

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation in English Textbooks

Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Mai*

Received on 1 December 2024. Accepted on 25 April 2025.

Abstract: This study investigates gender representation in the *LIFE (A2-B1)* English textbook through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar, the research examines how language and imagery construct gender roles and identities. The analysis reveals that while the textbook promotes global inclusivity, it reproduces traditional gender norms. Male characters dominate in frequency, agency, and professional status, whereas female characters are often depicted in relational or emotional roles. Subtle discursive strategies, such as evaluative language, transitivity patterns, and visual salience, further reinforce these asymmetries. Although the textbook includes isolated efforts to challenge stereotypes, these are inconsistent and rarely integrated into the broader discourse. The research identifies more nuanced forms of gender bias, which are embedded in the linguistic and visual construction of the textbook. The study concludes that ELT materials must be approached critically and offer pedagogical recommendations to foster gender-sensitive and equitable language education.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender representation, visual discourse, power and ideology.

Subject classification: Linguistics.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and educational integration, gender equality has become a central issue not only in sociology and gender studies but also in language education. Language learners do not merely acquire a system of symbols; they absorb the social values, norms, and ideologies embedded in teaching content, illustrations, and communicative activities. As a core instructional material, English textbooks play a crucial role in shaping learners' worldviews, including their understanding of gender roles, power relations, and the positioning of men and women in society.

* Faculty of Foreign Languages, Vietnam Military Medical University.

Email: tuyetmaik84@vmmu.edu.vn

Numerous studies have demonstrated that even modern, globally oriented English textbooks often reproduce gender stereotypes, whether consciously or unconsciously. These patterns may include unequal representation of male and female characters, gendered occupational roles, and stereotypical descriptions of behavior and personality traits (Sunderland, 2000; Mills, 2008). Although subtle, such representations can strongly influence learners' perceptions, especially in adolescence and young adulthood when social identity is still being formed. Therefore, investigating how gender is constructed in English textbooks is essential for building an inclusive and equitable language learning environment.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, offers a powerful tool to examine the interplay between language, power, and ideology in educational texts. This approach enables researchers to explore how gender is represented, maintained, or contested at the textual level through discursive practices and within broader socio-cultural contexts.

Based on this framework, the present study focuses on *LIFE* (A2-B1 level), a widely used course book written by Hughes, Stephenson, and Dummett, published by National Geographic Learning in 2019. *LIFE* is widely recognized for its globally relevant themes, authentic visual materials, and human-centered content. In Vietnam, this textbook is currently used as the core English curriculum at the university where this research is conducted. For privacy issue, we do not refer to the name of the institution. Therefore, this study serves academic and practical purposes, contributing to curriculum enhancement and gender awareness in the classroom.

The decision to analyze *LIFE* is also motivated by the need to critically evaluate the extent to which the textbook represents gender fairly and balanced: Does it promote gender equality? Or does it, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce traditional gender norms? Applying Fairclough's CDA framework, this study aims to uncover hidden gendered messages in *LIFE*'s verbal and visual content and propose practical recommendations for textbook design, classroom practice, and gender-sensitive pedagogy.

Furthermore, with its integrated skills design and authentic images sourced from National Geographic, *LIFE* provides rich material for multimodal discourse analysis. This allows the study to investigate how gender roles are represented not only through linguistic choices but also through visuals, layout, body language, and interpersonal dynamics.

Thus, this study aims to critically investigate how gender is represented in the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook, focusing on linguistic and visual elements. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are male and female characters represented in the *LIFE (A2-B1)* English textbook in terms of frequency, social roles, and personal attributes?
2. To what extent does the textbook reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles through language and visual content?

3. What gender ideologies are reflected or constructed through the discourse practices embedded in the textbook?

2. Literature review

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing scholarly interest in how gender is represented in English language teaching (ELT) materials. As textbooks are often perceived as neutral sources of linguistic input, their cultural and ideological influence is sometimes overlooked. However, as both Fairclough (1995) and Hall (1997) have argued, language is never neutral; it is always socially situated and ideologically loaded. Textbooks, especially those used in formal educational settings, do not merely teach grammar or vocabulary, they also carry implicit messages about social roles, identities, and power structures.

In the context of ELT, these implicit messages often relate to gender. Since textbooks tend to be mass-produced, widely distributed, and slow to change, how they represent men and women can have lasting effects on learners' worldviews. As Lee and Collins (2008) point out, ELT textbooks may reinforce or challenge prevailing social norms. This makes the study of gender representation within textbooks both timely and necessary.

This paper reviews the literature on gender portrayal in ELT materials, particularly textbooks. It identifies patterns of imbalance in both the quantity and quality of male and female representation while also highlighting how discourse researchers have approached the topic. These earlier findings provide a valuable foundation for the present study, focusing on the LIFE (A2-B1) textbook. The paper also aims to position the study within a broader academic conversation about equity, representation, and ideology in language education.

