguistic realization, as follows:

> Deletion involves voice, and also nominalization and adjectivalisation, rearrangement principally involves transitivity, while substitution is initially realized by aspects of the structure of the nominal group…, the numerative… and then by lexis… (p. 67).

Concerning deletion, the social actors may be "excluded" (i. e. hidden in the text) or "included" (i.e. stated directly). Where they are included, they could be either in the form of activation or passivation. While in activation the subject of the clause is the 'doer' or the 'agent' of the action, in the passivated social actor it is not so. Concerning exclusion, the excluded social actor may be sent to the background or be completely suppressed. For example, the social actor is sent into the background in "The traffic violator was arrested" because the sentence implies the presence of the policeman who is backgrounded. A social actor may be suppressed through deletion or nominalization as in, "Traffic violation is condemned." Here no social actor is present so it is suppressed. Excluded actors whether suppressed or backgrounded are more difficult to interpret because by their nature they are hidden. Exclusion and inclusion can be very revealing of the ideology residing behind them, and their effects can be even more important when they are performed in a systematic way.

While deletion involves exclusion in which the social actors can be represented by being suppressed or sent into the background, rearrangement tries to identify what role is allocated to which social actor through features such as activation, passivation, participation, etc., since the roles assigned to the social actors would be more meaningful if the activities they are engaged in are also identified. The notion of transitivity, used in van Leeuwen's framework, is an option that can be adopted to identify the activities that are associated with the roles in question.

Transitivity includes the wide range of roles and activities related to different social actors. Every clause contains a process (usually a verb or verbal group). Halliday (1989) offers six types of processes: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential. Material processes indicate doing or happening, such as cooking, hitting, playing, and so on. Mental processes deal with sensation, such as feeling, thinking, perception, cognition, etc. Relational processes, the third type, are the processes of being and are often realized with the verbs be, seem, like, have, and so on. The verbal processes, as the name implies, are that of saying, reporting, or describing an entity. The processes dealing with the "physiological and psychological behavior", according to Halliday (1989: 128), are behavioral. Finally, the processes concerning the existence or occurrence of something are referred to as the existential ones, and occur linguistically as there is, there are, it is. The combination of who or what acts, through what process, and upon whom or what are the fundamental elements of transitivity. Rearrangement occurs in the text when the social actors, out of a myriad of roles and activities, are assigned certain roles. For instance, a passive, rather than an active role, may be attributed to a certain social actor systematically.

As for substitution, there are certain discursive structures, such as personalisation/impersonalisation, objectivation/abstraction, categorisation/nomination, etc., through which different aspects of nominal groups are depicted and a substitution relationship is present within each pair of features. The social actor can be represented either as a personalised or impersonalised one, or either as an abstracted feature or an objectivated one.

Using this framework of deletion, rearrangement, and substitution, to the extent that the textbooks under investigation represent the social actors in certain ways, they can be analyzed to reveal the underlying determining ideologies at work. So, having identified the determining effect of particular ideologies on the representation of social actors in the selected textbooks, the study continues to speculate about the nature of such ideologies.

Results and Discussion

1. Deletion

In the 'deletion' section, the researcher identified which social actors are included and which excluded.

Table 1: Exclusion / inclusion with social actors cross tabulation

	Social actors			Total	
	Male	Female	General	Thing	
Inclusion	379 (33%)	63 (5.4%)	290 (25.3%)	420 (36.3%)	1152**(91%)**
Exclusion	2 (1.8%)	1 (0.9%)	16 (14%)	95 (83.3%)	114 **(0.9%)**
Total	381 **(30%)**	64 **(5%)**	306 **(24.3%)**	515 **(40.7%)**	1266

As shown in Table 1, statistically there is a significant difference (P< .000) in the presentation of social actors. The most frequently included and excluded social actors are 'things' (40.7%), of which 81% (n=420) belong to the included ones. 'Things", as particular types of social actors, were also taken into account in our scoring and computation since they had been used so frequently in the textbooks that their exclusion might have influenced the accuracy of the results. The first example below displays "things" as the "included" social actor and the rest are statements with "excluded" human social actors.

