

Constructing Gender Identities: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of English Textbooks in Ekiti State Public Primary Schools

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of gender identities in English textbooks used in primary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria, through the lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and transitivity in Systemic Functional Linguistics. The research investigates how language and textual representations in these textbooks perpetuate or challenge traditional gender roles, particularly the portrayal of men as active decision-makers and women as passive followers. The study reveals patterns of gendered power dynamics embedded in the textbooks. Findings indicate a persistent reinforcement of patriarchal norms, with men predominantly depicted as authoritative, economically active, and decision-making figures, while women are often relegated to subordinate, domestic, or supportive roles. These representations not only reflect but also perpetuate societal gender inequalities, shaping young learners' perceptions of gender roles. The study underscores the urgent need for curriculum reform to promote more equitable and inclusive representations of gender in educational materials. This research highlights the critical role of language in shaping social realities and calls for a conscious effort to disrupt traditional gender ideologies in educational discourse.

Keywords: Gender identities, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), transitivity, English textbooks, primary education, gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms, curriculum reform.

Introduction

The roles of textbooks in children's education cannot be overstated and has been highlighted in scholarship. Textbooks are fundamental components of the educational process, and they work in tandem to shape students' learning experiences. Textbooks provide structured content, reference materials, and a standardized curriculum, playing pivotal roles in ensuring that children receive a comprehensive and well-rounded education. Stromquist, et al. (1998) say that a textbook used in the classroom by a teacher can significantly impact students' ideas and mindset. However, the question of gender as a factor in language education continues to be of interest to researchers (Rifkin, 1998: 218). Textbooks can reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles by the way they represent the different genders. For example, they may portray women as homemakers and men

as breadwinners or, conversely, show women and men in diverse professional roles. Consequently, the representation of gender roles can influence how students perceive what is considered "normal" or acceptable in terms of gender behavior. The way gender is presented in textbooks can significantly influence students' perceptions of themselves and others. It can affect their self-esteem, aspirations, and attitudes toward gender equality. Therefore, gender is socially constructed. It is not an innate or biologically predetermined aspect of an individual's identity. Instead, it is a social and cultural construct that encompasses the roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities associated with being male, female, or non-binary. Gender construction refers to the process by which these ideas and roles are formed and perpetuated within a given society. Therefore, gender plays a central role in the socialisation of people, including children (Mineshima, 2008).

One of the means through which gender identities and power relations are constructed is language. Language serves as a primary tool for communication and expression within any society. Nevertheless, language is not just a neutral medium for communication; it also plays a fundamental role in shaping and reflecting the culture and beliefs of a society. Language is an important aspect of gender (Connell 2008: 9), through which individuals make sense of their ideas and feelings about the world (Holmes, 2008: 339; Mineshima, 2008; Montgomery, 1995: 223). 'Language can be a primary factor through which gender biases are explicitly and implicitly perpetrated' (McClure, 1992:39). Language provides the words and terms that people use to describe and categorize gender. In many languages, there are specific words and pronouns for male, female, and, in some cases, non-binary genders. These linguistic distinctions help reinforce the idea that gender is a fundamental aspect of identity. Again, language often includes expressions, idioms, and sayings that reflect and perpetuate gender roles and stereotypes. For instance, phrases like "man up" or "act like a lady" convey societal expectations of how individuals should behave based on their perceived gender. The way language is used in literature, media, and everyday communication can either reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The normative gender can manifest in characters and stories presented by images and texts (Earles, 2017).

From a young age, children are socialized into their society's understanding of gender, both at home and in school, through language. They learn not only the words associated with gender but also the associated behaviors, expectations, and roles. Language is not merely a passive reflection of pre-existing gender concepts; it actively contributes to the creation and perpetuation of those concepts. In English textbooks used in primary schools, both linguistic and visual representations are used. It is, therefore, important to see the portrayal of gender through words, sentences and images in the textbooks used in public primary schools in Ekiti state, Nigeria. This study, therefore, investigates how both masculine and feminine genders are perpetuated in the classrooms by textbooks, focusing on English textbooks and lessons at the primary level in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Understanding this relationship between language and gender construction is essential for promoting gender equality and inclusivity in society.