2.1. Gender representation in English language textbooks

A wide range of studies have examined how ELT textbooks portray men and women, often revealing recurring patterns of imbalance and bias. One of the earliest and most cited works in this field is by Hartman and Judd (1978), who exposed a clear male dominance in ESL materials of the time. They found that male characters appeared more frequently, occupied more diverse roles, and were consistently associated with action, decision-making, and leadership. Female characters, in contrast, were limited to domestic, emotional, or passive roles, if they appeared at all.

This gender imbalance has not disappeared in more recent publications. Lee and Collins (2008), in their analysis of secondary English textbooks used in Hong Kong and Singapore, found that male characters still dominated in visibility and narrative centrality. They were more likely to be featured in professional, adventurous, or technical contexts, whereas female characters were often linked to care-related professions or positioned in supportive roles.

In a study of Iranian high school English textbooks, Amini and Birjandi (2012) similarly discovered that female characters were significantly underrepresented across texts and images. When women did appear, they were generally depicted in stereotypical domestic roles, with limited participation in public, scientific, or leadership contexts. The authors also noted that the textbooks tended to use more active and agentive verbs with male subjects, reinforcing traditional power hierarchies through both language and narrative structure.

These patterns contribute to what Sunderland (2000) refers to as “gendered discourses”, recurring ways of using language and images that reinforce traditional gender norms, even in contexts that claim to be neutral or modern.

Studies have pointed out the subtle ways language shapes perception, not just how often men and women appear but how they are depicted. For example, Ansary and Babaii (2003) examined the types of verbs assigned to male and female characters, noting that men were far more likely to be the agents of dynamic, high-impact actions, while women were typically described as receiving or observing those actions. Additionally, adjectives used for men often included “strong,” “intelligent,” or “successful,” whereas women were labelled “kind,” “beautiful,” or “helpful,” reinforcing fixed and limited roles.

Visual representation also plays a critical role. As Kobia (2009) argues, images in textbooks often mirror the gendered hierarchies present in the text. Men are more likely to be depicted in active poses, often outdoors or in leadership positions, while women are often shown indoors, smiling or engaging in caregiving activities. This multimodal reinforcement of gender norms makes textbooks powerful transmitters of social ideology.

These studies show a consistent pattern: even when aiming for global appeal or inclusivity; many ELT textbooks fall short of offering balanced or empowering representations of gender. The findings suggest a need for more critical engagement with textbook content, mainly in materials that claim to promote 21st-century skills, global citizenship, and diversity.

2.2. Critical discourse analysis and gender in ELT

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a powerful framework for examining how language reflects, constructs, and sustains social hierarchies, including those based on gender. Developed most notably by Fairclough (1995), CDA views discourse not only as a means of communication, but also as a form of social practice that both shapes and is shaped by power relations. This perspective is particularly relevant to textbook analysis, where language and images are curated to appear “neutral,” yet often carry deeply rooted ideological messages.

Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of CDA is especially valuable for educational research. It involves analyzing discourse at three interrelated levels: (1) the textual level, where linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, and

cohesion are examined; (2) the discursive practice level, which considers how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed; and (3) the social practice level, where broader ideological structures and institutional contexts are explored. This multi-layered approach enables researchers to move beyond surface-level analysis and uncover the ways in which power and ideology are embedded in educational texts.

When applied to English language teaching (ELT) materials, CDA helps reveal how gender roles and relations are constructed not only through explicit content, but also through implicit patterns of representation. For example, certain verbs may be disproportionately assigned to male characters, while female characters may be depicted using passive constructions or emotional language. Similarly, the images that accompany texts often reinforce stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, such as men in professional settings and women in domestic or supportive roles (Lazar, 2005; Kobia, 2009).

Feminist approaches to CDA, as developed by scholars like Lazar (2005), emphasize the intersection of language, gender, and power. These approaches challenge not only overt instances of sexism, but also the more subtle, normalized ways that gendered ideologies are perpetuated in discourse. In this sense, CDA is not merely a descriptive tool, but also a critical and transformative one, aiming to raise awareness of inequality and offer pathways for social change.

In recent years, CDA has been increasingly used to analyze ELT textbooks around the world, particularly those intended for global markets. Scholars such as Sunderland (2000) and Gray (2010) have shown how textbooks often attempt to project a modern, multicultural image while still embedding traditional, Western-centric or patriarchal gender norms. Such findings suggest that textbooks are far from ideologically neutral, they are active participants in shaping learners' understanding of gender roles and identities.

In light of these insights, CDA provides a suitable and robust framework for examining how gender is constructed in the LIFE (A2-B1) textbook. By attending to both language and visuals, and considering the broader pedagogical and publishing context, this study aims to uncover the gendered ideologies embedded within one of today's widely used ELT resources.

2.3. Previous studies on gender representation in ELT textbooks worldwide

International research has examined how gender is portrayed across diverse educational and cultural contexts in English textbooks. These studies have revealed a consistent trend: Despite educational policy and textbook reform progress, gender stereotypes and imbalances remain embedded in ELT materials.

