

# Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks in Basic Education in Mexico<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Research on language and gender began in the 1970s with a broad interest, particularly from feminist researchers (Sunderland & Swann, 2016). The relationship between gender and language is of increasing interest to many scholars and researchers due to their bi-directional relationship. That is, according to Aydinoğlu (2014) "gender is reflected by language and language helps to shape gender" (p. 233). This study examines male and female representation in three EFL textbooks used in early elementary grades in public schools in Mexico. To this end, two types of analyses were performed to explore 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. Findings revealed that there is not a balanced representation of characters in the three textbooks; males were significantly more frequent than female characters in the illustrations. In terms of photos, it was found that both genders were allotted a similar number of appearances. Similarly, the results indicated that occupational gender stereotypes occurred in the three textbooks.

## Resumen

La investigación sobre el lenguaje y el género comenzó en la década de 1970 con un amplio interés, de manera particular con investigadoras feministas (Sunderland & Swann, 2016). La relación entre género y lenguaje ha sido de interés para muchos académicos e investigadores debido a su relación bidireccional. Es decir, según Aydinoğlu (2014) "el género se refleja en el lenguaje y el lenguaje ayuda a dar forma al género (p. 233). Este estudio examina las representaciones masculinas y femeninas en tres libros de texto para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en los primeros grados de primaria en las escuelas públicas de México. Para este fin, se realizaron dos tipos de análisis para explorar la distribución de hombres y mujeres en términos de visibilidad en ilustraciones y fotografías y visualización de los roles ocupacionales de ambos géneros en las imágenes. Los resultados revelaron que no hay una representación equilibrada de géneros en los tres libros de texto; los personajes masculinos fueron significativamente más frecuentes que los femeninos en las ilustraciones. En las fotografías, se encontró que a ambos sexos se les asignó un número similar de apariciones. Los resultados también indicaron asignación estereotipada de ocupaciones en los tres libros de texto.

## Introduction

Hietanen and Pick (2015) argue that gender inequalities in Mexico are not only significant and reflected in numerous aspects of life, but are also perceived as a normal phenomenon, which causes psychological barriers in human, economic and social development. Through results obtained in various polls from different resources "Guía para la incorporación de perspectiva de género" (Guide for the incorporation of gender perspectives) (Muñoz López et al., 2014) reported that stereotyped roles in Mexico seem to have contributed to sexism in decision-making, personal freedom, use of free time, participation in various aspects such as public, private and familiar, and the dynamics of relationships. They also claim that the results obtained in 2009 by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI for its acronym in Spanish), indicated that among family members ages 12 and older, female members spent significantly more time on household chores, particularly in relation to care, food preparation, and cleaning. Similarly, *El Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, Mexico* (the National Institute for Women in Mexico) has indicated that despite having a paid employment or not, women dedicate more time to household chores than men do.

Aguilar Montes de Oca et al. (2013) studied gender roles among 300 Mexican students with ages between 17 and 25 and 80 adults with ages between 35 and 40. They found that men defined themselves with the role of protector and provider, professional, secure and loving, while women described themselves as professionals, independent and wives or housewives whose main roles are sharing and educating.

According to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2018) children in Mexico are taught and expected to adhere to acting and behaving according to their biological characteristics and that any abnormal behavior is pointed out and even punished. Ortega et al. (2005) carried out a study to identify perceptions towards male and female roles among Mexican children. Their results indicated that children perceived equality among genders. However, their perceptions towards the role distribution, characteristics and activities for males and females were gender biased: males are providers and in charge of the economic activities while females are in charge of the house and characterized by patience and love for their kids. It was also found that male children are thought to be rebellious, strong, aggressive-like and untidy while female children are considered to be delicate, calm and tidy.