Literature review

Research in the area of gender and education shows evidence that ‘within schools, textbooks play a significant role in the gender socialization of children’ (Lee and Collins, 2008). The impact of textbooks on the development of learners both cognitively and behaviorally has been widely researched (Pavešić and Cankar, 2022; Lee and Collins, 2008). For instance, Lee and Collins (2008: 128) affirm that ‘Learners, who generally attach great credibility and authority to educational materials, tend to absorb and assimilate the materials in minute detail without comment, and to be susceptible to their influence’. Ann-Katrin and Aiso (2018) suggest that textbooks should be considered an important covariate in educational research and that textbook choice is a relevant factor for educational practice.

Gender representation in English language textbooks has been equally widely researched (Johansson and Malmsjo, 2009; Lee and Collins, 2008; Pihlaja, 2007; Rifkin, 1998) albeit mainly in the European and Asian contexts. These academics have demonstrated that gender bias frequently appears in English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks, where women are frequently stereotyped and given stereotypical roles and responses, and where men are overrepresented (Ansary and Babaii, 2003; Johansson and Malmsjo, 2009). According to Gupta and Yin (1990), men typically hold more influential positions and have access to a wider variety of career options, whereas women are typically viewed as less valuable (Harashima, 2005).

In the Nigerian context, studies on gender representation in textbooks have often taken an educational perspective (Ogunyemi, 2019; Ogbonaya-Iduma, 2014), mainly comparing roles associated with both genders. These studies have highlighted the disparity between males and females and emphasized that females are largely discriminated against in the areas of domination in characterization, undesirable qualities, representation, invisibility, and occupational/professional and domestic stereotypes. However, adequate attention has not been paid to how language and images foreground gender representations in English textbooks and classroom discourses. This study, therefore, considers a critical discourse analysis of English language textbooks at the primary level in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The objectives are: 1. to identify and analyze the linguistic features relating to the representation of gender in the textbooks; 2. to describe the ideological implications of the linguistic features in the representation of male and female characters in texts and stories. The representation of gender in English language textbooks and teaching in public primary schools in Nigeria is an important socio-linguistic topic that reflects broader societal attitudes and influences students' perceptions of gender roles and identities. The examination of gendered language in English textbooks in public primary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria, is essential for understanding how linguistic and sociocultural factors intersect in the educational context.

Methodology

The books purposively chosen are *Macmillan Brilliant English Text (MBET)*, *Primary English for Nigerian Schools (PENS)* and *Macmillan New Primary English (MNPE)* because they are the major English texts used in Primary schools in Ekiti state.. English language

textbooks for primary 4, 5 and 6 are purposively chosen for this study. This is because it is at this level that passages with discursive attributes are mostly used. All the passages are selected in each of the textbooks for analysis. Most of the books are structured in modular or unit forms that teach the skills of reading, writing, listening, speech and structure. Passages are often found in the teaching of skills other than reading. Notably, there is uniformity in the textbooks used in all public primary schools in Ekiti State.

This study deploys qualitative method of analysis. For the qualitative method of analysis, this study adopts Lazar's (2005) approach to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The task of feminist CDA is to examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter-)resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk. Feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) is interested in the ways that gender ideology and gendered relations of power are represented, negotiated, and challenged in texts and conversations about social practices, interpersonal relationships, and people's social and personal identities. A critical feminist examination of speech in these fields is predicated on the idea of "gender relationality," which can operate either overtly or covertly (Lazar, 2000). Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis focuses on framing the social and lexical re-contextualisation of the existing gender frames. It challenges and threatens the status quo and at the same time reconstructs disciplines that might bring women and men on an equal platform by accepting the principles of dominant neo-liberal dogma in the context of gender emancipation and other social issues. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis has the aim of advancing rich critical analysis of the complex works of power and ideology in discourse (Lazar, 2007). It challenges the existing social practices regarding pre-defined gender expectations and aims to transform such practices.