1. The buses are very slow nowadays. (shs2, L. 7, sent. 38)

2. In one country, a recent research showed that… (shs 3, L. 1, sent. 5)

3. The snowplow went down the road. (shs1, L. 4, sent. 31)

4. It was hard to see where the road was. (shs1, L4, sent. 10)

5. It's fun to see a monkey going to work (shs 1, L. 2, sent. 12)

Concerning male and female actors, though both are excluded from the text, the female is suppressed, while the male is sent to the background. That is, it is possible for the reader to identify the male character, while the identification of female characters is not easy, if not impossible. The books tend to represent males and females differently (Table 1). Under inclusion, male social actors are represented six times more than their female counterparts (i.e. 30% vs. 5.0%). Females in general are deemphasized if not radically excluded throughout the

books. When the book, for instance, is describing a family in which apparently a general term is used, considering the pictures accompanying the statements, females are mostly excluded. In the junior high school book, grade three, e.g., at the breakfast table, the father is portrayed at the breakfast table, with his face towards the readers, while the mother is shown from behind so that the reader cannot see her face, hence depicting her as a faceless being (10 pictures out of 18, depicting a family gathering, have shown females (mostly mothers) from behind). In the corpus, females are frequently portrayed from behind, contributing to their exclusion (there are 35 pictures depicting females from behind, compared to 17 presenting males). The father is usually in the middle of the photos, indicating the power relation existing in the family milieu. This seems to be in line with the social position of the father that is supposed to have a central role in the family, in addition to his socially well established position. The mother, in contrast, has, more often than not, the role of a caretaker, doing the chores, such as washing, cooking, or serving the family member in the pictures studied.

2. Role Allocation

Under 'rearrangement', van Leeuwen (1996) has discussed the roles allocated to different social actors. In this connection, following van Leeuwen's model, the current study analyzed the data to identify the type of roles considered for various social actors. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Activation and social actors in the textbooks

	No. of occurrences	% of total
Male	371	30
Female	63	5
General	282	22.3
Thing	401	31.7
Total	1117	89

Generally speaking, the books studied have used activation in about 89% of times. This may be attributed to the fact that these books are written for school students whose demand of English is supposed to be low. So, possibly owing to students' limited skill of English, the strategy of hiding, which requires better linguistic skills, is not carried out frequently. As Table 2 indicates, while 'things' comprise the most frequently activated social actors (31.7%). This could indicate the authors' inclination in generating impersonal texts. Activation, according to van Leeuwen (1996, p.43) refers to the social actor who is represented as the "active forces in an activity" and passivation refers to the social actor who is shown as "undergoing the activity". The term is defined briefly on page 6.

'Male' terms occupy the second position in terms of frequency of occurrence (30%). Concerning the appearance of male and female social actors, males manifest a frequency that was six times greater than that of females. The sort of activities assigned to each of male and female subjects were very different as well. The books extensively used gender bias with regard to their roles both at home and in the society. For instance, while *she* is activated with regards to having a *baby*, *he* is activated concerning having a *car* (Lesson 13, jhs 2)*.* As another example, in jhs 3, lesson 1, the writer talks about the mother who is making breakfast and the father who is leaving home. Girls are mostly depicted as individuals sitting at home *studying*, *watching TV*, or *helping mother*. Boys are, generally, excluded from the home context, except when they are eating or getting up in the morning. For example, on page 11, grade 3, the boys are playing football while the girl is watching TV, and on page 41 in the same book another picture is showing a girl helping her mother in the kitchen. Mothers are commonly shown together with their daughters at home. Fathers are with sons, either at or out of the home. For instance, while the girl is in the kitchen helping out the mother, the son is sitting next to his father in the park. Such representations seem to indicate that texts are written with the underlying intention that girls belong in the home context, while boys are an out-of-house work force, with wider ranges of activities awaiting them. Hence, though both genders are the social actors of activated statements, the roles assigned to them are very different and ideologically meaningful.

2.1 Transitivity

Transitivity concerns the actors and the processes they are engaged in. The writers of the books employed general terms, such as we, you, the family, etc. in the material process in about 23% of the time. This would imply that the authors wish to prepare a gender neutral book. However, the gender-specific roles assigned to males and females are so strong that such an intention, if there is any, is not carried out effectively.

The books appear to represent male and female social actors differently; that is, males are represented as the social actors of material process as many as 209 times, while women are shown in only 28 cases. The difference in male versus female representation is statistically significant ($p < 0.000$). The type of role assigned to a particular gender or class is another interesting issue in the books, which is shown to be in line with 'role allocation' in van Leeuwen's (1996) framework. The role allocations show the tendency of the sponsoring institution to envisage a leading role for certain social groups.

