

# Gender Representation in English Textbooks: A Qualitative Synthesis of Current Research in China

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**To cite this article:**

Wei Yan-huan. Gender Representation in English Textbooks: A Qualitative Synthesis of Current Research in China. *International Journal of Secondary Education*. Vol. 10, No. 2, 2022, pp. 84-90. doi: 10.11648/j.ijsedu.20221002.14

**Received:** April 10, 2022; **Accepted:** May 23, 2022; **Published:** May 31, 2022

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**Abstract:** Textbooks are not only the main carrier of knowledge but also the major vehicle that embody the social culture, values and ideology. The presentation of gender in textbooks can play an important role in the formation of individual gender perceptions. In the past two decades, studies on gender representation in English textbooks were found conducted vastly across the globe, and nearly all of which have revealed gender stereotypes and gender bias as well as their further impact on students' gender value. This review was conducted in December 2021 using CNKI database. In this review, eleven studies focused on gender representation in English textbooks that conducted in the Chinese teaching context were identified. Research subjects, the theoretical foundations, the research designs, findings and suggestions were analyzed. Suggestions as well as implications related to future research were provided. It is recommended first that the scope of research objects should be expanded, covering English textbooks for childhood education, higher education and vocational education and so forth. Further, researchers shall conduct more comparative studies, including comparison of different versions of textbooks published in China as well as the comparison of different textbooks at home and abroad. Finally, it's highly suggested to collect data from decision-makers as well as stakeholders in the educational process.

**Keywords:** Gender Representation, English Textbooks, CNKI, Literature Review

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## 1. Introduction

With the accelerating progress of social and economic development, gender issues have increasingly drawn public attention and gender equality has become a goal to which many civilized countries are committed and a universal value to which they adhere. Gender equality is "not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world" [1]. The United Nations has taken gender equality as one of its 17 goals in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, and has made access to quality education for girls and boys and the elimination of gender disparities in education one of the key pursuits under its education goals [1]. In China, gender equality in education is also one of the main objectives as listed in the *China Women's Development Programme (2021-2030)*, which requires that the basic state policy of gender equality be fully implemented in education, that gender equality in schools and universities be comprehensively promoted, and that the awareness of gender

equality among teachers and students be significantly enhanced.

The State Council pointed out in *Gender Equality and Women's Development in China* that the gap between men and women in education had been significantly narrowed at the practical level, and that equal access to education for men and women had been almost achieved [2]. While gender equality in education includes equal access to education, equality of process (freedom from gender discrimination and stereotypes in curricula, teaching methods and tools), equality of outcomes (learning outcomes, years of schooling, academic qualifications and diplomas that are not differentiated by gender), and equality of external outcomes (equal opportunities for women and men to find employment after education and equal pay for equal work) [3]. Gender equality in curricula and teaching materials, i.e. giving the same images and role expectations to both genders, is the basis for achieving gender equality in the educational process [4].

Textbooks, as a major part of teaching materials, are the carrier of national curriculum standards and syllabuses, and an authoritative resource for teachers and students, conveying not only knowledge but also social values and ideologies and influencing students deeply [5]. Therefore, the presentation of gender in textbooks not only has a great potential impact on students, but also has a bearing on the ultimate realization of gender equality in education.

There are now substantive amount of studies on gender presentation in English textbooks, which have collected and analyzed the number of characters of both genders, the number of outstanding characters of both genders, personality and appearance attributes of characters, jobs of characters, and females and males in social and family relationship, the turns and initiative of conversations of females and males, and so forth. Those studies indicated that the number of males is more than that of females in texts and illustrations. The occupations of males are more various than that of females, and those occupations generally enjoy higher social status than those taken by females, and females' work is more likely to be related to housework and child-raising. Males are usually depicted with more merits than females and to be the ones who initiate the conversation. Besides, males tend to be the focus in the pictures.

