

# Gender and Culture Analysis in EFL Textbooks as Measured by Personal Proper Names

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**Abstract** – Many studies have been carried out on gender and culture bias. Many of them show that EFL textbooks are more or less biased towards genders and non-Western cultures. The present study tries to analyze gender and culture bias and the visibility thereof in a somewhat different approach by investigating and tallying the gender and cultural origin of personal proper nouns. Carrying out a corpus-like analysis of personal proper names, we found nearly 1500 of such names in 10 local and global EFL textbooks having almost 1200 pages overall. The findings show that females are less visible in these textbooks than males and that the global textbook series analyzed is not very global (only 5 % of the names were non-Western)

**Keywords** – Proper Names; Gender Bias; Culture Bias; Global/Local Textbooks

## 1. Introduction

Language and culture are so intertwined with each other that they seem inseparable. Hence, to know one we need to know the other too. By now perhaps most L2 researchers would agree that mastering a language is more than just the acquisition of linguistic competence. Linguistic competence is not enough for learners to be competent in a language (Krasner, 1999). This clearly shows that the concept of language competence has constantly changed and become more complex. For example, in the first decades of the twentieth century communicative competence was not regarded by language teaching methods as a necessary component of language competence. Later, in the last decades of twentieth century and the first decade of twenty first century communicative competence took on so an astonishingly immense importance in L2 research that for instance in Canale's (1983) definition linguistic competence is sub-component of communicative competence. Culture has become part and parcel of communicative competence. This can be easily seen in Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale's (1983) model of communicative competence in which the sociocultural competence is one of the four main components of communicative competence. Also, Byram's (1997) concept of "intercultural communicative competence" bears witness to this.

Regarding our views toward teaching culture, textbooks are of cardinal importance to connect theory and practice. Although we have now reached to an arguably relative understanding of the importance of culture, language textbooks are seemingly lagging behind the theory that we have shaped. Aiming to investigate this issue, in this study we have analyzed two major textbook sets taught in Iran. One is the public school textbooks which are authored by Ministry of Education of Iran. The other set is the book taught and authored by a private language school organization (ILI) which is the biggest

private language school in Iran and is under Ministry of Education's supervision. More specifically this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are local and global textbooks gender-biased as measured by instances of male and female proper names?
2. To what extent are the global and local EFL textbooks multicultural, as measured by the instances of English and non-English proper names?

Many studies have been carried out on gender bias in EFL and non-EFL textbooks. However, in the present study we approach the concept somewhat differently than the previous studies. A different methodology is taken to analyze presence and visibility of each gender and non-English cultures. In a corpus-like analysis of personal proper names we tried to tally proper names in three series of local and global textbooks forming 10 books overall. Every endeavor is made to make the analysis more like a corpus-based study which is objective and in which less subjective human involvement is needed.

## 2. Literature Review

The role of culture is becoming more and more important in L2 pedagogy and research. During the recent three decades notions like intercultural awareness, cultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, multiculturalism, cultural identity and assessing cultural competence and teaching culture are being growingly discussed in L2 pedagogy and research. More and more language curricula are incorporating cultural elements into their objectives. The manifestation of this is also evident in a recent joint project called National Standards for Foreign Language Education which is supported by international language teaching organizations such as ACTFL. Five goals are determined by this project one of which is culture.