Table 3. Transitivity in representing social actors

Process	Male	Female	Total
Material	209 (88%)	28 (12%)	237 **(53%)**
Mental	35 (79%)	9 (21%)	44 **(10 %)**
Relational	83 (80%)	19 (20%)	102 **(23%)**
Verbal	34 (85%)	6 (25%)	40 **(9%)**
Behavioral	16 (94%)	1 (6%)	17 **(3.8%)**
Existential	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 **(1.2%)**
Total	381 **(85%)**	64 **(15%)**	445

The verbal process is that of saying, reporting or describing an entity; the processes dealing with the "physiological and psychological behavior", according to Halliday (1989: 128), are behavioral. You may compare 34 occasions in which males used verbals with that of females.

According to the results, male actors are represented as the actors in the material processes about seven times more than female ones. In analyzing the actors of material processes, the evidence available in the books shows that both females and males are depicted as actors, although the sense and nature of the act considered for each gender is of a very different nature. That is, while females are the actors of *cooking*, or *preparing breakfast*, males are actors of *reading*, *buying,* and *making*. Females are represented as actors of the verb *staying*, but males as those of *going*, with a dynamic character.

Furthermore, in terms of the mental process, females are shown to be the 'thinker' of *enjoying* and *liking* something, rather than subjects of deep and serious ventures, as observed in the following sentences:

1. She likes books with pictures in them. (jhs3, L.4, sent.9)

2. Nahid enjoyed her visit very much. (jhs3, L. 7, sent.14)

Based on such evidence, one may argue that the texts under study tend to present a gender bias. This ideology is overtly and sometimes covertly represented in the textbooks. These books seem to have some impact on making an active male / passive female dichotomy in the society. The following sentences bear witness to this claim:

1. **She stayed** in her grandfather's house. (jhs3, L.7, sent.11)

2. **He rides** on the back of the farmer's bicycle. (shs1, L.2, sent.13)

3. **He usually reads** after dinner. (jhs3, L.4, sent. 3)

4. **She went** to his room **with a pan** of water and an egg. (shs1, L.3, sent.8)

Such differences indicate the marginal social role assigned to women and would contribute to perpetuation of the traditional role of women as social actors acting as caregivers in the home context.

3. Substitution

There are different discursive features through which social actors can be represented, as shown below:

Table 4: A cross tabulation of male/female agents with substitution features

Impersonalisation/ Personalisation	Social actors				Total
	Male	Female	General	Thing	
Functionalisation	17 (60.7%)	3 (10.7%)	7 (25%)	1 (3.6%)	28**(10.8%)**
Classification	37 (41.5%)	9 (10.1%)	35 (39.4%)	8 (9%)	89 **(34.3%)**
Relational	17 (53.2%)	9 (28%)	5 (15.6)	1 (3.2%)	32 **(12.4%)**
Abstraction	0	0	0	21 (100%)	21**(8.1%)**
Formalisation	8 (89%)	1 (11%)	0	0	9(3.5%)
Informalisation	38 (90.5%)	4 (9.5%)	0	0	42 **(16.2%)**
Semiformalisation	13 (100%)	0	0	0	13 **(5%)**
Objectivation	0	0	0	25 (100%)	25 **(9.7%)**
Total	130 **(49.5%)**	26 **(10%)**	47 **(19%)**	56 **(21.5%)**	259

Table 4 presents a summary of the discursive structures used under substitution to represent the social actors. The most frequent discursive structure used is classification. According to van Leeuwen (1996) this structure is used to

give values to the social actors. Males, in this sense, are classified twice as frequently as females.

1. I am a student. (jhs2, L.5, sent. 1)

2. He's a dentist. (jhs 2, L. 6, sent. 9)

3. There are many people who do not seem to know. (shs3, L3, sent 7)

As the above Table shows, the male social actors are more frequently nominated and this can occur in three ways. Nomination according to van Leeuwen is 'formal' when only the surname of the social actor is used; 'semiformal' means the given name and the surname is used, and 'informal' occurs when only the given name is used. While there are eight cases of formal nomination (formalization) referring to males, there is only one instance referring to females. Furthermore, there is no reference to females through the semi-formal nomination. And concerning informal nomination, in contrast to four instances of females, there are 38 cases referring to males. The ideological implication of this obvious discriminatory use of nomination is that the males are represented as those having unique and independent characters. In other words, they are seen and known by the readers and the actions carried out by them are more probably assumed to be realistic, hence having more effects on the world.

