



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Challenging Gender and Ethnic Boundaries: Exploring Representations in a University Textbook

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**ABSTRACT**

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This paper aims to analyze gender representation, cultural diversity, and inclusive representation in Evolve: Special Edition (Hendra et al., 2021) used to teach English to students at university level in Oman. Quantitative content analysis was used to examine the following categories: jobs, masculine and feminine names, Muhajeb (hair-covered) and non-Muhajeb (non-hair covered), pronoun repetitions, and Arab and non-Arab characters used in the designated textbook. Study findings show that the textbook exhibits gender equality and balance in all categories except for pronoun repetitions. Analysis of pronoun repetition showed that masculine pronoun repetitions outnumbered feminine pronoun repetitions. Although one category was gender biased against females, this study shows that gender balance, cultural diversity, and inclusive representation are strongly visible in the textbook. Addressing this imbalance could further enhance the textbook's commitment to equitable gender representation and contribute to more inclusive pedagogical practices.

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## INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of the construct of gender in the school syllabus is one of the aspects that requires attention as it has the ability to shape the culture and the individual's identity. Given the role of textbooks and other educational materials as sources of knowledge, these also express culture's values and beliefs. How gender is perceived and defined in these materials can either reinforce discrimination against these individuals or contribute towards understanding gender in a more plural sense. For example, researchers point out that several educational resources still illustrate primary gender roles and pay little attention to women's and non-binary persons' inputs which in the end frees students from appreciating the idea that gender is a spectrum rather than a binary idea (Kostas, 2021; UNESCO, 2003).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need to integrate a more balanced representation of the genders into the curriculum. This is a very good development because it assists students in developing critical thinking and empathy and equips them to function in a multicultural society. For successful curriculum revision, an all-encompassing strategy is needed, including the evaluation of available resources for gender bias and the creation of materials that effectively present all genders without discrimination. Research has demonstrated that when education materials are based on gender theory, students are able to resist stereotypes and receive empowerment by the available relatable figures (Bataineh et al., 2024; Kostas, 2021; Wondifraw, 2017).

In addition, the gender equity concerns in relation to school education programs are not only content related but also integrally connected with the teaching approaches which are used with such content. Gender image formation among children is mediated by the approaches which teachers take during

classroom instruction and through the instructional materials used in the classrooms. These initiatives include professional training programs geared towards equipping teachers with adequate information on gender perspectives. Thus, by providing teachers with training aimed at assisting them in the discussion of issues concerning gender and gender equality, the schools would foster the desire for a more tolerant society and one free of the generally accepted stereotypes (Bidyapati, 2024; OECD, 2022).

While much progress has been made in various educational systems, several challenges remain to be combatted. Confrontation from various shareholders due to societal and cultural beliefs poses a significant hindrance to the incorporation of gender-inclusive curricula, hence making it a challenge. To overcome such barriers, there is an urgent need to involve communities in dialogue regarding the advantages of gender equality in education. By emphasizing the positive effects of inclusive curricula on student outcomes and the general good of society, teachers help develop a collaborative process with policymakers in deconstructing the obstacles that ensure the perpetuation of gender bias in institutions (Ryan Group, 2024; UNESCO, 2003).

An analysis of gender visibility in an English textbook used in teaching English to foundation students at various higher education institutions is the objective of this study. In order to achieve this objective, the current study will tackle three primary research inquiries:

1. To what degree does gender representation prevail in the language and visuals employed in the university textbook, and how does this portrayal either mirror or question conventional gender norms?
2. To what extent do the occupational positions allocated to male and female characters in the university textbook shape students' expectations of gender competence and professional ambitions?
3. To what extent do the university textbook sustain cultural diversity and inclusive representation?

### **Importance of the study**

The choice of gender visibility in textbooks is very significant for many reasons, especially in influencing both teaching and learned perceptions. Textbooks provide the backbone of a course curriculum and are primary sources of knowledge and culture for students. The illustrations of gender representation in such materials can significantly affect students' notions of gender roles and expectations. Research shows that textbooks usually perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes, which can confine students' ambitions and propagate stereotypes in society (Bidyapati, 2024). Gender visibility gives educators an opportunity to identify and challenge these biases, thus the creation of a more just learning environment. Beyond that, the inclusion of different gender representations in educational material is vital for enabling inclusivity and equality. Such findings indicate that when students meet varied constructions of gender within their learning resources, they not only transgress stereotypes but empower them toward broader views of their identity and future (Elwood, 2016).