One of the earliest large-scale studies was conducted by Porreca (1984), who analyzed 15 ESL textbooks in the United States and found that women were underrepresented across various dimensions, including appearance frequency, occupational roles, and grammatical constructions. Porreca also highlighted the use of

male-dominated generics, such as “he” as the default pronoun, and the overwhelming tendency to position men as actors and women as objects or supporters.

In a later study, Lee and Collins (2008) investigated secondary school English textbooks in Hong Kong and Singapore. Their findings confirmed a noticeable imbalance in the representation of male and female characters. Males were typically depicted as professionals, explorers, or decision-makers, while females were cast in nurturing or emotional roles. These patterns persisted even in supposedly modern or globally oriented textbooks.

Similarly, Ndura (2004) conducted a critical content analysis of American ESL textbooks and observed that gender representations were often intertwined with cultural and racial stereotypes. She argued that such portrayals subtly reinforced unequal power dynamics and promoted a narrow worldview that privileged Western norms.

In the Middle East, Amini and Birjandi (2012) found that Iranian high school EFL textbooks displayed a strong male bias in both text and images. Women were significantly underrepresented and typically confined to domestic or emotional roles, while men dominated public, scientific, and political spheres. These findings echoed those of Ansary and Babaii (2003), who described the phenomenon as “subliminal sexism”, where gender bias operates below the surface yet shapes learners’ perceptions over time.

Other studies have also explored the visual dimension of gender representation. Kobia (2009), for example, examined primary English textbooks in Kenya and discovered that illustrations often mirrored the same gender hierarchies found in the text. Men were shown working, leading, or solving problems, while women were most frequently portrayed as cooking, cleaning, or caring for children.

Despite cultural and regional differences, these studies point to a common issue: ELT textbooks frequently present a limited and stereotypical view of gender. While some recent materials have made efforts toward inclusivity, many still fail to offer balanced representations of men and women regarding roles, voice, and agency. These insights underscore the need for ongoing critical evaluation of textbook content, particularly through frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis, which can help uncover the subtle ways gender ideologies are reproduced in educational settings.

2.4. Previous studies on gender representation in ELT textbooks in Vietnam

Research on gender representation in English language teaching (ELT) materials in Vietnam has revealed persistent gender biases despite efforts to modernize educational content. These studies highlight how textbooks continue to reflect traditional gender norms, potentially influencing learners’ perceptions and reinforcing societal stereotypes.

Vu and Pham (2021) conducted a critical discourse analysis of a newly published English textbook series for lower secondary education in Vietnam. Their study found that male characters occupied more verbal space and were depicted as having higher social status, better knowledge, and more ambitious goals than female characters. In contrast, female characters were portrayed as less independent, with limited choices and fewer developmental resources. Interviews with textbook authors revealed that while some efforts were made to ensure gender balance, gender was not a priority during the textbook writing process. Furthermore, classroom observations indicated that teachers often overlooked gender issues, focusing primarily on linguistic content.

Phan and Pham (2021) examined gender stereotypes as a hidden curriculum in illustrations of English textbooks for upper-secondary students in Vietnam. Their mixed-methods study revealed that male characters were depicted in various occupations and sports, while female characters were often shown in domestic roles or engaging in traditionally feminine activities. The study concluded that such representations reinforce traditional gender roles and may limit students' perceptions of gender possibilities.

These findings underscore the need for a more critical and gender-sensitive approach to textbook development and classroom practices in Vietnam. Addressing these biases is essential for promoting gender equality and providing learners with diverse and inclusive representations.

2.5. Research gaps

Despite a growing body of international research highlighting gender bias in ELT textbooks across various educational and cultural contexts (Porreca, 1984; Lee & Collins, 2008; Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Kobia, 2009), existing studies have predominantly focused on locally produced materials or national curriculum textbooks. Many of these works have exposed recurring patterns in which male characters dominate textual and visual space, while female characters are frequently associated with emotional, domestic, or passive roles. However, relatively few studies have addressed how internationally developed and globally marketed textbooks, particularly those claiming to promote diversity and global citizenship, represent gender in practice.

In Vietnam, research into gender representation in English textbooks remains limited, though recent studies have started to emerge. For instance, Vu and Pham (2021) critically examined gender bias in textbooks used in lower secondary schools and found persistent stereotypes embedded in language and imagery. However, they focused primarily on materials published within the Vietnamese national curriculum. There remains a notable gap in research exploring how globally distributed ELT materials, such as *LIFE (A2-B1)*, construct gender roles and ideologies in Vietnamese educational settings, particularly at the university level, where such textbooks are increasingly common.

Moreover, many previous studies have relied on quantitative content analysis or surface-level observations, often focusing solely on textual or visual aspects. Few have employed a comprehensive critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to explore how language and images work together to reproduce or challenge gender ideologies. This study seeks to fill these gaps by applying Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model to examine both the linguistic and visual representations of gender in the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook, thereby contributing new insights into the intersection of global educational content and local classroom realities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in CDA to investigate gender representation in the *LIFE (A2-B1)* English textbook. CDA, particularly the model proposed by Fairclough (1995), is the guiding framework for analyzing how language and images construct, reinforce, or challenge gender ideologies. The study focuses on verbal and visual discourses, acknowledging that meaning is shaped not only by linguistic choices but also by multimodal elements such as images, layout, and the interplay between text and visuals.

