

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The representation of gender in educational materials, particularly textbooks, has been a subject of ongoing research and discussion. Research indicates that these materials often reflect and perpetuate societal norms and biases, which can significantly influence students' perceptions of gender roles and identities. This concern is particularly relevant in language textbooks, where the portrayal of characters and scenarios can shape young learners' understanding of gender dynamics and contribute to either the reinforcement or challenge of existing stereotypes. By adopting a critical lens, educators and policymakers can work towards creating more inclusive and empowering educational resources that foster gender equity and social justice within the classroom and beyond. The analysis of the textbook images revealed a stark gender imbalance, with male characters featured significantly more often than female characters and often depicted in positions of authority, leadership, and high-status occupations, while female characters were frequently shown in domestic or supportive roles.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Language Textbooks, Gender Stereotypes, Visual Analysis, Educational Equity

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of gender in educational materials, particularly textbooks, has been a subject of ongoing research and discussion. Research indicates that these materials often reflect and perpetuate societal norms and biases, which can significantly influence students' perceptions of gender roles and identities in their local contexts (Rong et al., 2021). This concern is particularly relevant in language textbooks, where the portrayal of characters and scenarios can shape young learners' understanding of gender dynamics and contribute to either the reinforcement or challenge of existing stereotypes (Hussain et al., 2023). Moreover, the importance of critically analyzing the content within these textbooks cannot be overstated, as they are key vehicles for transmitting cultural values and norms that underpin gender relations, thus necessitating a continuous examination to ensure equitable representations that do not favor one gender over another (Farnon, 2021). The careful scrutiny of gender representation in language textbooks is crucial, as these materials have the potential to either reinforce or challenge the traditional gender scripts that students internalize, ultimately shaping their worldviews and opportunities (Yang, 2011). By adopting a critical lens, educators and policymakers can work towards creating more inclusive and empowering educational resources that foster gender equity and social justice within the classroom and beyond.

However, some argue that the representation of gender in language textbooks may not necessarily reflect or perpetuate societal biases, but rather serve as a reflection of the existing gender dynamics within the local context. These critics suggest that textbook

content, rather than being a driver of gender norms, may simply mirror the realities and power structures that are already prevalent in society. Consequently, they contend that a critical analysis of gender representation in language textbooks should consider the broader cultural and historical factors that shape gender roles and identities, rather than solely focusing on the content of the textbooks themselves. While this perspective has merit, it is crucial to also examine how the textbook content, in turn, may reinforce or challenge these existing gender dynamics, thereby influencing the perceptions and attitudes of young learners. A comprehensive analysis should consider both the reflective and the formative aspects of gender representation in language textbooks (Prendergast, 1996).

This research paper aims to conduct a critical analysis of gender representation in language textbooks, focusing on the Indonesian context. To achieve this goal, the study will assess the linguistic and visual elements present in the textbooks, examining how these elements contribute to the construction of gender identities and roles, while also considering the implications for educational equity and social justice within the classroom environment (Bursuc, 2013).

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the representation of gender in Indonesian language textbooks. The analysis will focus on the examination of linguistic features, such as the use of gendered pronouns, gender-specific language, and the frequency and portrayal of male and female characters. Additionally, the study will analyze the visual elements within the textbooks, including the depiction of gender roles, occupations, and power dynamics in the accompanying illustrations and images. The combination of linguistic and visual analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender is represented and potentially reinforced or challenged within the selected language textbooks.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Gender Representation in Textbook using Pictures

The analysis of the textbook images revealed a stark gender imbalance, with male characters featured significantly more often than female characters. Male characters were also more likely to be depicted in positions of authority, leadership, and high-status occupations, while female characters were often shown in domestic or supportive roles. This pattern suggests that the visual representation in the textbooks reinforces traditional gender hierarchies and stereotypes, potentially shaping students' perceptions of appropriate gender roles and opportunities.