Culture is a very complex and multi-faceted concept to define. It may include a diverse set of notions from as vast as literature to trivial customs of a group; it is a cover term which is not a notion of any precision. In many definitions of culture, a customary distinction is made between capital C culture and small c culture. C-culture refers to activities and artifacts of arts and literature. However, c-culture contains the tradition, practices and values which are common to the individuals of a community. In language teaching we deal with the second definition of culture (Thornbury, 2006). Of course, the definitions of culture are not confined to the above distinction. For example, Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952) lists 164 definitions of culture with different connotations. A further distinction is made by Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990). They suggest four definitions or senses for culture: 1. the aesthetic sense 2. the sociological sense 3. the semantic sense and 4. pragmatic sense. In the aesthetic sense which correlates with the capital C culture defined above, culture includes the media, cinema, literature and music. The sociological sense correlates with the small c culture. In this sense culture refers to information about the structure of family, work, leisure and customs of people. The semantic sense refers to the conceptual system which is incorporated in the language and is shared by a community. This system may shape thought processes, emotional states, colors etc. For example the perception of color which varies from some languages to the other may be a good example of culture in this sense. For Adaskou et al language-specific pragmatic rules also are related to culture. Culture in the pragmatic sense refers to the social and paralinguistic skills and knowledge which, along with linguistic knowledge, make a communication successful. Two manifestations, along with other examples, of this can be found in the characteristics of the written genres of some language and also the conventions that make a discourse polite.

As it is clear from the definitions portrayed above in Adaskou's categorization of the definitions of culture, at least two of the definitions (the semantic and pragmatic senses) are directly linked with language. Its probably centuries that scholars have debating the nature of the interplay that exist between culture and language. A logical definition should include both the necessary and sufficient conditions of the term being defined. Another, widely quoted definition of culture is given by the National Center for Cultural Competence. It defines culture as:

“integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications,

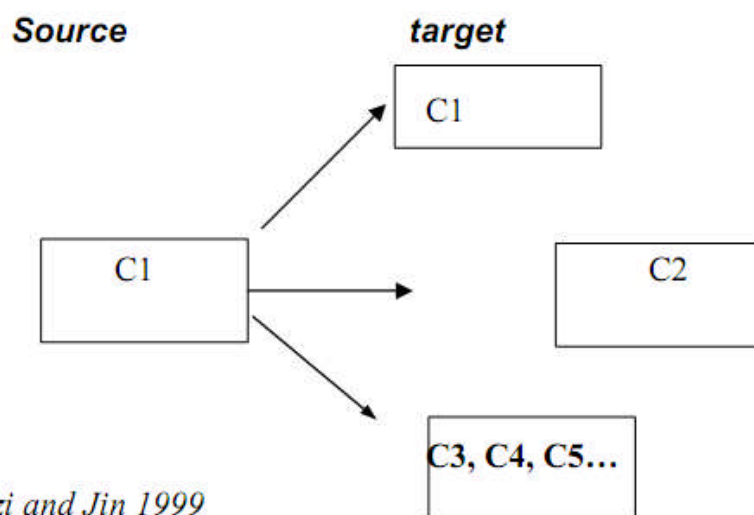
languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations” (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000, p. 1)

The genus of this definition is behavior, or more specifically, pattern of human behavior, so here culture is a type of human behavior. However, for us applied linguists the main concern is whether we should teach culture and/or its different usages or not and if yes how and in what sense or senses of the culture. Scholars have differing ideas about the nature of this interplay between language and culture. For Halliday (1978, p. 296) “language neither drives culture nor is driven by it”. For him the relationship between the two is not a matter of cause and effect, but it is a matter of realization. Some others believe that language is inextricably interwoven with culture and they are not separable (e.g. Whorf, 1956; Kramsch, 2001; Wei, 2005).

Having said these, we should also not that Lakoff (1987) believes the dispute over linguistic relativity has been futile. He put forth four parameters according to which researchers differ in their view toward relativity.

The first parameter has to do with the degree and depth of linguistic relativity. The second parameter is about the conceptual system, that whether conceptual systems are seen as something absolute or whether they can be changed during the life of a person. The third parameter is deals with translatability, whether it is a reason for similarity or differences between conceptual systems or it is the real routine use of linguistic expressions which is going to be examined. The fourth parameter deals with the locus of linguistic relativity, whether it is in the language or in the mind.