Education, along with other agents such as family, friends, and media play an important role in addressing issues of inequality and at gender socialization processes (John et al., 2017). Textbooks can be one of the

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great influences in contributing to cultural prejudices and gender bias (Dominguez, 2003) since exposure to textbooks and other learning materials may serve as a powerful medium for nurturing young people into dominant patterns of gender relations and gendered behaviors that can perpetuate in adult life (Leach, 2003). According to Amini and Birjandi (2012), gender-biased textbooks may negatively affect female students' perceptions of social, behavioral, and linguistic roles. Similarly, gender stereotyped portrayal can influence children's career aspirations and personal development (Hamilton et al., 2006). Sunderland (1992) argues that gender representation in coursebooks affect language students and language users in three ways: unconscious influence of restricted social, behavioral and linguistic female roles, hampering female students' learning as they become demotivated if noticing these restricted portrayals and, promotion of models of language that can become classroom practice such as male firstness in conversations. Therefore, it is vital to produce and maintain gender balanced EFL textbooks for all ages, especially among young learners who are still rapidly developing their understanding of the world including gender roles.

This study aimed to analyze gender representation in three EFL textbooks that have been used in the English Programs in Mexican public elementary schools with a focus on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades. For this purpose, the following research questions are addressed:

- *Are male and female characters equally represented in the visuals of the selected textbooks?*
- *How are male and female roles depicted in terms of occupations in the textbooks?*

### **Literature Review**

According to Guía para la incorporación de perspectiva de género (Muñoz López, 2014), the word 'gender' came into use in Spanish in the last three decades. Its adoption has been difficult since there is a lack of an equivalent concept compared to other languages. Despite gender referring to the sociability of sex, rather than merely biological, anatomical, and physiological characteristics, in the Mexican culture the terms gender and sex are usually used as synonyms and are often confused or difficult to comprehend separately.

To talk about gender representation, it is necessary to first define the main concepts that the topic involves. Sex and gender are different concepts. Sex refers to biological and physiological maleness and femaleness, and the anatomic and chromosomic characteristics and differences that distinguish men and women (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2007a; Litosseliti, 2006; Muñoz López et al., 2014;). On the other hand, gender refers to the traits assigned to the sexes (Litosseliti, 2006) and the set of ideas, beliefs, and social attributions for feminine and masculine in every culture (Muñoz López et al., , 2014) which change through time and can be modified since they are learned (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2007b). Gender as a cultural and social construction is defined by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2014,) as "the power relations between men and women, and the norms and values regarding 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles and behaviors" (p.14). Brugeilles and Cromer (2009) state that the social division into masculine and feminine varies enormously among societies as "every society develops its classification on the basis of its own criteria and principles" (p.27).

Gender representation elucidates the qualities, aptitudes, roles and responsibilities associated with men and women in a given context (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009). Representation, according to Yang (2014) "occurs in spoken, written and visual texts. In spoken and written texts, gender can be represented by the choice of words, for example, adjectives, nouns/noun phrases, and verbs" (p.43). In visuals, gender representation relates to the way males and females are portrayed and the number or portrayals related to each gender. Representation of genders is often based on gender stereotypes (Sunderland, 2004, 2006 as cited in Yang, 2014) which are usually overgeneralizations and beliefs about personality traits and about how men and women should act and behave (Blaine, 2007; Muñoz López et al., 2014).

### Hidden Curriculum

Textbooks are a very common element in English language teaching around the world (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994) whose roles and functions in a language curriculum is defined by the learning content and aims, and the students' and teachers' needs and objectives (Cunningsworth, 1995). However, other aspects that influence the curriculum may not be easily perceived. For Cunningsworth (1995) there are ideological positions, conscious and unconscious values and adopted biases and perspectives that form part of any educational program embedded in the actual curriculum--the hidden curriculum. Likewise, Onatra and Peña (2004) refer to hidden curriculum as "that set of attitudes which filter the teaching-learning process during everyday lessons as well as the other activities of school" (p.159). These values, attitudes, norms, rules, ideologies, perspectives, behaviors, and rituals taught in school settings through hidden curriculum can

cover academic and non-academic outcomes and direct or indirect intent (Jančec et al., 2015; Novosel, 2015).