This study aims to synthesize the current literature concerned with the analysis of gender presentation in English textbooks, and highlight gaps of knowledge in this field. Results of the synthesis are presented in the following sections: namely research objects, theories, research design, and findings and proposed suggestions. The concluding section of the article will provide discussion on the findings as well as

highlighting consideration for further research.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Initial Search of Literature

The CNKI database was searched in December 2021 with the key terms of English textbooks and gender (gender bias, gender stereotype, gender presentation, gender difference, sexism, female). No date criteria were used due to the limited number of the studies conducted in the Chinese teaching context in this field. A total of 153 articles were returned in CNKI database.

### 2.2. Selection Criteria

The screening process followed the PRISMA protocol (see Figure 1), and was undertaken by a single author. While two independent reviewers are recommended for conducting reviews, the selection done by single reviewer still has considerable accuracy [6]. Under a thorough check of the 153 articles (journal articles and master theses), only studies with their objectives related to the gender presentation in English textbooks were included. A further criterion was adopted with considering the quality of studies: articles with their compound impact factor index higher than one were included. Studies were excluded if they were not qualified regarding the mentioned two criteria. During the review of the studies, the researcher found that two of them didn't take the gender presentation of English textbooks as the research subject, so they were excluded. Finally, 11 articles were selected for analysis.

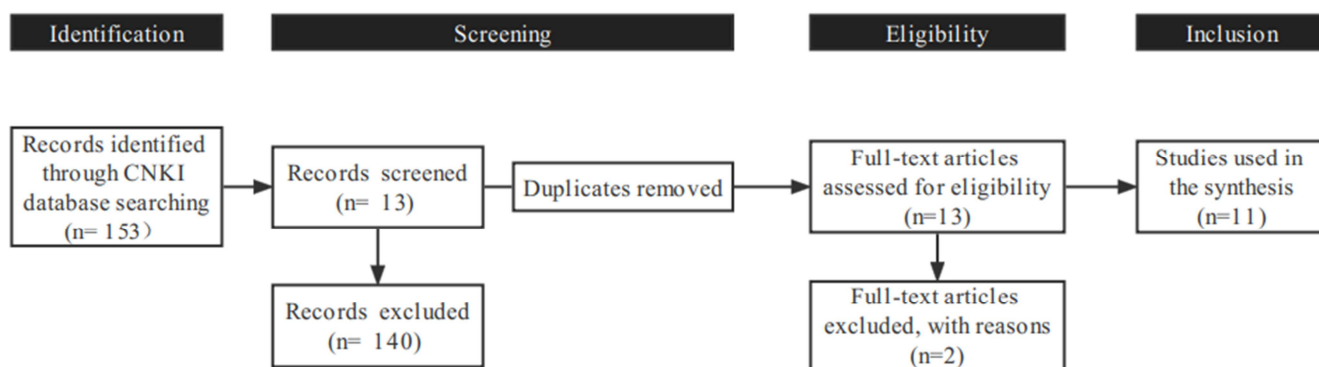


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Research Objects

Basic information about the objects of the study is collated in Table 1. First, most of the studies have focused on the English textbooks for basic education [7-15]. While a small part of studies have focused on the ones for higher education and early childhood education [16, 17]. There are no studies on English textbook for vocational education. Second, the

majority of the selected researches took the texts and illustrations in English textbooks as the specific material to study on, with one study taking the recording material into consideration [16]. Then, although there are numerous publishers of English textbooks in China, studies often concentrated more on the major publishers such as Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and People's Education Press [7, 8, 10, 15], with only a few focusing on other publishers such as Yilin Press and Shanghai Educational Publishing House.