English language textbooks vary as to their view about culture and the extent to which they incorporate cultural contents. The decisions that material developers make have a key role in establishing cultural awareness and in l2ers and practicing and teaching multiculturalism. An important decision for them is to decide on whose culture to include in the textbooks. For example, in case of Iran, textbook designers have mostly resisted to incorporate elements of Western culture, due to the fact that doing so is considered by many stakeholders of the local English textbooks as an instance of an act that promotes cultural invasion. This decision has been portrayed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) as follows:



*Adopted from Cortazzi and Jin 1999*

C1 is the learner's own culture. C2 is the culture of the target language. C3, C4, C5 ... are neither learner's culture nor the target culture. So the material developer has three choices: incorporating learner's culture, target culture or cultures other than the learner's culture and target culture. Many English text books in Japan and Malaysia have gone for the first option. Many textbooks are relatively neutral to culture, like English textbooks taught in Iran (Aliakbari, 2004). According to Adaskou et al (1990) we should definitely teach everything that deals with the semantic and pragmatic sense of culture, because these are the very necessary and important elements that lead to communicative competence in learners. They give the following reasons as to why we should teach culture as far as it is concerned with aesthetic and sociological sense of culture:

1. To foster international understanding and counter negative stereotypes and other prejudices
2. To encourage the learners to compare their own and the foreign culture and arrive thus at a better understanding and appreciation of their own.
3. To facilitate the learners' possible future visits to the foreign countries concerned or contacts with people from them.
4. To integrate the language course in an interdisciplinary, thematic curriculum.
5. To motivate the learners – common point of view in Europe and north America

In addition to linguistic differences between cultures, paralinguistic features sometimes make intelligibility difficult. Two important paralinguistic features that have been thus far discussed in language pedagogy are kinesics and proxemics. Kinesics or, more informally, body language is the language- or culture-specific gestures, facial expressions, head movements and postures. Proxemics refers to the study of physical

distance between the parties of communication and whether there is physical contact or not (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

In teaching culture there are some malpractices which should be avoided.

1. Cultural misrepresentation\underrepresentation: it happens when the manifestation of the culture, usually the culture of the target language, is not enough or it is contrary to the real world. This malpractice usually has its root in misinformation. An instance of this malpractice is the negligence of ethnic minorities.
2. Another malpractice is to promote linguistic imperialism, monoculturalism and cultural alienation
3. In older approaches to language teaching culture was mostly confined to literature. However, literature, in Adaskou et al's definition of culture is at best one fourth of culture.
4. Stereotyping of the cultures and their practices and values.

Brown (2007) sees the language-culture connection as a 'keystone' in our approach to language teaching and states that this connection favors certain techniques and avoids some others. He has offered a checklist that shows how classrooms lessons and activities can be developed and revised according to this connection:

1. Does the activity value the customs and belief systems that are presumed to be a part of the culture(s) of the students?
2. Does the activity refrain from any demeaning stereotypes of any culture and including the culture(s) of your students?

3. Does the activity refrain from any possible devaluing of the students' native language(s)?
4. Does the activity recognize varying degrees of willingness of students to participate openly due to factors of collectivism/individualism and power distance?
5. If the activity requires students to go beyond the comfort zone of the uncertainty avoidance in their culture(s), does it do so empathetically or tactfully?
6. Is the activity sensitive to the perceived roles of males and females in the culture(s) of your students?
7. Does the activity sufficiently connect specific language features (e.g., grammatical categories, lexicon, discourse) to cultural ways of thinking, feeling and acting?
8. Does the activity in some way draw on the potentially rich background experiences of the students, including their own experiences in other cultures?

Oliver's (1974) criteria for analysis of sexism and gender bias are as follows: 1. frequency of occurrence 2. personality or character traits 3. interests and activities 4. profession and career options 5. physical appearance 6. role in the family. In the current study the first criterion is used.