Objectivation and abstractions are two discursive structures used to present the social actors in impersonal ways. While in the objectivation the social actor is turned into an inanimate one, in abstraction the agency and tense of the statement together are removed, as shown in the following examples:

1. Memory is the brain's ability to keep a record of past events. (shs3, L. 3, sent.9)

2. This is a competition among many nations of the world. (shs3, L.4, sent.2)

The social actors are functionalized and classified, using expressions such as father, brother, doctor, teacher, student, and the like. However, males are shown to have higher social status in the textbook coverage than females. That is, while males are generally functionalized as doctors, dentists, teachers, etc., females are rarely represented with such functions in the society. They are either shown as housewives, or at most as teachers and nurses.

One way of categorization is "relational" in which the kinship and personal relationship are concerned (van Leeuwen 1996). Regarding relational categorization, compared to females (28%), males are more frequently used (53.2%), which is again statistically significant ($p<0.05$). The relational categorization used in these textbooks represents females as more dependent actors. That is, females are mostly introduced as the mother, the sister or the wife of a male character, as the following examples illustrate:

1. My sister works in a library. (jhs2, L.16. sent5)

2. My mother cleans the room. (jhs2, L.16. sent6)

The other point worth noticing is related to the photographs accompanying the texts. Both the texts and the photographs try to present a particular image of femininity and masculinity which is consistent with the general norm practiced in the community. Males, as social actors, are involved in certain male-specific activities, which are not apparently considered so suitable or common for females.

Table 5: Photographs depicting male/female social actors and their social activities

Animate social actors	Teacher	Doctor / Dentist	Nurse	Farmer / Clerk	Sport / Playing	Total
Male	40 (42.5%)	17 (18%)	0	7 (7.5)	30 (32%)	94 **(76%)**
Female	16 (55%)	2 (7%)	8 (27.5%)	1 (3.5%)	2 (7%)	29 **(24%)**
Total	56 **(45.5%)**	19 **(15.5%)**	8 **(6.5%)**	8 **(6.5%)**	32 **(26%)**	123

Out of 689 photographs depicting animate social actors, about 58.5% have depicted males while only 29% depict females exclusively. The photographs (Table 5) show males engaged in various social activities, such as being teachers (40 cases in contrast with 16 female teachers), doctors or dentists (17 cases in contrast with 2 female doctors), mechanics, policemen, farmers, etc. Females, in contrast, apart from their traditional role as mothers and caregivers, are most commonly depicted as teachers (16 times) and nurses (8 times). Such representations causes Song (2001) to blame the educational system for contributing to gender inequality observed in the society and asserts that formal education is responsible for women's inability to view themselves in a career.

To sum up, in terms of both frequency and type, the aforementioned points seem to be sound enough to indicate that school textbooks attempt to represent males and females differently. Such a trend implicitly shows the nature of the ideology imposed on the curriculum. That is to say, the textbooks are formulated to shape a society in which social positions and opportunities are unequally distributed, in favor of male subjects.

Conclusion

To conclude, whatever the reasons that may lie behind representing the social actors this way, the books can be very effective in generating as well as maintaining the *status quo*. The ideological implication of such representations would ensure the construction of a male-dominated society since textbooks can act as a model for the readers to construct their worldview and eventually their world. They can impose certain effects on the learners who, in this case, are students that age-wise can be highly susceptible to psycho-social influences. In this connection, the data identify how the curriculum developers reconstruct a particular culture, serving as a medium for imposing certain ideologies in favor of certain gender or social class of their target population, i.e. the high school students. The results might further indicate that the ideologies disseminated via the medium of language might be quite influential, because language could be employed quite successfully this way to impart the intended message indirectly without getting the learner consciously involved in the process of decoding the message. Studies like the current work help to bring these invisible effects to the fore and identify the way textbook representation can contribute to the construction of a normative view on the issues of gender, race, or ethnicity, to name just a few.

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APPENDIX 1: The representation of social actors in discourse: system network

(van Leeuwen, 1996)