Grasping gender visibility in textbooks feeds into larger discourses around social justice and equity in education. The representation of gender in teaching aids is, therefore, more than an academic issue, since it brings about real impact on how people see themselves and others in society. Through analyzing how gender roles are captured in such contexts, researchers can bring to the attention of policymakers to widen the consideration towards achieving equality for different genders in schools, thus falling in line with several policy frameworks claiming for inclusivity and diversity within educational spheres. This analysis may also be able to ignite reform within educational systems where the very curriculum could be made more reflective of gender sensitivity, producing collaboration among practitioners and education bureaucracies. Today's clear emphasis on gender visibility in textbooks should positively influence the shaping of a more inclusive and just educational process, which eventually benefits all students in their growing into socially responsible citizens (Kostas, 2021).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Gender bias in educational materials**

Prior research has invariably brought out the persistent traces of the gender bias in academic texts, including college textbooks. One such study done in Ethiopia indicated a phenomenon of high male bias in the language use and construction of the characters in high-status professions, while women are often depicted as employees or engaged in domestic activities (Wondifraw 2022). This finding seems to indicate that the hidden curriculum entrenches traditional gender roles restricting students' views of gender capacities and reinforcing societal stereotypes. The textbooks are not simply educational tools but would also represent cultural artifacts through which gender societal norms are manifested or reinforced (Sunderland 2006). These biases have significant implications, ranging from influencing career aspirations to shaping self-concepts in students (Pillely 2013).

### **The role of language in gender representation**

Language assumes a pivotal role in gender representation within textbooks. Linguistic features—such as nouns, pronouns and occupational titles—can convey implicit biases that, in turn, reinforce gender stereotypes. Scholars posit that textbooks frequently mirror societal attitudes towards gender; male characters often occupy roles associated with power and authority, whereas female characters are relegated to supportive or domestic roles (Gee, 2005; Butler, 2004). This imbalance in representation not only influences how students perceive gender roles, but it also shapes their understanding of societal expectations and norms (Bataineh et al., 2024; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). The linguistic analysis of textbooks, therefore, becomes essential for uncovering the subtle ways in which gender bias is perpetuated through language (Yang, 2014). However, the implications of this linguistic bias extend beyond mere representation, because they inform the very fabric of students' socialization processes.

### **Impact of gender representation on student outcomes**

The representation of gender within textbooks holds profound implications for student outcomes; it is particularly influential in shaping (1) attitudes and aspirations. Research has demonstrated that when educational materials provide balanced portrayals of genders, students are significantly more likely to cultivate positive attitudes towards gender equality and to challenge traditional stereotypes (Campbell, 2010). However, textbooks that reinforce gender biases may restrict students' ambitions and perpetuate discriminatory attitudes (Ullah & Skelton, 2012). The educational environment—including the materials utilized—plays a critical role in socializing students into societal norms. This necessitates a rigorous evaluation of textbook content to ensure equitable gender representation (Turner-Bowker, 1996). Although such evaluations may seem daunting, they are essential for fostering an inclusive educational landscape. Because of this, the ongoing scrutiny of educational resources remains imperative for promoting progressive attitudes and dismantling entrenched stereotypes.

### **Gender bias in educational materials**

Research has consistently underscored the prevalence of gender bias in educational materials (including university textbooks). A study conducted in Ethiopia revealed significant male domination in language use and the portrayal of characters in prestigious professions; women are often depicted in subordinate roles, such as employees or in domestic settings (Bataineh et al., 2023; Wondifraw, 2022). This finding suggests that the hidden curriculum perpetuates traditional gender roles, limiting students' perceptions of gender capabilities and reinforcing societal stereotypes. Textbooks serve not only as educational resources but also as cultural artifacts that reflect and shape societal norms regarding gender (Sunderland, 2006). The implications of such biases extend beyond the classroom, influencing students' career aspirations and self-perceptions (Pillely, 2013). However, one must question the extent to which these biases are acknowledged, because they can profoundly impact the trajectory of students' futures.

### **The role of language in gender representation**

Language (as a construct) plays a pivotal role in the representation of gender within textbooks. Linguistic features—such as nouns, pronouns and occupational titles—can convey implicit biases that reinforce gender stereotypes. Scholars (such as Gee, 2005; Butler, 2004) argue that textbooks often reflect societal attitudes towards gender; male characters, for instance, frequently occupy roles associated with power and authority, whereas female characters are relegated to supportive or domestic roles. This imbalance in representation not only affects how students perceive gender roles;

however, it also shapes their understanding of societal expectations and norms (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). The linguistic analysis of textbooks thus becomes essential for uncovering the subtle ways in which gender bias is perpetuated through language, because it reveals the underlying structures of inequality (Yang, 2014).