Hidden curriculum in textbooks can be embedded in various elements such as topics, learning activities, examples, texts, and visuals. Gender inequality in ELT textbooks can be conveyed using the language choices in texts and audios, but gender representation can also be seen in the images used to portray males and females and their roles. In fact, some studies on hidden curriculum in ELT and teaching materials have revealed inequalities in socio-cultural content, gender representation and even racial and gender stereotypes (Sayedayn, 2019).

### Research on Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks

Dominguez (2003) analyzed treatment of sexism and treatment of images in EFL/ESL textbooks in a series of three books popular in Canada. She found that there was a balanced male and female presence in the text and illustrations and non-stereotyped male and female roles. The findings also revealed that males and females were allotted a similar amount of talk and that male and female first place occurrences were equally conveyed. In her study, Cook (2015) compared and analyzed EFL textbooks published approximately ten years apart and used in Japan, revealing that there are still more male than female characters and that males are still portrayed more than female characters in language textbooks. In a study comparing twenty English language textbooks in Australia and Hong Kong (Lee & Collins, 2010, as cited in Yang, 2014), the overall results showed that the discrepancy between men and women was not very substantial. However, in many of the books, male characters excessively outnumbered female characters and mentions. Barton and Satwa (2012) analyzed an English language textbook frequently used in secondary education in Uganda recommended by the Ministry of Education. They found that the coursebook showed inequity of gender representation in favour of men and that it is male biased as "it largely maintains a traditional representation of gender roles characterized by women's invisibility and silence, their employment in domestic roles and lower rank occupations, and a negative portrayal of their emotional state" (p.186).

Yang (2014) studied gender representation in two widely used textbook series in Primary English language in Hong Kong. In relation to male and female characters in the illustrations, she discovered that human males were significantly more visible than female in line drawings in both series. Also, in photographs non-human male characters were more represented in one of the series while in the other non-human female characters were significantly more. Yang (2014) also found that adult males and females in the line drawings and photographs in both series were portrayed as engaging in a similar number of occupations. Yet, females were mainly depicted as teachers and in stereotyped professions such as cashier, secretary and nurse while males were illustrated in traditional occupations such as police officers and drivers. Aljuaythin (2018) analyzed two EFL textbooks implemented for elementary students in Saudi Arabia. The results in this study showed that females were considerably underrepresented as compared to males; males were depicted performing activities more frequently than females, and activities and roles for both genders were portrayed stereotypically. The studies on gender representation in English learning textbooks indicate the existence of underrepresentation of females and the prevalence of gender-stereotyped roles in various levels of education.

While there has been broad research on gender representation in EFL/ESL course books, there is very little, if any research available relating to gender representation in EFL textbooks in public elementary education in Mexico. The purpose of this study was to examine whether textbooks equally depict males and females in the images and whether they promote traditional gender stereotypes. Moreover, the aim of the study is to provide information on this issue to contribute to gender awareness in the field.

## **Methodology**

### Research Design

In order to examine male and female representation in the visuals and gender occupational roles portrayed in the illustrations in three ELT textbooks, quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed. First, a quantitative analysis was conducted with reference to visibility of male and female characters in the two types of visuals the books contain: illustrations (color or black and white pictures in books, magazines, etc. that usually accompany the text) and photos (pictures produced using a camera). Secondly, a qualitative analysis regarding gender occupational roles was conducted according to the gender display in the images.

Materials

For this study, three EFL textbooks in early elementary grades (which belong to Cycle 1 whose purpose is contact and familiarization of the language) were used to analyze the representation and portrayal of males and females in textbooks that have been used for English learning in Mexican public schools. The books used for English learning in Cycle 1 in public elementary schools in Mexico are a set of four books: teachers’ book, activity book, a fact book and a story book. The textbooks analyzed were the activity books of the set. These textbooks were intentionally analyzed as they focus on raising students’ awareness of another language and as pertaining to the first stage of learning, which is contact, (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2011) It was sought to examine how this first language contact addresses gender socialization among young learners. These textbooks, published in 2010 and 2011, are designated for English learning; thus, they are only in English. All textbooks used for English learning in public elementary education in Mexico are approved by the Ministry of Education and are employed in many schools across the country which are part of the National English Program (PRONI, for its acronym in Spanish). The selection of the materials, which was done by the researcher, deliberately included textbooks by different publishers. Therefore, the selection ended up incorporating textbooks published by international (Textbooks 2 and 3) and local (Textbook 1) publishing houses.