Interpretive research aims to uncover hidden ideologies and asymmetries in gender portrayal rather than test hypotheses or quantify occurrences. The emphasis is placed on examining discourse as a social practice that reflects and reproduces power relations.

3.2. Data source

The primary data for this study is the *LIFE Intermediate A2-B1* textbook, authored by Hughes, Stephenson, and Dummett (2019) and published by National Geographic Learning. This textbook was selected based on the following criteria:

- It is widely used in English language programs in Vietnam, including at the researchers' institution.
- It claims to reflect global perspectives and real-world issues, making it a relevant site for examining gender representation in an internationalized ELT context.
- Its integration of authentic images, topic-based units, and cross-cultural themes offers rich material for multimodal discourse analysis.

The Analysis focuses on textual content (e.g., dialogues, reading passages, vocabulary examples) and visuals (e.g., photographs, illustrations, page design) across all 12 textbook units.

3.3. Analytical framework

The Analysis draws on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse, which includes:

- Textual Analysis - examining linguistic choices such as:
 - + Thematic structure
 - + Use of transitivity (who does what to whom)
 - + Modality and evaluation (e.g., strong vs. soft assertions)
 - + Gendered vocabulary and adjective-noun collocations
- Discursive Practice - analyzing how texts are produced and interpreted:
 - + What social roles are assigned to male vs. female characters?
 - + Who speaks more, initiates actions, or holds authority in dialogues?
- Social Practice - interpreting how gender representations relate to wider ideologies:
 - + Do the portrayals align with or challenge traditional gender roles?
 - + How might these discourses reflect globalized but Western-centric views of gender?

Visual Analysis is informed by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar, focusing on:

- Gaze and positioning
- Activity and passivity
- Spatial placement (foreground/background, prominence)
- Symbolic representations of gender (e.g., clothing, setting, gesture)

3.4. Coding and data analysis procedure

A coding framework was developed to categorize both linguistic and visual indicators of gender representation. Initial codes were drawn deductively from previous studies (e.g., Sunderland, 2000; Lazar, 2005) and then refined through inductive coding during the close reading of the textbook. Units of Analysis included:

- Character gender
- Role type (professional, domestic, learner, etc.)
- Speech acts and turn-taking
- Visual representation and positioning
- Stereotypical attributes (e.g., appearance, emotions, authority)

The data were analyzed manually, and the findings were organized around recurring themes and patterns in the portrayal of male and female characters.

4. Results

The following coding table was developed to record their frequency of appearance across all twelve units to provide an overview of how male and female characters are distributed throughout the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook. The table distinguishes between textual and visual representation, documenting how often male and female figures appear in images, reading passages, dialogues, and listening scripts. This preliminary mapping serves as a foundation for the deeper analysis that follows. In sections 5.1 to 5.5, findings from this table are used as reference points to explore not only the quantitative presence of gender but also how roles, language, and visual framing contribute to broader patterns of gender representation in the textbook.

Table 1: Frequency of Male and Female Characters by Unit in the LIFE (A2-B1) Textbook

Unit	Unit topics	Male Visuals	Female Visuals	Male Text References	Female Text References
Unit 1	Who you are	5	3	4	3
Unit 2	Sport	4	4	3	3
Unit 3	Transport	6	3	5	2
Unit 4	Challenges	5	3	4	3
Unit 5	The Environment	4	4	3	3
Unit 6	Stages in life	6	3	5	2
Unit 7	Work	5	4	4	3
Unit 8	Technology	3	5	3	4
Unit 9	Holidays	4	4	4	3
Unit 10	Products	5	3	5	2
Unit 11	History	6	2	4	3
Unit 12	Nature	4	4	3	3

4.1. Imbalance in gender visibility and participation

A close analysis of the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook reveals a moderate yet noticeable imbalance in the visibility and participation of male and female characters across visual and textual content. While the textbook does not present overt gender bias, patterns in frequency and prominence suggest that male figures are more often foregrounded and occupy central communicative or narrative roles in several units.

Based on a coding of all twelve units, male characters appeared more frequently in both images and textual references. On average, each unit includes approximately 4.75 male visuals compared to 3.67 female visuals. For example, Unit 3 (*Transport*) features six male visual representations versus three female ones, and Unit 4 (*Challenges*) shows a similar gap (five male visuals versus three female). In units with strong professional or public themes, such as Unit 6 (*Stages in Life*) and Unit 10 (*Products*), male characters are often depicted as active, in motion, or in leadership positions.

The trend in textual content is similar. Across reading passages and listening scripts, male figures are referenced more often (mean: 4.0 per unit) than female figures (3.08 per unit). In Unit 3, for instance, male travelers and workers dominate the narrative around transportation, while female characters are either absent or briefly mentioned. Likewise, Unit 10, which discusses product design and innovation, highlights male speakers and inventors more prominently in text and accompanying audio material.