**Table 1.** Basic information about the research objects.

Author	Research material	Educational level of the textbook	Press of the textbook
Zhang & Yang (2003)	texts	Primary school	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Hunan Children's Publishing House, Beijing Press
Zhu (2012)	texts and illustrations	Junior high school	Beijing Education Press
Zhu (2012)	texts and recording material	Adults (for business)	Economic Science Press, Peiking University Press
Wang (2016)	texts and illustrations	kindergarten	Gunagxi Education Press
Gui (2019)	texts and illustrations	Senior high school	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press
Yu (2018)	texts	Junior high school	Shanghai Educational Publishing House
Li (2019)	texts and illustrations	Junior high school	People's Publishing House
Yang (2020)	texts and illustrations	Senior high school	People's Education Press
Wang (2021)	texts and illustrations	Junior high school	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press
He (2020)	texts and illustrations	Primary school	People's Education Press
Jiang (2019)	texts	Primary school	Yilin Press, Shanghai Educational Publishing House, People's Education Press

Based on the information above, it is suggested that the scope of the research objects still needs to be expanded. First, English textbooks for early childhood education, higher education, and vocational education should be included under investigation. Further, textbooks published by various publishers shall be considered. Meanwhile, textbooks for teachers and other relevant teaching materials such as the electronic textbooks shall be examined as well. In addition, comparing multiple types of teaching materials is also recommended.

In terms of the education level, the majority take English textbooks at the primary and secondary educational levels as research objects. That's worth acknowledging as students from primary and secondary school have not yet completed the socialization process and have not formed a complete gender identity and gender value, they will unconsciously identify with and imitate the gender images in the textbooks, and form their own gender value according to the dominant gender culture embedded in textbooks [18]. However, less coverage has been given to textbooks served for early childhood education, higher education, and vocational education. The influence of curricula and teaching on people's perceptions of gender is ever-present, and the construction and management of teaching materials in China is still inadequate, especially for non-compulsory education. More research is needed on the gender presentation of teaching materials at the levels mentioned about in order to draw the attention of education departments and schools and teachers. It is also worth noting that textbooks include both the ones for students and teachers, but current researches have focused on the textbooks for students, neglected the ones for teachers, which actually have an impact on the teaching process.

Regarding the publishers, the selected researches mainly chose the English textbooks published from Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and People's Education Press, some from other presses. However, there are now a variety of versions of English textbooks used in primary and secondary schools across the country, including the ones published by Jiangsu Education Publishing House, Shanghai

Education Publishing House, Beijing Normal University Publishing House, Yilin Press, Higher Education Press, and so forth. Other English textbooks not published by mainstream presses also need to be studied, in order to cover the materials used by students in the country as far as possible.

Regarding the form of textbooks, in addition to traditional paper-based textbooks, new electronic textbooks such as ebooks and AR textbooks are also available. Research on gender presentation in other editions and e-textbooks has yet to be further developed. Most importantly, with the diversification and digitization of textbooks, the management, regulation, evaluation and guidance of teaching materials needs to be strengthened and more researchers need to be involved in the research.

Apart from what mentioned above, comparative studies are also highly recommended. The selected studies were basically analyses of a single textbook edition, with fewer studies comparing different editions of English textbooks from home and abroad, or from different publishers in China, and comparing different editions of the same publisher longitudinally. It is the analysis of different editions that will reveal what needs to be improved and what is worth learning for those presses and will provide reference for the management and construction of English textbooks.

### 3.2. Theoretical Foundations

As research in this field is at the intersection of sociology and linguistics, the majority of the theory the researches based on are gender theory and theory of critical discourse analysis [7, 10-11, 13, 17]. The former is concerned with the constitution of gender in society, and the latter aims at systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourses. Other theories included social learning theory, social role theory, self-presentation theory, stereotype threat theory, feminist's view on textbooks, Systemic Functional Grammar, Visual Grammar [8, 12, 14]. As the Table 2 shows, some studies have taken several theories as their theoretical basis.