Poststructuralist conceptions of discourse as socially constitutive signifying practices have been fruitfully combined with linguistic approaches in many CDA and gender and language studies. Feminist CDA takes a view of discourse as being one (among several) element of social practices; of particular interest to discourse, analysts are those aspects of social practices that are discursive in character, and which are discursively represented in particular ideological ways (Chouliariaki & Fairclough, 1999). Discourse constitutes (and is constituted by) social situations, institutions, and structures (Fairclough, 1992). The notion of constitution applies in the sense that every act of meaning-making through language and other forms of semiosis contributes to the reproduction, maintenance, resistance, and transformation of social order. The discursive constitution of the social can be analysed broadly in terms of representations, relationships, and identities (Fairclough, 1989, 1992), following Halliday's metafunctions of language use.

The Hallidayan linguistics approach engages language in relation to the social interactions which the language encodes and the cultures within which these social interactions are embedded. The four main theoretical claims of SFL are:

- i. language is functional;
- ii. the function is to make meaning;

iii. these functions are influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded; and

iv. using language is a semiotic process of making meanings by choice (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). In the context of this study, certain meanings are generated through the use of language. Therefore, for the analysis of texts in this study, lexicalisation and transitivity choices are considered.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Textbooks serve as powerful tools for socialization in education, transmitting not only academic knowledge but also cultural values and societal norms. As authoritative resources, they reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies, including gender roles, by presenting certain behaviors, occupations, and identities as "appropriate" for boys and girls. Through stories, images, and language, textbooks subtly shape children's perceptions of gender, positioning men as leaders, problem-solvers, and public figures while often relegating women to domestic, supportive, or passive roles. These representations normalize gendered expectations early in life, influencing aspirations, self-concept, and interactions. Textbooks act as both mirrors of existing societal structures and agents of their perpetuation, making their critical analysis vital for fostering equity and challenging stereotypes. In this section, I consider how gender ideologies are reinforced via the instrumentality of language in textbooks used in primary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Reinforcement of Stereotypical Gender Roles

In the textbooks under consideration, stereotypical gender roles are often reinforced via linguistic means. Males are represented as the default in professions, while women are confined to domestic roles. Male characters are the decision-makers, and female characters are helpers.

Career aspirations: males as high-profile professionals versus females as teachers

If textbooks predominantly depict men as engineers, doctors, or leaders and women as teachers, nurses, or homemakers, children internalize these roles as "natural.". Examples of how career aspirations in the texts can reinforce stereotypical gender roles are presented below.

1. My father is a pilot. He works with Virgin Nigeria Airlines in Lagos. My mother is a teacher. PENS
2. A successful businessman was growing old and knew it was time to choose a successor to take over his business.... He decided to do something. The seed, PENS pg 37-38
3. Wilcox's father is a sailor in a ship named 'River Ogun'. MNPE4, Pg. 14
4. The senior engineer at the Kanji Dam took the children round. He told them that the dam took four years to build. PENS
5. Our headmistress is Mrs Boyo and my class teacher is Mrs Amu. My School PENS pg. 42

The examples above reinforce stereotypical gender roles by associating specific careers and societal roles with men and women in ways that reflect and perpetuate traditional norms. In

