

Representing Gender in an Indonesian EFL Textbook: Students' Perspectives and Textbook Analysis

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze gender representation in the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* and to explore students' perceptions of gender stereotypes portrayed in the textbook. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. The data were collected through content analysis and an open-ended questionnaire distributed to 44 tenth-grade students at a senior high school in Karawang. The analysis focused on seven indicators of gender representation, namely pictures, activities, traits, role models, characters, gender mentions, and the order of name mention. The results showed that the textbook was not fully gender-balanced and still reflected gender bias in several aspects. Male characters were more dominant in most indicators, while female characters appeared slightly more frequently only in the gender mentions indicator. In addition, most students were aware of the unequal gender representation portrayed in the textbook, although several students demonstrated critical awareness toward gender stereotypes. Overall, the textbook still reflected unequal gender representation despite several positive portrayals of female characters.

Keywords: Gender Representation; EFL Textbook; Gender Stereotypes; Students' Perceptions; Textbook Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are essential components in the educational process because they not only function as instructional resources but also as tools that influence students' understanding of knowledge, values, and social norms (Cunningsworth, 1995). In the context of *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) learning, textbooks play a significant role because they often serve a primary source of language input and classroom activities in the teaching and learning process (Richards, 2001). Besides delivering learning materials, textbooks also function as cultural and ideological products that represent social values, beliefs, and power relations, including gender representation (Hall 1997; Nasution et al., 2025) Furthermore, textbooks are considered influential in shaping students' beliefs and perspectives toward social realities because textbooks play an important role in constructing students' perspectives, values and social identities through repeated representations and discourses (Nasution et al., 2025). Furthermore, textbooks are considered powerful instruments in shaping children's beliefs, attitudes, and values (Muzdalifah et al., 2022). Therefore, gender representation in textbooks has become a significant issue because it may influence students' understanding of male and female roles within society. Gender representation in textbooks frequently reflects inequality between female and male characters. Male characters are commonly portrayed in active, dominant, and public roles, whereas female characters are more frequently associated with passive and domestic roles. Such representations may construct gender stereotypes and influence students' perceptions of identity and social roles (Connell, 2002). In addition, gender bias in educational materials may reinforce social inequality through repeated exposure to stereotypical portrayals

(Muthali'in, 2001). Previous study also revealed that males dominated in areas such as the number of named-non active, non-named-non active, appearance in drawings, and titled & named (Fauzi et al., 2023). These results indicate that gender representation in textbooks remains unequal and tends to position male characters as more dominant figures than female characters.

Studies on gender representation in EFL textbooks have demonstrated that gender inequality remains prevalent. Male characters are more dominant in visual representations, activities, occupations, and social positions compared to female characters (Nur Amalia et al., 2024). Another study revealed that gender representations in English textbooks tend to reflect unequal power relations, where male characters are more frequently positioned in dominant and authoritative roles, while female characters are portrayed in limited and stereotypical ways (Nasution et al., 2025). In Indonesian EFL textbooks, visual representations also continue to portray traditional gender role divisions between male and female characters (Wiraningsih et al., 2025). Studies in Indonesian EFL textbooks also found that male characters tended to dominate linguistic interactions, occupational roles, and social participation, while female characters were represented less visibly and less actively (Wilfitri & Suganda, 2023; Yolanda & Syafryadin, 2025). In comparative analyses between Indonesian and international ELT textbooks, female characters were still frequently associated with emotional and supportive characteristics, whereas male characters were portrayed as more independent and authoritative (Fithriani, 2022). Another study found that male characters tended to dominate language strategies and occupy more public areas, while females are represented to be passive and occupy more private areas (Muzdalifah et al., 2022). Furthermore, gender representation in textbooks can shape students' understanding of social roles and influence their expectations regarding gender identity and behavior (Su et al., 2021). Gender stereotypes presented in educational materials may also affect students' psychological development, self-perception, and future aspirations, particularly among female students who are repeatedly exposed to limited representations of social roles (Zhao, 2022). In addition, UNESCO (2019) emphasized that unequal gender representation in education may contribute to the reinforcement of discriminatory social norms and unequal educational opportunities. Although numerous studies have examined gender representation in textbooks, limited attention has been devoted to how students interpret and respond to gender stereotypes portrayed in Indonesian EFL textbooks, particularly in recently published textbooks under the current curriculum. Therefore, this study focuses on the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* published by Pusat Kurikulum dan Perbukuan (PUSKURBUK) for tenth-grade senior high school students. This study aims to analyze gender representation in the textbook and to explore students' perceptions of gender stereotypes portrayed within the textbook.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a qualitative descriptive design to analyze gender representation in an EFL textbook and to explore students' perceptions of gender stereotypes. A qualitative approach is a method for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2023). In addition, qualitative descriptive research is focused on describing data in simple and everyday terms without deep interpretation (Sandelowski, 2010). This approach has been widely used in studies of gender representation because it enables researchers to identify patterns of gender inequality in educational materials (Muzdalifah et al., 2022; Fauzi et al., 2023). The object of this study was the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* for tenth-grade senior high school students published by PUSKURBUK. Additional data were obtained from 44 tenth-