*Table 2. Theoretical foundations of selected researches.*

Author	theory
Zhang & Yang (2003)	Language sexism
Zhu (2012)	Social learning theory, social role theory, self-presentation theory, stereotype threat theory
Zhu (2012)	Defect Theory, Domination Theory, Politeness Theory
Wang (2016)	Gender theory
Gui (2019)	Gender theory
Yu (2018)	theory of critical discourse analysis
Li (2019)	theory of critical discourse analysis
Yang (2020)	Systemic Functional Grammar, Visual Grammar
Wang (2021)	gender theory, feminist's view on textbooks
He (2020)	gender discrimination in language, visual grammar
Jiang (2019)	Presentation of social actors

According to the findings above, it's clear that the theoretical research on textbook analysis needs to be strengthened. Some studies do not distinguish clearly between concepts and theories very well, just piling up a lot of seemingly relevant theories. We can see many of the papers generally take several macro theories, such as the ones in the field of sociology and linguistics, as the theoretical foundations. However, it turns out that the theories do not have much relevance to the analysis of the materials that follow, and do not provide much guidance to

the materials, which tends to be separated from from the specific analysis. The root cause of the above situation is that the theoretical research on textbook analysis is weak, and a scientific theoretical system of textbook analysis has not yet been formed [19]. Further researches needed in the future are the ones about the establishment of a theoretical system specifically for analyzing the teaching materials. Meanwhile, the studies of gender presentation of textbooks should improve the theoretical basis, making it meet the study specifications.

*Table 3. Research method and analyzed content of selected researches.*

Author	Research method	Analyzed content
Zhang & Yang (2003)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The total number, occupation, and the image in family of male and female characters, and the adjectives to describe different gender
Zhu (2012)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	Illustrations, public figures, initiative in conversation, features, occupation and domestic roles of different genders
Zhu (2012)	Content analysis; statistical analysis; conversational analysis	The total number, occupation of male and female characters, the adjectives to describe different genders, and the turns and initiative in conversation
Wang (2016)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The number of male and female characters, the number of male and female protagonists, and the physical characteristics and personality traits of both genders
Gui (2019)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The total number, occupation, and the image in family of male and female characters, the adjectives to describe different gender, and the addressing of both genders
Yu (2018)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The total number, the occupation of both genders, and sexism in language
Li (2019)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The total number, occupation, and the image in family of male and female characters, the adjectives to describe different genders, and the addressing of both genders, the position, dressing and face of both genders in pics
Yang (2020)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The total number, occupation, the image in family of male and female characters, and the position of both genders in pics
Wang (2021)	Content analysis; statistical analysis	The number of male and female characters, the number of male and female protagonists
He (2020)	Content analysis; statistical analysis with corpus	Language: words with gender identity, turns of females and males, initiative in conversation of females and males, occupation, and the image in family of male and female characters, and the adjectives to describe different gender; Illustration: times of females' and males' appearance, the social distance, social relation and social interaction between characters and viewers.
Jiang (2019)	Content analysis; statistical analysis with corpus	Inclusion, nomination, functionalization, role allocation, association of both genders

### 3.3. Research Design

A detailed description about the research design is provided in Table 3, including the research method and the content analyzed. In terms of the method, all of the selected studies used content analysis and statistical analysis, with a few studies using the corpus to deal with big data [8-9]. Besides, some study took conversational analysis into account [14].

Studies on gender presentation of textbook should adopt a variety of research methods, to develop a more systematic and

comprehensive multi-perspective research system. "While there's argument about the heterogeneity of the methodology in foreign studies of gender representation in textbook" [20]. Methods including content analysis, linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, role analysis, critical image analysis were found adopted in the current literature. And as research has become more in-depth and detailed, there have been many studies that have drawn on corpus tools such as Antconc to conduct analyses regarding a wider range of data. Some scholars thought it is quite unwholesome, for example, in Lee's view [21], the literature

assessing the depiction of gender roles in textbooks has remained remarkably heterogeneous over the past 20 years and has failed to make any significant improvements. Lee concluded that it is difficult to make scientific comparisons between studies if individual researchers continue to use their own research methods, hence he called for a standardized assessment tool in a concerted effort to solve the problem of gender discrimination [21]. While in Mustapha's mind, "the researcher's expertise and the choice of data to work with might determine methodology. Perhaps, we should consider heterogeneity of methods as a healthy scholarship phenomenon." [20].