example 1, piloting, a high-status, technical, and adventurous role, is assigned to the father, while the teaching profession is assigned to the mother. This is foregrounded by the choice of attributive relational processes with *my father* as the carrier of the attribute, *pilot* and *my mother*, as the carrier of the attribute, *teacher*. This is also replicated in example 3. This form of representation mirrors the stereotype that men dominate prestigious, "masculine" fields, while women are confined to supportive, "feminine" roles, such as teaching. In the examples above, women are mainly represented in relational processes (e.g., "my mother is a teacher"), framing women's roles as passive states, while men's roles involve action. Men are represented as actors in material processes (e.g., "father works"). This form of representation reinforces the idea that men are suited for high-status professions and risk-taking, while women belong in roles tied to education and caregiving. Again, the term "businessman" and the male pronoun "he" in example 2, frame entrepreneurship and corporate leadership as inherently male domains. The absence of gender-neutral terms like "businessperson" implies that wealth, power, and decision-making are reserved for men. Depicting an older man selecting a successor reinforces intergenerational male dominance in business, excluding women from narratives of economic authority. In example 3, While female leadership (headmistress) is shown, both roles are within education—a field stereotypically associated with women. The text reinforce the trope that women's leadership is limited to "soft," care-driven sectors rather than diverse industries like STEM, politics, or business. The absence of male teachers or administrators might subtly normalize the idea that teaching is "women's work," discouraging men from entering the profession. These examples socialize children into believing that men belong in public, high-status, or economically dominant roles (pilots, businessmen, laborers). Women belong in private, supportive, or unpaid roles (teachers, homemakers). If textbooks predominantly depict men as engineers, doctors, or leaders and women as teachers, nurses, or homemakers, children internalize these roles as "natural." Girls may limit their career ambitions to "feminine" fields, while boys may feel pressured to avoid caregiving or artistic roles. These textbook excerpts reproduce and legitimize patriarchal ideologies by linguistically encoding gendered hierarchies. They socialize children into accepting unequal power dynamics as "normal," limiting aspirations for girls and reinforcing toxic expectations for boys. To disrupt this cycle, textbooks must consciously challenge these discourses through inclusive language, diverse role models, and critical engagement with gender norms.

Women as belonging to domestic spheres versus men as belonging to public spheres

Traditionally, gender roles have been constructed along the lines of private/domestic (associated with women) and public (associated with men). These distinctions have evolved over time. Gendered division of labor in textbook narratives (e.g., women cooking, men working outside) reinforces the idea that unpaid care work is women's responsibility. Women as actors of material processes depicting domestic chores such as *cook*, *help*, among others.

6. Women **were cooking** and men were arranging chairs and tables. MBPE6, A traditional marriage, pg 6

7. One man, named Jim, was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his wife the story. She **helped** him get a pot, soil, and compost.... PENS, Pg 38
8. The women in the compound **take turns to cook** the large family meals. MNPE4, Pg. 50.
9. Harwa: you must clear up your plates now or else...
Inua: I won't! Boys are not supposed to do such jobs.
Inua: Harwa, you should be doing all the housework. You are going to become a wife and a mother. (MNPE4), pg. 11
10. My mother **buys** our clothes, **cooks** our meals, and **takes care of the home**. My family pg. 24

Women have historically been associated with the home, caregiving, child-rearing, and household management. In example 6, both women and men are represented as actors of material processes were cooking and were arranging respectively. This representation reinforces gendered division of labour. Women are linked to domestic/private tasks (cooking), while men handle organizational/public roles (arranging furniture). The parallel structure ("women were... men were...") naturalizes this division as normative, masking potential power imbalances. In example 7, Jim is centred as the primary agent (receiving, acting, narrating), while his wife is relegated to a supportive role ("helped"). This reflects patriarchal norms where men lead/initiate action, and women assist, reinforcing gendered hierarchies in decision-making. Example 8 positions cooking as a collective female responsibility, naturalizing women's labour in domestic spaces. The absence of men in this process reinforces the privatization of care work as inherently feminine. The conversation in example 9 essentializes gender roles. Inua uses relational clauses to frame housework as incompatible with masculinity ("boys are not supposed to") and ties Harwa's identity to reproductive labour ("wife and mother"). It reinforces patriarchal ideology by policing labor based on gender and conditioning girls into accepting domesticity as their "natural" future. Women are systematically associated with cooking/domestic tasks, while men are linked to public/organizational roles (Examples 6, 8). Men are positioned as primary actors (Jim in Example 7; boys in Example 9), while women's roles are supportive or obligatory. Language naturalizes these roles through material/relational processes, and conditioning expectations (e.g., Harwa's future as a wife/mother in Example 9). The implication of this is that boys may grow up undervaluing domestic labor, while girls may accept unequal household burdens as inevitable. Men have traditionally dominated public life, including politics, business, and leadership roles.