While these numerical gaps may appear modest, they become more meaningful when considering the qualitative roles assigned to each gender. Male characters are frequently shown taking initiative, giving opinions, solving problems, or leading discussions. Female characters, by contrast, are more often shown in supportive or interpersonal roles. In Unit 7 (*Work*), for example, a video features a male job interviewee explaining his qualifications, while the female character facilitates the interaction but speaks less.

It is worth noting that several units, notably Units 2, 5, and 8, make visible efforts to balance gender presence, particularly in collaborative or human-centered themes such as sport, environment, or technology. In these cases, visual and textual content show a near-equal gender split. However, these instances remain inconsistent across the book and are not always accompanied by equal depth of role or voice.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, these imbalances are not merely about numbers but about whose voices are heard more, who takes action, and who occupies the centre of the narrative or visual frame. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have argued, visual prominence and compositional choices can signal symbolic power. In *LIFE*, men are more frequently positioned in the foreground, shown performing tasks, or engaged with technology and tools. Women, although present, are more often shown smiling, observing, or participating in social scenes without occupying central agentive roles.

LIFE (A2-B1), thus does not explicitly exclude women or present them in overtly stereotypical ways. However, it tends to reflect a subtle asymmetry in gender representation that favors male presence and agency, especially in travel, design, and professional life topics. These patterns, unless made visible through critical engagement in the classroom, may quietly reinforce learners' assumptions about gendered roles in society.

4.2. Gendered role assignments in text and image

Beyond numerical differences in visibility, the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook also reveals patterns in how male and female characters are assigned roles, both in the written text and visual illustrations. Though not always overt, these role assignments often reflect traditional gender expectations, particularly in how professional identity, agency, and expertise are distributed across genders.

In several units, male characters are more frequently associated with roles that involve action, authority, or technical skill. For instance, in Unit 7 (*Work*), the vocabulary and grammar sections focus on job-related language, including terms like *engineer*, *builder*, *manager*, and *interview*. The visual materials in this unit predominantly depict male figures in these occupational contexts, such as on construction sites, in formal business settings, or holding tools and equipment. By contrast, female characters are more likely to appear in service-oriented or communicative roles (e.g., *in customer service or administrative positions*), with fewer visual cues implying leadership or technical expertise.

Similarly, Unit 6 (*Stages in Life*), which discusses life events and celebrations, associates women with relational roles such as mother, bride, and caregiver. Visuals in this unit often portray women in family-based contexts, smiling, hugging, or surrounded by children, while men are more frequently shown giving speeches or leading ceremonial moments. These subtle cues support Lazar's (2005) observation that even well-meaning materials may assign men and women different types of social presence: men as achievers and women as connectors.

In Unit 10 (*Products*), which focuses on design and innovation, male figures are more prominent in visual and textual content. A listening task, for example, features a male speaker describing the technical process behind creating a new product. At the same time, female characters in the same unit are pictured as consumers or observers rather than creators. This aligns with findings from earlier studies (e.g., Mills, 2008; Sunderland, 2000), which note that ELT materials often depict men as producers and women as users or supporters.

That said, the textbook does include some efforts to challenge traditional role assignments. In Unit 8 (*Technology*), one of the featured reading texts includes a female computer science student explaining how she learned coding and developed an app. The image shows her in a focused, hands-on context, breaking the stereotype of technology being a male-dominated domain. This positive representation, however, is somewhat isolated, there is no sustained pattern of gender reversal across the other units.

In terms of visuals, men are more often shown in action, fixing things, speaking, climbing, pointing, while women are more often seated, smiling, or

listening. These patterns reinforce what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) call the “interactive meaning” of images: posture, gaze, and spatial position all communicate social relationships and symbolic roles. A man standing and pointing at a whiteboard implies knowledge and authority; a woman seated and listening suggests receptiveness and support.

From a discourse perspective, this imbalance is further reinforced by the language of role framing. Male characters are more likely to be introduced with occupational nouns (*e.g., a scientist, a manager, a technician*), whereas female characters are more often introduced relationally (*e.g., a mother, a friend, a local resident*). These linguistic choices subtly prioritize professional identity for men and personal/social identity for women, reflecting broader patterns in how gendered subjectivity is constructed in educational texts.

Although *LIFE (A2-B1)* includes diverse topics and voices, it still tends to assign male and female characters to roles that echo traditional gender norms. Male characters dominate work, innovation, and expertise, while female characters are more visible in relational, emotional, or community-oriented contexts. Though not extreme, these patterns carry implicit messages about who acts, who leads, and who supports, messages that are important for educators to surface and critically examine in the classroom.

4.3. Subtle linguistic bias and symbolic association

While the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook does not display explicit or overt sexism, a closer look at its language choices and visual symbolism reveals more subtle patterns of gender bias. These discursive strategies, often operating beneath the surface, shape learners’ perceptions of what men and women are like and their roles.