On the other hand, the specific content analyzed are found relatively similar, including the total number of male and female characters, the number of outstanding characters of both genders, the occupations, family roles and character traits of both genders. A small number of studies have looked at the differences in the position, dress, posture and facial expressions of the gender characters in the illustrations [8, 12]. Besides, some studies have focused on the specific aspects of the sexism in language, including the turns and the initiative of conversation of both genders, the amount of generic use of "man" and its derivatives (using "man" to refer to whole human being and characters with uncertain gender), the word order in paired words, the exclusive nouns and addressing of males and females [8, 13].

The studies involved many specific aspects to determine whether there's gender stereotype in the textbooks, however, the impact of those chosen aspects on students' gender values

has yet to be validated when more pieces of empirical evidences are collected. First, when the texts of several books are analyzed together, the imbalances in gender presentation can be obvious to the researchers, while considering one book alone, the sexism or stereotyping may not be as obvious as the prior one. For students who usually spend a semester studying one textbook, these imbalances in gender presentation perhaps do not have much impact on their gender values. Second, students may pay little attention to these aspects, including difference such as position, dress, posture and facial expressions of both genders in the illustrations, the turns and initiative of conversation of females and males, and the modal analysis of the direct speech and indirect speech. Whether there is any research significance in the data collection and analysis of the mentioned aspects also needs to be confirmed by the collection of relevant data from students and teachers.

### 3.4. Research Findings and Suggestions

The findings and suggestions drawn from the selected studies are listed in Table 4. Regarding the research findings, almost all the studies indicated that there are gender stereotypes, gender bias, ignoring women in the English textbooks, and that the gender perspective of textbook writers is in a state of collective unconsciousness. Some recent studies pointed out that the textbook writers had paid attention to the issue of gender equity and made some efforts, but there was still gender stereotyping to some extent [9, 10].

**Table 4.** Findings and suggestions of selected researches.

Author	Findings	Suggestions
Zhang & Yang (2003)	Gender discrimination in primary school textbooks is still serious in China	Include Equity consideration as a principle in writing teaching materials and the examination materials; Formulate a series of provisions to maintain gender equality. Revise the review system and related policies;
Zhu (2012)	A lot of contents in the textbook present stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.	Raise the awareness of gender equality among education policy makers, textbook writers and teachers; Increase the female roles in textbooks and enrich female characters.
Zhu (2012)	Gender discrimination against female characters exists in both the BEC series and the NSR series, but to a lesser extent in the BEC series and to a greater extent in the NSR series.	Relevant authorities pay attention to and revise the gender presentation of textbooks.
Wang (2016)	There exists gender stereotype and females being ignored.	The education authorities and schools should attach the importance to gender equality education, and make regulations for the review of kindergarten teaching materials; Textbook writers should raise the awareness of gender equality and increase the number of female figures; Society at large and families should be aware of gender equality education in daily life.
Gui (2019)	Gender bias still exists in the English textbooks of Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press for high school.	Establish textbook review system and principles; Pay attention to gender equality education in daily teaching activities; teachers give the proper guidance about gender equity.
Yu (2018)	Gender bias still exists in the English textbooks, which is a reflection of social ideology.	Gender equality needs to be addressed in all four aspects of the development, publication, selection and use of educational materials.
Li (2019)	Textbook writers have taken note of the issue of gender equality and have made some efforts, but there is still a degree of gender stereotyping.	Include guidelines gender equality in the curriculum reform; Raise awareness of gender equality among textbook editors, writers and teachers.
Yang (2020)	The presentation of gender in the set is unbalanced.	Textbook writers should pay due attention to the presentation of gender in the materials; Teachers should provide appropriate guidance to students and help them develop a reasonable gender perspective.

Author	Findings	Suggestions
Wang (2021)	The material is somewhat gender stereotyped and gender biased.	Raise teachers' awareness of gender equality; Use the teaching materials critically; Improve classroom interaction; Create a cooperative learning classroom.
He (2020)	There is prevalence of gender discrimination against females in the textbooks;	no suggestion
Jiang (2019)	There has been some progress in the development of teaching materials in terms of gender equality, but there is still a degree of gender stereotyping and bias.	Write gender equality into the guidelines and writing standards; Select the materials carefully; Pay attention to the gender equality in the teaching process.