Men as decision makers and providers versus women as passive and subordinate

Femininity is often linked to passivity, nurturing, and emotional labor, while masculinity is associated with strength, rationality, and authority. Men are consistently portrayed as active, authoritative figures who make decisions, provide for their families, and control resources. Their roles are tied to leadership, economic contribution, and public action. Women are often depicted as passive, dependent, and confined to domestic or supportive roles. Their agency is minimized, and their contributions are either objectified (e.g., the daughter's beauty) or devalued (e.g., the

mother's housework). Texts portraying men as decision-makers (e.g., "Father decides," "The king rules") and women as passive followers legitimize patriarchal authority. Examples are found below.

11. There was a chief who had a beautiful daughter. Many young men wanted to marry her, but the chief thought, 'they are not good for my daughter'. Why fire and rain are enemies pg 53
12. He is responsible for feeding us. He also pays our school fees and the rent of our house in Calabar. Major decisions on matters concerning our education and welfare are taken by my father.
13. Wilcox father drove his car to the wharf. His wife, Wilcox and his sister were in the car. The car was to be driven back home by Ada, his wife. NMPE, Wilcox travels in a ship, pg 14
14. One man, named Jim, was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his wife the story.
15. Kalu lived with his poor parents in a riverine village. His father was a poor fisherman, and his mother was just a housewife who did not do anything to bring in money. The family unit (1) page 55

In example 11, the chief is the active decision-maker with authority over his daughter's fate, represented as the possessor of the possessive relational process. The daughter is the possessed entity in the possessive relational process ("had a beautiful daughter"). She is objectified and framed as a possession. The chief is portrayed as the dominant figure who controls his daughter's future, reinforcing patriarchal norms where men hold power over women's lives. The daughter is passive and objectified, reduced to her beauty and marital value. Her agency is absent, and her role is limited to being a prize for men. This reflects traditional gender roles where men are decision-makers and women depend on male authority. He (father) is the actor in material processes ("is responsible for feeding," "pays," "taken by"). He is the primary provider and decision-maker. Us (family) are the beneficiaries in the processes. They are passive recipients of the father's actions. The father is depicted as the sole provider and decision-maker, reinforcing the stereotype of men as breadwinners and leaders. The family, particularly the mother and children, are portrayed as dependent on the father, with no mention of their contributions or agency. This perpetuates the idea that men are naturally suited to leadership and economic roles, while women and children are passive and subordinate. In example 12, *Wilcox's father* is the actor in a material process ("drove his car"). He is the active driver and decision-maker. The father is portrayed as the primary actor, initiating the journey and holding authority. Ada, the wife, is given a role but only in the context of returning home, suggesting her actions are less significant or subordinate to the father's. This reflects traditional gender roles where men lead and women follow, even when they are given some agency. In example 14, Jim is the actor in material processes ("was there," "received," "went home," "told"). He is an active participant and storyteller. His wife: Goal in a verbal process ("told his wife"). She is the passive recipient of Jim's story. Jim is portrayed as the central figure who experiences events and shares them with his wife, reinforcing his agency and authority. The wife is passive, with no active role in the narrative. She is merely a listener, reflecting traditional gender