At the lexical level, male characters are more frequently associated with competence-based vocabulary, especially in work, innovation, and achievement units. For example, in Unit 7 (*Work*) and Unit 10 (*Products*), male figures are described using terms such as *experienced, efficient, problem-solver, or leader*. In contrast, female figures in Unit 6 (*Stages in Life*) or Unit 9 (*Holidays*) are often characterized using emotionally charged or appearance-oriented adjectives like *caring, beautiful, inspiring, or creative*. These patterns mirror what Mills (2008) calls a “*gendered division of praise*,” in which male accomplishment is framed through skill and mastery, while female value is rooted in emotion or aesthetics.

The use of transitivity in the textbook’s dialogues and reading texts further supports this bias. In several units, male characters appear as grammatical agents, the doers of actions, while female characters are more often recipients or supporters. For instance, in Unit 11 (*History*), a male explorer “discovers new ruins” and

“documents ancient civilizations,” while a female character is shown “learning from the past” or “visiting a museum exhibit.” These subtle shifts in verb structure reflect what Fairclough (1995) and Lazar (2005) describe as structural asymmetry in discourse: who acts versus who observes, who leads versus who responds.

Modal verbs and hedging also play a role. In Unit 8 (*Technology*), a female speaker says: “*Maybe we could test the app again?*” while her male partner replies: “*Let us launch it this week.*” Female characters’ use of tentative modal structures (*maybe, could, perhaps*) softens their authority, while male speech tends to be more direct and declarative. Though subtle, these differences reinforce stereotypical associations between gender and confidence, echoing patterns documented in real-world conversational research (Coates, 2015).

Visual symbolism in *LIFE* also contributes to gendered associations. In Unit 12 (*Nature*), images of men typically depict them climbing mountains, leading tours, or interacting with wild animals. At the same time, women are often shown engaging with nature in passive ways, sitting in a field, admiring flowers, or smiling toward the camera. The positioning of figures within images also reflects symbolic power: men appear in foregrounds, often facing outward or in motion, while women are more often seated, centered within symmetrical frames, or gazing directly at the viewer, signaling approachability rather than authority (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Another important observation lies in the thematic framing of gender. Male figures are frequently tied to problem-solving, action, and decision-making, especially in contexts like technology (*Unit 8*), design (*Unit 10*), and environment (*Unit 5*). Female figures, on the other hand, are commonly framed in relational or emotional roles, such as caring for others (*Unit 6*), participating in cultural celebrations (*Unit 9*), or maintaining harmony (*Unit 2, on sportsmanship*). While these are not inherently negative representations, the consistent pattern of division suggests an underlying ideological framework that may subtly shape learners’ understanding of gender expectations.

These subtle linguistic and symbolic cues reflect what Lazar (2005) calls “*non-obvious sexism*”, forms of gender bias that do not rely on exclusion or hostility but are nonetheless powerful in their accumulation and repetition. Without critical awareness, such patterns can become naturalized, particularly in the language classroom, where learners may internalize linguistic structures and their social meanings.

While *LIFE (A2-B1)* avoids overt stereotyping, it exhibits recurring micro-level choices that align men with competence, agency, and external engagement and women with emotion, relation, and observation. These lexical, grammatical, or visual choices are not accidental; they are shaped by, and, in turn, reinforce, social ideologies about gender. Recognizing and questioning these patterns is key to building a more inclusive and reflective classroom environment.

4.4. Attempts at balance and emerging shifts

Although the *LIFE (A2-B1)* textbook reveals certain imbalances in gender representation, it also includes instances that suggest an intentional effort to portray men and women in diverse and non-stereotypical roles. These moments, though not consistent across all units, indicate a degree of awareness on the part of the authors and publishers regarding the importance of gender inclusivity. From a CDA perspective, these shifts, however partial, represent points of ideological negotiation where dominant norms are gently challenged or reframed (Fairclough, 1995).

One noteworthy example appears in *Unit 8 (Technology)*, which includes a listening task featuring a young woman studying computer science. She discusses her experiences in learning to code and developing her own app, clearly positioning her as both technically competent and agentic. In the accompanying image, she is seen working independently at a laptop, fully engaged with her project. This representation challenges the common association between technology and masculinity, and aligns female identity with innovation and self-direction.

Another instance of progressive framing is found in *Unit 6 (Stages in Life)*, where a female character is portrayed as a community leader involved in organizing local celebrations. The reading passage emphasizes her planning skills, ability to manage resources, and leadership qualities. She is not introduced as a mother or wife, nor defined by her appearance or emotional expressiveness, but as an active social contributor. The photo that accompanies the text shows her speaking in front of a group, further reinforcing her public presence and authority.

Visual balance is also more apparent in *Unit 2 (Sport)*, which showcases both men and women participating in various athletic activities. The reading section highlights athletes from different backgrounds, including a female martial artist, described in terms of her strength, focus, and discipline. Unlike in other units where physicality is linked predominantly with men, this unit grants female characters an equal share of the narrative space, while avoiding reductive or gendered labels.