### 3. Methodology

In line with the aims of the study we analyzed three intermediate level EFL textbooks, consisting of 10 textbooks overall, 7 of which are local and 3 are global textbooks (the workbooks, teacher books and other supplementary materials were not analyzed):

1. English Book 1 (Birjandi, Soheili, Noruzi, & Mahmudi, 1993a), 2. English Book 2 (Birjandi et al 1993b), 3. English Book 3 (Birjandi et al 1993c), 4. Learning to Read English for Pre-University Students (Birjandi, Sarab, & Samimi, 2004). The above textbooks were produced in Iran and are being taught nationally in high schools.

5. Intermediate 1 student's book: The ILI English series (Research and Planning Department, 2005a), 6. Intermediate 2 student's book (Research and Planning Department, 2005b), 7. Intermediate 3 student's book (Research and Planning Department, 2005c). These books are developed by a local Iranian private language institute (Iran Language Institute).

8. Interchange 1 (Richards, Hull, & Proctor 2006a), 9. Interchange 2 (Richards et al, 2006b), 10. Interchange 3 (Richards et al, 2006c). These books are globally taught in many language institutes around the world.

All of these books were analyzed and a corpus of personal proper names was made accordingly. Proper name or noun is defined as follows by Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (Random House (Firm), 1998)

"a noun that is not normally preceded by an article or other limiting modifier, as any or some, and that is arbitrarily used to denote a particular person, place, or thing without regard to any descriptive meaning the word or phrase may have, as Lincoln, Beth, Pittsburgh."

In the current study only proper names referring to people were analyzed. More specifically, here the definition of proper name is 'any instance of a(n) English/non-English male/female first and/or last name which is justifiably attributable to a dead or living person'. This was used as a criterion to include suitable proper names (= first and/or last names) for analysis of the two research questions of this study. This means that for example 'Sir Thomas' was naturally excluded from the analysis if it was the name of a school, so does for 'Eve' in 'Christmas Eve'. These are names but they do not refer to a person; or the name Thomas Edison was included in the analysis for both of the research questions, since it refers to an actual person, although a scientist who is not alive. Also, for both research questions, if the first and last name were used together, such as in 'Nicole Kidman', they were counted as one instance of a name in the analysis.

The repeated names (for example in dialogues) were also counted as independent names for objectivity, comparability and clarity reasons. Here, just the occurrences of the personal proper names and their gender and origin (i.e. being English and non-English) regardless of anything else such as context were important. At times for some unisex names (or epicene names, a given names that are often given to either a boy or a girl), such as Sandy, we had to refer to the context to decide on the gender of the name for research question number one. The names were written down and then they were counted for each research question separately.

For RQ 1, if the non-English names (e.g. Noriko or Chang) and the context didn't reveal the gender of the character, it was excluded from the analysis, although with a bit of further investigation (for instance by googling the name, it would become clear that, for example, Noriko is a Japanese female given name. According to the criterion stated above if the gender of the names were not determinable by themselves or by context, they were left out from the analysis of RQ 1.

When analyzing RQ 2, some special proper nouns were noticed. Some characters had a Western first name and a non-Western last name (e.g. Sarah Chang) or vice versa. Since the purpose was to investigate the presence of Western and non-Western characters, in case the origin of the character were not determinable from the context it would be excluded from the analysis of the second research question.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Nearly 1500 personal proper names were found in 10 local and global EFL textbooks having almost 1200 pages overall. For RQ 1, in three first textbooks of 'English Book' series which seemingly follows a strong version of localization nearly 20 % were female names. However, in the fourth book 59 % of the names were female names. The reason behind this difference is that the fourth book is more recent than the other 3 books in the series and also the fourth book has been revised

thoroughly unlike the other 3 ones. In ILI series nearly, which seemingly follows a weaker or more moderate version of localization 25 % of the personal proper names were feminine. In Interchange series which is supposedly a global textbook 46 % of the names was devoted to the females. A more detailed account of ratios for this RQ is presented in table 1. For RQ 2 ratios of non-Western names were as follows: 61 % for English Book 1, 2 & 3, 37 % for English Book 4, 14 % for ILI series, 5 % for Interchange series. A more detailed depiction of these ratios can be seen in table 2.