grade students at a senior high school in Karawang through an open-ended questionnaire. The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they actively used the textbook in the English learning process. The data were collected through observation and content analysis of the textbook’s visual and textual materials using a coding sheet. The indicators of gender representation were primarily adapted from Logsdon (1985), which focused on the visual representation, activities, and social roles of female and male characters in textbooks. Additional indicators, such as traits, gender mentions, and the order of name mention, were incorporated by the author to provide a more comprehensive analysis of gender representation in the textbook. The use of visual representation, activities, and social roles as analytical categories was also supported by recent studies on gender representation in EFL textbooks (Nur Amalia et al., 2024; Nasution et al., 2025). In addition, an open-ended questionnaire was employed to explore students’ perceptions of gender stereotypes portrayed in the textbook. The data were analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2014). The textbook data were categorized based on gender representation indicators and presented descriptively to identify patterns of gender representation. Meanwhile, the students’ perception data were analyzed qualitatively to examine students’ views toward gender stereotypes presented in the textbook.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Gender Representation in the Textbook

The first research question aimed to investigate how gender representation was portrayed in the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* published by PUSKURBUK for tenth-grade senior high school students. The results revealed that the textbook was not fully gender-balanced and still reflected gender bias in several aspects of representation. The analysis was conducted based on seven indicators, namely pictures, activities, traits, role models, characters, gender mentions, and the order of name mention. Overall, male characters were more dominant in most indicators of representation, although female characters appeared slightly more frequently in the gender mentions indicator.

Table 1. Summary of Gender Representation in the Textbook

Indicators	Total Female	Total Male	Dominance
Pictures	24	74	Male
Activities	15	33	Male
Traits	33	37	Male
Role Models	5	40	Male
Characters	22	52	Male
Gender Mentions	158	157	Female
Order of Name Mention	1	15	Male
Total	258	408	Male

In terms of pictures, male characters appeared more frequently than female characters. Male characters were predominantly portrayed in sports and public activities, whereas female characters appeared less frequently, although some of them were represented as athletes and award recipients. These results indicate that the visual representations in the textbook still tended to position male characters as more dominant and more visible in public spaces. Nevertheless, the textbook also attempted to portray female characters in active roles, such as

female athletes depicted as strong and accomplished individuals. Similarly, in the activities indicator, male characters were more frequently portrayed in sports and public activities, such as football, basketball, cycling, and swimming. In contrast, female characters were more commonly associated with routine, personal, and domestic activities, such as relaxing, sleeping, and eating healthy food. Although some sports activities involved female characters, the distribution of activities still reflected traditional gender role divisions. Furthermore, in the traits indicator, male characters were more commonly associated with active, strong, and brave characteristics, whereas female characters were more frequently portrayed as emotional, caring, friendly, and passive. However, in several sections of the textbook, female characters were also represented as strong and active, particularly in the context of sports and achievements. This result suggests an attempt to present more positive representations of female characters, although male dominance remained more visible overall. Examples of visual representations of male and female characters portrayed in the textbook are presented in Figure 1 and 2.



Figure 1. Male badminton athlete



Figure 2. Female rock climbing athlete

In terms of role models, male figures were considerably more dominant than female figures. Male public figures such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, and LeBron James were more frequently portrayed as inspirational role models. Meanwhile, female role models appeared in limited numbers, such as Greysia Polii and Windy Cantika. The dominance of male figures as role models indicates that public achievement and success were more frequently associated with male characters. Similarly, in terms of characters, male characters were more dominant in active and public roles, whereas female characters in several narratives were still portrayed as passive or dependent on male characters. Although female protagonists such as Cinderella, Snow White, and Ariel were included in the textbook, several narratives continued to maintain traditional patterns in which female characters required male assistance or protection.

In the gender mentions indicator, male characters were more frequently mentioned in most chapters, although the total frequency of female mentions was slightly higher due to the dominance of female-centered narratives in Chapter 6. In addition, texts about Cristiano Ronaldo portrayed male characters as active, strong, and successful figures, whereas stories such as Little Red Riding Hood and Shrek tended to position female characters as individuals requiring male assistance. Regarding the order of name mention, the pattern of male-first ordering remained dominant. Forms such as he/she, him/her, and his/her appeared more frequently than female-first ordering. This result suggests that male characters were still prioritized within the linguistic structure used in the textbook.