In *Unit 5 (The Environment)*, men and women are depicted collaborating equally in environmental initiatives. One photo shows a mixed-gender group of volunteers planting trees, while the listening activity features both male and female speakers discussing sustainable living. There is no visible hierarchy between genders; both are framed as active participants with shared responsibility. This kind of collaborative discourse resists traditional binaries by focusing on collective action and shared values rather than role-based distinctions.

However, despite these positive examples, they remain isolated and not consistently maintained across the textbook. For example, while *Unit 8* foregrounds

a female tech student, *Unit 10 (Products)* reverts to male-centered narratives about innovation, with male inventors featured prominently in both texts and visuals. Likewise, while *Unit 2* balances sports imagery, *Unit 12 (Nature)* again shows women in passive poses, admiring scenery or relaxing, while men are depicted climbing, leading, or taking photos.

From a critical standpoint, these inconsistencies point to what Gray (2010) refers to as “*safe diversity*”, the inclusion of progressive representations that signal awareness, but are not disruptive enough to challenge the broader structure of traditional gender discourse. Without explicit commentary, reflection tasks, or thematic links across units, these representations risk being interpreted as exceptions rather than intentional shifts in discourse.

Nonetheless, the presence of such examples offers opportunities for pedagogical engagement. Teachers can build on these moments to foster reflection, such as comparing role representations across units or inviting students to analyze how agency is distributed visually and linguistically. When paired with guided discussion, even isolated positive shifts can become critical entry points for broader conversations on gender and representation.

Thus, while *LIFE (A2-B1)* demonstrates emerging efforts to portray gender in more equitable and dynamic ways, these efforts are limited in scope and depth. They suggest progress but also highlight the need for a more coherent, sustained, and critically informed approach to gender inclusivity in ELT materials.

5. Discussion

The *LIFE (A2-B1)* analysis reveals that while the textbook avoids overt gender stereotypes and includes a range of global, modern topics, it still reflects subtle patterns of gender imbalance, particularly regarding visibility, role distribution, and symbolic associations. These imbalances are not always numerical or explicit. However, they are embedded in how male and female characters are framed linguistically and visually and what roles they are assigned across the textbook’s thematic units.

Male characters dominate high-agency, public-facing roles such as engineers, inventors, and leaders, especially in units focused on technology, innovation, or product design (*e.g., Units 7 and 10*). Although present throughout, female characters are more commonly associated with supportive, interpersonal, or aesthetic roles, seen in units on family, nature, or cultural celebrations (*e.g., Units 6, 9, 12*). Linguistically, men are more likely to be described through action-oriented

verbs and competence-based adjectives, while women are often linked to emotions, appearance, or relational identity.

From a CDA perspective, these patterns are not neutral or accidental. They reflect deeper ideological structures that shape learners' assumptions about gender, identity, and social power (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2005). By consistently reinforcing specific gender associations, however subtly, textbooks like *LIFE* risk contributing to the normalization of traditional gender roles in the language classroom.

That said, the textbook does demonstrate several positive shifts, with examples of women in non-traditional roles and men in emotionally expressive or collaborative contexts. Including a female computer science student in Unit 8 and a female community organizer in Unit 6 reflects the textbook's emerging efforts to diversify and expand its portrayal of gender roles. However, these attempts are inconsistent, isolated, and often not integrated into the wider narrative structure of the book.

These findings have significant implications for ELT practice. In many educational contexts, especially in EFL settings where textbooks are the primary source of language and cultural exposure, learners may interpret the patterns they encounter as reflections of real-world norms. When these materials reinforce narrow role models, they risk limiting learners' perceptions of what is socially acceptable or possible for themselves and others. In light of these findings, several pedagogical implications can be drawn to guide more equitable and gender-sensitive practices in the EFL classroom as follows:

- *Encouraging Critical Textbook Engagement:* Teachers should be encouraged to approach textbooks as ideological texts, not just linguistic tools. This includes guiding learners to reflect on who speaks and acts and how different identities are represented.
- *Supplementing with Gender-Inclusive Materials:* In areas where gender balance is lacking, teachers can integrate additional texts, videos, or images that challenge dominant narratives and reflect a broader spectrum of identities.
- *Creating Classroom Opportunities for Reframing:* Teachers can design critical tasks such as rewriting texts with reversed roles, analyzing visual compositions, or comparing male and female character portrayals across units.
- *Including Gender Awareness in Teacher Training:* Teacher education programs should incorporate discourse analysis and gender-sensitive pedagogy training, which will enable educators to detect and address subtle material bias.
- *Collaborating with Publishers for Inclusive Content:* Findings such as those in this study can inform future textbook development. Authors and editors

should be encouraged to consider not only gender balance in numbers but the deeper discursive roles, relationships, and agency afforded to all characters.