**Table 1.** RQ 1: The ratio of male and female names

EFL Book	No. of Pages	Male Names		Female Names		Total No of names
English Book 1	130	63	77 %	18	23 %	81
English Book 2	105	83	83 %	17	17 %	100
English Book 3	107	104	79 %	27	21 %	131
English Book 4	97	36	41 %	51	59 %	87
ILI Intermediate 1	144	130	75 %	43	25 %	173
ILI Intermediate 2	144	152	75 %	49	24 %	201
ILI Intermediate 3	157	167	72 %	63	27 %	230
Interchange 1	105	78	53 %	69	46 %	147
Interchange 2	105	154	53 %	136	46 %	290
Interchange 3	113	152	52 %	136	47 %	288

**Table 2.** RQ 2: The ratio of Western and non-Western names

EFL Book	No. of Pages	Western Names		Non-Western Names		Total No of names
English Book 1	130	23	28 %	58	72 %	81
English Book 2	105	55	55 %	45	45 %	100
English Book 3	107	45	34 %	86	66 %	131
English Book 4	97	55	63 %	32	37 %	87
ILI Intermediate 1	144	142	82 %	31	18 %	173
ILI Intermediate 2	144	140	86 %	22	14 %	162
ILI Intermediate 3	157	131	87 %	18	12 %	149
Interchange 1	105	278	93 %	21	7 %	296
Interchange 2	105	291	94 %	18	5 %	309
Interchange 3	113	282	95 %	12	3 %	294

Non-western names in the two Iranian textbooks were all local Iranian names. However, in Interchanges non-Western names were mostly Eastern names.

The number of names for RQ 1 and 2 differed slightly, because sometimes some names were unsuitable for one of the RQ's and suitable for the other, e.g. the proper names 'the Smiths' quite obviously is genderless, therefore unsuitable for the first research question, however, it is a Western name, therefore worth of analysis for the second research question.

In dealing with the first research question some special cases of proper nouns were noticed. For instance, in one of the books in a reading the given name Galileo was used 21 times. At first sight, this may sound threatening to the results. Nevertheless, such cases were not excluded from the analysis, since the criterion for inclusion of

names was 'any instance of a(n) English/non-English male/female first/last name which was justifiably attributable to a dead/living person. We argue that these cases do not cause danger to the findings, because logically it would be also probable for a female figure such as Virgin Mary or Mother Teresa to be repeated as so in a reading, as there was for instance a reading in Interchange 2 in which the proper name 'Nicole (Kidman)' was used many times.

Obviously, in a decontextualized situation the gender of the surnames are not determinable. For all of the surnames we had to refer to the context to determine their gender. In their context we could find clues such as possessive pronouns and honorifics (e.g. Mr., Mrs., Madam, Sir etc.) by which we were able to determine their gender.

Naturally, some given names and surnames were genderless (e.g. the Browns) or their gender was not identifiable from the context (e.g. Duggan). Such names which made a very small proportion of the names were omitted from the analysis for the first research question. For instance, Sandy is both a male and female name and we had to refer to context to determine the whether it is male or female. In case we could not guess it from the context we would leave it out from the analysis.

We also were not able to group some of the names either into the western or non-western group. Such names which were a few were omitted. For instance, 'Anand' was a name that fell into this category.

## 5. Conclusion

With the assumption being that presence of human characters as measured by number of proper names should be distributed among males and females evenly, we can conclude males have a more prevailing presence than the females in the textbooks we analyzed. Also, non-Western proper names were far less visible in nearly all of the book analyzed.

A limitation of the study is that the listening parts and video sections were not analyzed; though, it does not seem that with inclusion of those parts the results would vary drastically from what we presented above, since these parts make up a small proportion of the textbooks analyzed. Also, in the analysis of frequency of occurrence we measured proportion of occurrences by tallying only the proper names, where as 'occurrence' is not limited to proper names; for instance pictures may also be a good measure to analyze the occurrence or visibility of different genders or cultures.

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