Furthermore, the illustrations often depicted gender-specific activities, with males engaged in outdoor, physical, or technical tasks, and females in indoor, domestic, or nurturing tasks. This dichotomous portrayal of gender roles fails to recognize the diversity of interests, abilities, and aspirations that individuals of all genders possess, and can limit the aspirations and opportunities available to students (Silberstang, 2011). The textbooks should strive to depict a more balanced and diverse representation of gender roles and occupations, showcasing individuals of all genders engaged in a wide range of activities

and positions (Dogucu et al., 2021). This would help challenge traditional stereotypes and encourage students to explore their interests and pursue their goals without being limited by gender-based expectations. Incorporating more gender-inclusive and progressive representations in language textbooks can empower students to envision a more equitable and inclusive society, where individuals are recognized and valued for their unique talents and contributions, regardless of their gender identity.

3.2. Gender Representation in Textbook Language

The linguistic analysis of the textbooks revealed similar patterns of gender representation. Male characters were more likely to be referenced using generic or gender-neutral language, while female characters were often identified using gender-specific terms. This suggests an underlying bias that positions male characters as the default or normative, while female characters are marked as the "other". Additionally, male characters were more frequently portrayed in active, agentic roles, while female characters were more commonly depicted in passive or dependent roles. This linguistic framing can reinforce the perception of males as the central actors and decision-makers, while females are relegated to more subordinate positions.

Such gendered language patterns not only reflect but also perpetuate societal norms and power dynamics, shaping the way students perceive and internalize gender roles and expectations. To address this issue, language textbooks should strive to use more gender-inclusive and equitable language, such as employing gender-neutral pronouns, avoiding gender-specific terms when unnecessary, and ensuring a balanced representation of active and passive language for all genders. By fostering a more inclusive linguistic environment, textbooks can contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills and promote a more equitable understanding of gender identities and roles.

3.3. Gender Inclusive Textbook Criteria

To create more gender-inclusive and equitable language textbooks, the representation of gender identities and roles should be carefully considered and expanded upon. Textbooks should strive for a balanced, diverse, and nuanced portrayal of gender, both in textual and visual elements, avoiding stereotypical or limited depictions. The use of gender-neutral pronouns and language should be employed when referring to individuals, occupations, or activities, unless the specific gender identity is directly relevant to the context. Textbooks should include a wide range of gender-diverse characters engaged in a diverse array of tasks, roles, and positions, actively challenging traditional gender norms and expanding students' perspectives on the breadth of human experiences and capabilities (Boyd et al., 2014). Additionally, the representation of gender should account for intersectionality, ensuring that gender is considered alongside other salient identity factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, and more (Fernandez et al., 2016). Importantly, textbooks should incorporate positive, empowering, and inspiring portrayals of individuals of all gender identities, highlighting their unique strengths, talents, and valuable contributions to society. Continuous review and updating of textbook content is necessary to reflect the evolving societal understandings and increased acceptance of diverse gender identities and expressions. By adopting these comprehensive and inclusive approaches, language textbooks can play a

pivotal role in fostering an educational environment that promotes true gender equity, social justice, and the holistic development and empowerment of all students, regardless of their gender identity.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings and discussions presented in this paper highlight the need for more gender-inclusive and equitable representation in language textbooks. The stark imbalances and stereotypical portrayals observed in both visual and linguistic elements of the analyzed textbooks suggest that they may be inadvertently shaping students' perceptions and limiting their understanding of the diverse range of gender identities and roles in society. To address this issue, language textbooks should strive to incorporate a balanced, diverse, and nuanced depiction of gender, employing gender-neutral language and including positive, empowering, and intersectional representations of individuals of all gender identities. By adopting a comprehensive and inclusive approach, language textbooks can play a crucial role in fostering an educational environment that promotes true gender equity, social justice, and the holistic development and empowerment of all students.

Future researchers should consider expanding the analysis of gender representation in language textbooks to include a wider range of educational materials across different subject areas and grade levels. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender norms and stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged throughout the educational system. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews with teachers and students, could offer valuable insights into how the textbook content influences their perceptions and experiences related to gender identity and expression. Exploring the intersections of gender with other salient identity factors, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, would also contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the issue. Ultimately, a multifaceted and longitudinal approach to investigating gender representation in educational materials could inform the development of more equitable and inclusive curricula and pedagogical practices, empowering students of all gender identities to reach their full potential.

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