roles where men are storytellers and women are silent or supportive. This perpetuates the idea that men are the primary actors in public and private spheres, while women are relegated to passive, domestic roles. In example 15, Kalu's father: Actor in a relational process ("was a poor fisherman"). He is given an identity tied to work, even if it is low-status. Kalu's mother: Actor in a relational process ("was just a housewife"). Her role is minimized and framed as non-contributory ("did not do anything to bring in money"). The father is acknowledged for his work, even if it is not lucrative, while the mother's role as a housewife is devalued and dismissed as unproductive. This reflects patriarchal norms that undervalue domestic labor and reinforce the idea that women's contributions are less important than men's. The use of "just a housewife" diminishes the mother's role, perpetuating stereotypes that women's work is insignificant compared to men's. These examples reflect and perpetuate traditional gender roles that privilege men and marginalize women. The language used reinforces patriarchal ideologies, normalizing male dominance and female subordination. Such representations contribute to the systemic inequality of women by framing their roles as secondary and less significant. Girls may internalize passivity, while boys are socialized to equate masculinity with control and action. Challenging these narratives requires reimagining gender roles in discourse to reflect more equitable and diverse representations.

The supremacy of the man

In many older texts, the use of "man" was standard and not necessarily intended to exclude women. However, in contemporary contexts, this usage is increasingly seen as outdated and problematic. The ideological implication here is that language is not neutral but reflects and reinforces power dynamics. The choice to use "man" instead of more inclusive terms can signal resistance to or ignorance of these dynamics.

16. **Man**'s major fight for survival has been against nature and the environment. Nature has thrown wind, rain and storms in the path of **man**. MNPE4, pg. 145
17. **Man** is a religious being. Religion tames **man** and modifies his life. Without religion, **man** will not be much different from the animals in the bush. MBPE6, pg 14

In example 16, the use of "man" as a generic term for humanity reflects a patriarchal linguistic tradition that centers male experiences as universal. This excludes women and non-binary individuals from the narrative, reinforcing the ideological assumption that men are the default representatives of humanity. The phrase "man's major fight" positions men as the primary agents of survival, sidelining the contributions and struggles of women and other genders in historical and environmental contexts. In example 17, the repeated use of "man" as a generic term excludes women and non-binary individuals from the discussion of religious identity and spirituality. The possessive pronoun "his" further reinforces this exclusion, implying that religious and moral development is a male-centric experience. The text constructs a hierarchy where "man" (implicitly men) is elevated above animals through religion, but this elevation is framed in masculine terms, ignoring the role of women in spiritual and moral development. The use of "man" as a generic term reflects a historical tradition where male experiences and perspectives were seen as the default or norm. This usage can perpetuate the invisibility or marginalization of women and non-binary

individuals, reinforcing patriarchal structures. While "man" is intended to represent all of humanity, it can implicitly exclude or diminish the presence of women and other genders, suggesting that men are the primary or default subjects of discourse. Feminist scholars and advocates for inclusive language have critiqued the use of "man" as a generic term, arguing that it reinforces gender hierarchies and excludes non-male perspectives. This has led to a shift toward more gender-neutral terms like "humanity," "people," or "humans."

Conclusion

Having considered the construction of gender identities in English textbooks used in public primary schools in Ekiti State, the study shows that pupils are socialized into unequal gender roles. The textbooks perpetuate a cycle of gender inequality that stifles individual potential and societal progress. Socializing children into rigid roles ensures the intergenerational reproduction of inequality, as adults replicate textbook norms in families and institutions. Normalizing male leadership discourages girls from aspiring to political roles, sustaining male-dominated governance. Occupational segregation perpetuates wage gaps and restricts economic mobility for women. Underrepresentation of non-conforming identities (e.g., working mothers, stay-at-home fathers) marginalizes diverse experiences. Children outside traditional norms may feel invisible or stigmatized, fostering shame or alienation. Highlighting these implications underscores the urgency of reimagining textbooks as tools for equity rather than instruments of oppression. This study, therefore, recommends diversifying gender roles in stories, images, and exercises (e.g., female engineers, male nurses) and the use of gender-neutral language (e.g., "firefighter" instead of "fireman"). The Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistic analysis exposes these patterns and provides a foundation for advocating transformative changes in educational materials.

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