The textbooks, which happen to be written by women, are presented as follow:

	Grade	Publisher	Year of publication
1. <i>Play and Play 2</i> , Activity book	Second	Editorial Nuevo Mexico	2010
2. <i>Brilliant! Two</i> , Activity book	Second	Santillana	2010
3. <i>Kites 1</i> , Activity book	First	Macmillan	2011

Table 1: Textbooks

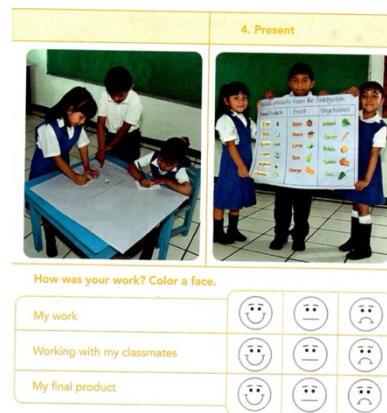
Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection procedures for this study consisted of two parts: data collecting for the frequency of male and female character representation and data collecting for male and female occupational roles attributed to the characters displayed. For the first part, data were gathered in relation to two types of visuals: illustrations and photos depicted in the whole books, each book containing five units and each unit comprising two lessons. In this analysis, frequencies of images were counted in the number of female and male characters displayed, first per unit and then the totals. Then, percentages were obtained. For the next part, male and female occupational roles were identified in the visuals of the three textbooks and their frequencies to analyze the way they depict male and female characters.

Images are used in a slightly different manner in each book. In Textbook 1, the photos are used to present the units and to display the process of task products while illustrations are used for lesson activities and evaluations. In the photos, there is a limited number of characters who appear throughout the book. The illustrations in this textbook include both children and adult human-like characters. There are no leading characters appearing in every unit. However, some characters are recurring in some units.



Figure 1: Examples of illustrations and photos in Textbook 1



In Textbook 2, the photos are only used to display the process of task products while illustrations are used to present the units and for lesson activities. Textbook 2 contains a self-evaluation with no images. Characters in the photos are more diverse and vary in most units. The illustrations in this book include

children and adult human-like characters as well as some anthropomorphic animals which were not considered for analysis given these types of illustrations do not appear across all three books. There are no leading characters in the illustrations, although some characters reappear in some units.



Figure 2. Examples of illustrations and photos in Textbook 2

In Textbook 3, the photos are used to present the finished products and in some lesson activities, whereas illustrations are only used in lesson activities. This book has a self-evaluation section with no images in a review section. The characters in the photos are limited and appear in all the units while characters in the illustrations include children and adult human-like characters. As in the other books, there are no main characters appearing throughout the book, but some appear more than once in some units.



Figure 3. Examples of illustrations and photos in Textbook 3

Content analysis was used in this study to analyze the visual representation of male and female characters in the illustrations and photos as this kind of analysis involves the frequencies of occurrence of specific features. The images that were not clear (either too small or unclear identification of biological sex), in all cases in the illustrations, were excluded from analysis. In this study, a tally was made of the number of male and female characters regardless of the number of times some characters reappear in the unit. The study involves frequency of characters in the illustrations and photos separately to analyze and compare how gender socialization is addressed in illustrations, as the most numerous visuals in the books and thus the ones children are more exposed to, and how gender is represented in photos from English classrooms.

**Findings and discussion**

The findings of this paper and their discussion revolve around the two aspects related to the research questions in the study: gender representation in the visuals and occupational gender roles in the visuals.

Gender Representation in the Visuals.