Gender bias in textbooks is closely related to the long-standing atmosphere of patriarchal society and traditional culture towards both genders in our country. For example, the weakening of women in comparison to men in terms of social status, economic conditions, professions and personality in the textbooks confirms the ideological and cultural bias against women in our society. The inequality in the social division of labour between the sexes in the long run has led to an inequality of power between the genders in many ways, with women becoming subordinate to men. As Beauvoir said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" [22]. Males' "gender power" permeates every corner of our society, which shapes and monitors women. Under the above social and cultural conditions, it seems reasonable and easier to understand that gender inequality is presented in the textbooks.

The suggestions raised by the studies varied in different subjects. Those made for the education sector are to promote the national policy of gender equality, to establish a system and regulations for reviewing the gender equality of teaching materials, to include gender equality as one of the criteria and principles in the preparation of teaching materials. Advice for textbook writers are to raise awareness of gender equality, to try to eliminate gender stereotypes and prejudices in teaching materials, to increase the number of female characters in teaching materials and to enrich the image of female characters. Suggestions for schools are when selecting teaching materials, to pay attention to the gender aspects. Those for teachers are to pay attention to gender equality education in daily teaching activities, to provide correct guidance to students and convey the concept of gender equity. Some studies mentioned that society and families should also play a role in gender equality in education.

The recommendations made by the researchers are still relatively comprehensive and well developed. However, there are still some points that need to be highlighted and given attention. First, we are supposed to distinguish between those gender imbalances that are normal and acceptable (e.g. occupational differences due to physiology) and those that must be addressed (e.g. bias against women in terms of ability, personality and so forth in the text). Second, given the relatively long cycle of updating textbooks, it's necessary to provide more specific advice for schools and teachers about how to correct the the unbalanced gender presentation.

## 4. Conclusion

In this study, eleven articles on gender presentation in

English textbooks are selected and reviewed based on their influence. Almost all the selected studies point out that gender stereotypes still exist in English textbooks. Due to the authoritative nature of textbooks and students' strong plasticity, incorrect gender presentation in textbooks will inevitably have a negative impact on students and hinder the promotion of educational equality. For the analysis of gender presentation in English textbooks, it is more important for researchers to find multiple perspectives on the topic and to improve innovation and guidance for practice.

Based on the findings and discussion above, this study proposed several implications for further research as follows.

Firstly, there could be more research into the gender presentation of English textbooks served for early childhood education, higher education and vocational education, published by other presses, prepared for teachers, and electronic ones. For example, some scholars have pointed to serious gender stereotyping influences and gender bias in materials used at nursery and higher education levels, but the number of studies in this area is small and has not yet attracted sufficient attention. Secondly, comparative studies of textbook analysis can be added. Comparisons between different editions in China can provide a reference for schools or districts to select teaching materials and presses to write the textbooks. The comparisons of different textbooks at home and abroad may offer some inspirations and implications for domestic publishers. And comparisons of different editions by the same publisher are helpful to see the history of the publisher's writing and the changes made, and to gain a deeper understanding of textbook writing. Thirdly, in order to analyse the gender presentation of English textbooks more precisely, the researchers can collect data from users of the materials, i.e. teachers and students to better understand the feelings and needs of the users of the materials and perhaps identify issues regarding the presentation of gender in the teaching and learning process. As well as this data can be used to check whether those aspects previously studied by the researchers are relevant to the formation of students' gender perceptions. In addition to these gaps that are to be filled, there are other gaps that subsequent studies might find interesting. For example, teachers' views and awareness about the gender presentations in English textbooks and how they teach those texts regarding gender in classroom can be considered in future research. Similarly, students' view about the gender presentation and how those content affect their gender values can also be incorporated in further researches. And the guidelines and pre-service training for teachers about how

they deal with the gender issues in textbooks also need for attention.

## Funding

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the Early Career Start-up Scheme sponsored by Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China. (Project No. 281500120010).

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