Thus, while *LIFE (A2-B1)* shows progress toward more diverse representation, it still relies on many traditional gender scripts that limit the scope of inclusion. A more intentional, sustained, and critically informed approach, both in materials development and classroom practice, is needed to ensure that English language education becomes a space for equity, reflection, and transformative learning.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how gender is represented in the *LIFE (A2-B1)* English textbook through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). By examining the textual and visual content across all twelve units, the research revealed that while the textbook embraces a globally oriented and visually modern format, it still largely reflects conventional gender ideologies. Male characters appear more frequently, are granted greater agency, and are more often placed in leadership, innovation, and authority roles. In contrast, female characters tend to be positioned in emotional, aesthetic, or caregiving contexts. Even when women are shown in professional roles, these are often framed in relational or secondary terms.

The study also identified more nuanced forms of gender bias, which are embedded in the linguistic and visual construction of the textbook. Patterns in evaluative language, transitivity, and modality consistently favour male characters as actors and initiators, while women are more frequently positioned as observers, supporters, or passive participants. The visual design reinforces these dynamics: men are more likely to be shown in motion, occupying central space or engaging with tools and environments, whereas women often appear in more passive or socially oriented settings. Although there are moments where the textbook attempts to introduce more inclusive portrayals, such as the female computer science student in Unit 8 or the female community organizer in Unit 6, these instances are isolated and not systematically integrated into the overall narrative structure.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest a more critical and reflective approach to how textbooks are selected, used, and interpreted in the EFL classroom. English language materials are not ideologically neutral; they shape how learners view themselves and others about gender, identity, and power. To promote more inclusive and equitable learning environments, the following recommendations are proposed:

- *Promote Critical Textbook Literacy in Teacher Training*: Teacher education programs, pre-service and in-service, should include training on critically analyzing textbooks. Teachers need the tools to recognize subtle gender messages and learn how to address or reframe them in classroom discourse.

- *To Encourage Reflective and Dialogic Teaching Practices*: Text-gendered content can be used as a starting point for meaningful discussion. Tasks such as role reversal, critical reading, image deconstruction, or rewriting dialogues can help learners identify bias and imagine more inclusive narratives.

- *To Supplement Materials with Inclusive and Local Content*: When textbooks fail to offer balanced representation, teachers can use supplementary materials that reflect a broader range of gender identities and challenge dominant stereotypes, especially those that resonate with local realities and student experiences.

- *To Collaborate with Publishers for Inclusive Content Development*: Textbook writers and publishers should engage with educators and gender experts to move beyond tokenistic representation. This means rethinking who is represented, how they speak and act, and their roles within the discourse.

- *To Integrate Gender Awareness into Language Learning Outcomes*: Language education should extend beyond grammar and vocabulary to include values like critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and social justice. Embedding gender sensitivity into course outcomes supports a more holistic and transformative learning experience.

In conclusion, although *LIFE (A2-B1)* offers learners an engaging and culturally diverse language-learning experience, it subtly reflects enduring gender hierarchies that can go unchallenged if left unexamined. By applying a CDA lens to textbook content and adopting inclusive teaching practices, educators can reshape the language classroom into a space that cultivates communicative competence, equity, critical reflection, and gender awareness.

References

- Amini, M., & Birjandi, P. (2012). Gender bias in the Iranian high school EFL textbooks. *English Language Teaching*, 5(2): 134-147. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n2p134>
- Ansary, H., & Babaii, E. (2003). Subliminal sexism in current ESL/EFL textbooks. *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(1): 1-15.
- Coates, J. (2015). *Women, men and language: A sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Gray, J. (2010). *The construction of English: Culture, consumerism and promotion in the ELT global coursebook*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Hartman, P. L., & Judd, E. L. (1978). Sexism and TESOL materials. *TESOL Quarterly*, 12(4): 383-393.
- Hughes, J., Stephenson, H., & Dummett, P. (2019). *LIFE intermediate A2-B1*. National Geographic Learning.
- Kobia, J. M. (2009). Femininity and masculinity in English primary school textbooks in Kenya. *Gender and Education*, 21(6): 617-625.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Lazar, M. M. (2005). *Feminist critical discourse analysis: Gender, power and ideology in discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, J. F. K., & Collins, P. (2008). Gender representation in Hong Kong and Singapore secondary English textbooks. *Sex Roles*, 59(1-2): 127-137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9414-1>
- Mills, S. (2008). *Language and sexism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ndura, E. (2004). ESL and cultural bias: An analysis of elementary through high school textbooks in the Western United States. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 17(2): 143-153.
- Phan, A., & Pham, T. X. (2021). Gender stereotypes as hidden curriculum: A case of Vietnamese English textbooks. *International Journal of Education*, 14(1): 30-38. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ije.v14i1.30553>
- Porreca, K. L. (1984). Sexism in current ESL textbooks. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18(4): 705-724. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586584>
- Sunderland, J. (2000). *Gendered discourses*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vu, M. T., & Pham, T. T. T. (2021). Still in the shadow of Confucianism? Gender bias in contemporary English textbooks in Vietnam. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 31(3): 477-497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1924239>