The analysis regarding male and female characters representation in the illustrations and photos in the EFL textbooks revealed the following results as shown in the tables below:

Frequency of male and female characters				
Unit	Illustrations		Photos	
	males	females	males	females
1	30	29	16	8
2	50	12	16	11
3	12	1	8	17
4	42	21	8	20
5	18	20	7	15
<b>Totals</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>64.7%</b>	<b>35.3%</b>	<b>43.7%</b>	<b>56.3%</b>

Table 2: Textbook 1, frequency of male and female characters

The findings in Table 2 show that in Textbook 1 male characters were represented 152 times while female characters were depicted 83 times in terms of illustrations. Regarding photos, it was found that males were represented 55 times while females were portrayed 71 times. As found in Textbook 1, the visibility of male characters in the illustrations are higher as they were portrayed 64.7% while females were presented 35.3%. On the contrary, women were more displayed than men in the photos. However, the discrepancy (43.7 % vs 56.3%) is not alarming within the context.

Frequency of male and female characters				
Unit	Illustrations		Photos	
	males	females	males	females
1	50	40	15	17
2	76	22	7	10
3	17	20	10	10
4	29	28	11	13
5	7	8	9	14
<b>Totals</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>60.3%</b>	<b>39.7%</b>	<b>44.8%</b>	<b>55.2%</b>

Table 3: Textbook 2, frequency of male and female characters

As mentioned in Table 3 above, in Textbook 2 it was found that male characters were visible 179 times while female characters were identified 118 times in the illustrations. This difference is of high value as it indicates that in Textbook 2 children are considerably more exposed to male characters (60.3%) than they are to female ones (39.7). In the photos, it was found that male representations appeared 52 times while female representations appeared 64 times. Gender representation in the photos is not balanced; yet the difference is not as startling as it is compared to illustrations. Similar to Textbook 1, in this book male characters were more frequent than female characters in the illustrations, but they were slightly less visible than females in the photos.

As shown in Table 4 below, in Textbook 3, the results in the illustrations indicated that males were represented 143 times whilst females were represented 50 times. These numbers indicate that the difference of male characters compared to female characters is alarming (74.1 % compared to 25.9%) and that we

should be concerned about it. In the photos, male and female representation was quite balanced (51.6 % and 48.4 % respectively).

Frequency of male and female characters				
Unit	Illustrations		Photos	
	males	females	males	females
1	56	24	7	5
2	13	8	2	3
3	0	2	2	2
4	47	13	2	2
5	27	3	3	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>74.1%</b>	<b>25.9%</b>	<b>51.6%</b>	<b>48.4%</b>

Table 4: Textbook 3, Frequency of male and female character representations

The overall results reveal two trends across the three books. Firstly, it was found that males are noticeably more visible than females in terms of illustrations. Textbook 1 has a ratio of 1.8 to 1 in favour of men, in Textbook 2 the ratio is 1.5 to 1 and in Textbook 3 the ratio is 2.8 to 1. Therefore, male characters are significantly more visible than females in terms of illustrations in the three EFL textbooks particularly in Textbook 3 whose ratio of visibility of males as compared to females is more than double. These findings support Cook’s (2015) argument that there are still more male characters than female characters portrayed in language textbooks. Taking into consideration that illustrations in the three analyzed textbooks depict the vast majority of the visuals -as illustrations are used for all the activities in the three books and activities constitutes the majority of the books, it can be concluded that the English Language Teaching textbooks analyzed in the study show gender discrepancy.

Secondly, the other trend indicated that females are slightly more represented than males in terms of photos as they were moderately more portrayed in Textbook 1 and 2 and both genders were equally represented in Textbook 3. These findings reveal a more balanced representation between male and female characters as compared to illustrations which raise some additional research questions such as what causes the difference in presentation between photos and illustrations? And, how are the photos and illustrations related to the authors’ values and mindsets?

Gender Occupational Roles in the Visuals

Table 5 below presents the findings related to male and female occupations portrayed in the three textbooks.