Students' Perceptions of Gender Stereotypes

The second research question aimed to explore students' perceptions of gender stereotypes portrayed in the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress*. The results of the open-ended questionnaire indicated that most students were aware of gender inequality represented in the textbook. Students perceived that male characters appeared more frequently, were more active

in sports-related activities, and were more commonly presented as role models than female characters. In contrast, female characters were more frequently associated with relaxing activities, healthy lifestyles, and gentle characteristics. Several students stated that male characters appeared more dominant because the textbook contained numerous discussions related to sports and athletes. In addition, students associated male characters with active, strong, and brave characteristics, whereas female characters were perceived as caring, diligent, and friendly. However, several students also demonstrated more critical perspectives by stating that both female and male individuals could perform the same roles and that abilities should not be determined by gender. This result indicates that students did not entirely accept the gender stereotypes portrayed in the textbook.

Discussion

The results demonstrated that gender representation in the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* still reflected male dominance across various aspects of representation. Such dominance was evident in visual representations, activities, characters, role models, gender mentions, and linguistic patterns. These results are consistent with representation theory, which argues that representation not only reflects reality but also constructs social meanings related to gender (Hall, 1997). When male characters are repeatedly portrayed in active and dominant positions, textbooks indirectly construct the perception that men are more appropriate for public roles and more important social positions. This result is also consistent with previous studies showing that gender representations in EFL textbooks tend to reflect unequal power relations, where male characters are more frequently positioned in dominant, active, and authoritative roles, while female characters are portrayed in limited and stereotypical ways (Nur Amalia et al., 2024; Fauzi et al., 2023). Similarly, previous studies revealed that male characters commonly dominate public spaces, sports activities, and physically active roles, whereas female characters are more frequently associated with passive, supportive, and domestic activities (Aini et al., 2021; Muzdalifah et al., 2022). Previous studies also found that males dominated in areas such as named and non-active characters, appearance in drawings, and titled and named representations, indicating that male visibility in textbooks remained higher than female visibility (Fauzi et al., 2023). In addition, visual representations in Indonesian EFL textbooks continue to reinforce traditional gender role divisions between male and female characters (Wiraningsih et al., 2025). While several previous studies primarily emphasized male dominance and stereotypical portrayals, the findings of this study also revealed several attempts to present more positive and inclusive representations of female characters. Female characters were portrayed as athletes, award recipients, and individuals capable of achieving success. Such representations are important because they may challenge traditional stereotypes that position women solely within domestic roles. However, the visibility and frequency of female representations remained lower than those of male characters, indicating that equal representation has not yet been fully achieved. This suggests that positive representations of women were still limited and insufficient to counterbalance male dominance.

From a linguistic perspective, the dominance of male-first ordering patterns such as he/she and his/her reflected implicit linguistic bias. According to Wardhaugh (2002), language is not neutral because it carries social values and ideologies. Therefore, the repeated prioritization of male references may construct perceptions that male characters occupy more primary positions than female characters. The results from students' perceptions also indicated that students were capable of recognizing patterns of gender inequality represented in the textbook. Most students realized that male characters were more dominant in pictures, sports activities, and role model

representations. These results suggest that textbook representations may influence students' understanding of gender roles within society. However, several students also demonstrated critical awareness by stating that all roles could be performed by both male and female individuals. This indicates that students did not entirely accept the gender stereotypes portrayed in the textbook. Overall, the results of this study indicate that the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* still contains patterns of gender representation that are not fully balanced. Although several positive and inclusive representations of female characters were identified, male dominance remained more consistently visible across multiple indicators. Therefore, textbook development should place greater emphasis on gender equality principles to ensure that educational materials not only support academic objectives but also promote fairness and inclusivity in education.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated gender representation in the textbook *Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress* and explored students' perceptions of gender stereotypes portrayed in the textbook. The results confirmed that the textbook was not fully gender-balanced and still reflected gender bias across several indicators of representation. Male characters were more dominant in pictures, activities, role models, characters, and linguistic patterns, whereas female characters appeared slightly more frequently only in the gender mentions indicator. Male characters were generally portrayed as active, strong, and dominant figures in public roles, while female characters were more frequently associated with passive, caring, and domestic roles. Although the textbook included several positive portrayals of female characters, such representations were still limited compared to male representations. The results from students' perceptions also confirmed that students were aware of the unequal gender representation presented in the textbook. Most students recognized the dominance of male characters in sports activities and role model representations, although several students demonstrated critical awareness by rejecting stereotypical gender roles. Therefore, this study concludes that the textbook still contains unequal gender representations that may influence students' understanding of gender roles and social identities. Consequently, textbook developers and educators should pay greater attention to gender equality in educational materials to support more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

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