	Female roles	Male roles	
<b>Textbook 1</b>	Teacher (10) Veterinarian(4) Nurse (2) Dentist (1) Photographer (1) Actress (1)	Firefighter (4) Teacher (3) Farmer (3) Dentist (2) Janitor (2) Doctor (2) Photographer (1)	Veterinarian (1) Taxi driver (1) Mechanic (1) Construction worker (1) Architect (1) Surveyor (1)
<b>Textbook 2</b>	Teacher (14) Nurse (1)	Teacher (5) Doctor (2) Sower (2)	Farmer (1) Hunter (1)
<b>Textbook 3</b>	Nurse (4) Salesclerk (3) Cook (1)	Firefighter (14) Doctor (4) Chef (4) Major (1)	

Table 5: Male and female characters’ occupations

Overall, there are two sets of findings. First, males were depicted in a larger number of visualized occupations than females. For example, characters in Textbook 1 showed 13 jobs with respect to men compared to six jobs for women. Textbooks 2 and 3 show five occupations for males compared to two for females and four for men compared to three for women respectively. Second, only four occupations - teachers, dentists, photographers, and veterinarians involved both males and females. However, females were significantly more related to teaching than males. Females were exclusively depicted as nurses, actresses, salesclerks and cooks while male occupational roles included farmers, janitors, taxi drivers, mechanics, construction workers, firefighters, architects, surveyors, sowers, hunters, chefs, doctors and majors. The results also indicate that male occupations were more active -firefighters, taxi drivers, hunters- than female occupations and that male occupations were more related to leadership than they were to females. For example, the term nurse was associated with females and doctor was associated with males. Similarly, cook goes together with women whereas chef goes with men. These findings are in line with those of Mkuchu (2009) that males are more represented than females in relation to power and leadership. We can conclude that occupations presented in the textbooks show traditional perceptions of genders and stereotypes; women are teachers, nurses, salesclerks and cooks and men are firefighters, mechanics, doctors, architects, chefs and majors. Consequently, this reality may support gender stereotyping.

### **Conclusions**

This study attempted to investigate gender representation in three EFL textbooks used in Mexican public elementary schools. For this purpose, activity books from different publishing houses used in first and second grade in public elementary schools were analyzed. In relation to Research Question 1 (Are male and female characters equally represented in the visuals of the selected textbooks?), the findings revealed that there is not a balanced representation of males and females in the illustrations and photos in the three books. Males are more visible than females in the illustrations in the three books. Additionally, the findings revealed that females are slightly more frequent than males in two books in terms of photos while males and females were equally portrayed in one of the books. Regarding Research Question 2 (How are male and female roles depicted in terms of occupations in the textbooks?), results indicated that male characters were displayed in a larger number of occupations than female characters in the three books. Furthermore, the findings showed stereotyped gender roles depicting females in traditional nursing and caring occupations and males in traditionally male-dominated jobs.

Gender and language studies in Mexico on English language textbooks are scarce, especially for the analysis of EFL primary textbooks which may result in little awareness on gender issues among socialization agents and among curriculum developers, material writers and publishers as well as teachers and educators.

Taking into account the Mexican context, gender inequalities are still substantial (Hietanen & Pick, 2015) and since children develop gender stereotyped awareness at early ages (Leach, 2003), textbooks can be an important tool in contributing to education and social change (Mizra, 2004). Given that there is still work to be done to reduce gender bias in textbooks and for them to portray women in more occupational and active roles (Leach, 2003), ELT teachers need to be aware of gender and language use and gender representations in EFL materials and teaching practices in order to foster gender equality in the classroom. To approach gender equality and to contribute to a better gender perspective, language teachers could: reduce stereotyped messages and images, balance the representation of men and women in messages and images, include images that portray men in domestic, family and care of people environments and women in decision-making and management positions, promote respect for difference, diversity and gender equality, equally include men and women in public, economic, political and international contexts, and integrate the different ethnic groups, ages and diversity of women and men (Muñoz López et al., 2014).

Due to the number of textbooks analyzed, generalizations of gender bias do not account for the public primary education sector. Nevertheless, this study provides a contribution in the field. Further research is suggested to include gender representation in texts and reading passages as well as gender representation in EFL textbooks in higher levels.



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