### **Impact of gender representation on academic performance**

The representation of gender in textbooks holds substantial implications for academic performance; this is particularly evident in disciplines such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Numerous studies (Bowman et al., 2022) have revealed that female representation within a course positively influences the academic achievement of all students, although particularly pronounced effects are observed among female students. The presence of female instructors has been linked to improved performance—suggesting that gender congruence may enhance students' self-concept and motivation (Doornkamp et al., 2019). Such findings underscore the significance of gender representation in educational contexts, for it can cultivate a more supportive learning environment that encourages all students to excel. However, the implications of this representation extend beyond mere numbers; they challenge the very fabric of educational equity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Quantitative research**

Quantitative research refers to an organized inquiry that is basically focused on gathering and analyzing numerical information (Choy, 2014). The effort here is directed at establishing patterns, correlations, and trends relating the variables under study. An inherent strength of this methodological approach lies in objectivity; since quantitative research relies on numerical data and not subjective judgments, biases are minimized, and results stemming from such a study become much more credible (Choy, 2014). This level of objectivity allows replication of the studies, hence confirming the findings and strengthening the reliability of the research. Another advantage is that quantitative research involves mostly standardized approaches in collecting information, including surveys and experiments, which facilitate efficient access to large data sets. This would be an utmost advantage when studying large populations since, by that, it provides researchers with the capability of forming conclusions that could then be applied to general use. This makes the application of statistical analysis stronger, as it allows researchers to establish possible correlations and causal relationships; hence, making quantitative research a powerful tool in hypothesis testing and predictive modeling.

One further important strength of quantitative research is the relative ease of interpretation of findings and the ability to report them to different audiences (Ghanad, 2023). Because data is quantitative, it is easy to make comparisons and present the information pictorially in the form of graphs, charts, or other illustrations which improves comprehension and aids in making decisions. This precision is important in healthcare, education, and market research, whereby stakeholders are dependent on data to formulate policies and strategies. In addition, the ability to work with large amounts of data gives researchers the chance to reveal more intricate detail than might be obvious at first sight, hence enhancing understanding of complicated issues. In summary, the advantages of quantitative research include: objective, easy (efficient) to collect data, can be repeated, easy to obtain results; thus, the methodology is seen as an important method for researchers who want to investigate and understand more about human behavior and social context.

### **Sampling**

While quantitative research typically relies on random sampling to ensure statistical representativeness, this study employed purposeful sampling to select the university textbook for analysis. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves deliberately choosing research participants or materials based on specific criteria relevant to the research question (Patton, 2015). In the context of this study, the decision to use purposeful sampling was driven by the aim to analyze a textbook that is widely used and influential within the academic discipline. By selecting a commonly used textbook, the findings of this study have the potential to provide meaningful insights into the gender representation encountered by a significant number of students. This approach aligns with the goal of quantitative research to draw generalizable conclusions, as the selected textbook is likely to shape the educational experiences and perceptions

of a large student population. Furthermore, the use of purposeful sampling allows for the in-depth examination of a specific case that is particularly informative and relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While the findings may not be statistically representative of all textbooks in the field, the analysis of a widely used and influential textbook can still yield valuable insights into the gender dynamics present in educational materials and their potential impact on students' learning experiences.

### Description of the sample

The sample textbook is *Evolve: Special Edition Student's Book*. It was published by Cambridge University Press in 2021. It is a level 1 English language Foundation textbook, and it has twelve units and 184 pages. The textbook units revolve around interesting topics for young learners (e.g. Busy days, Zoom in, Zoom out, Great people, Colorful memories, You're good). The textbook aims to serve as a basic introduction to Foundation students at a university level. The four skills (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are taught for beginner's level.

**Table 1: Number of units, lessons and pages in evolve textbook**

Units	Lessons	Pages
I am	6	12
Great People	6	21
Come in	6	13
I Love it	6	11
Busy Days	6	11
Zoom in, Zoom out	6	13
Now is Good	6	11
You're Good!	6	11
Places to go	6	13
Get ready	6	11
Colourful Memories	6	11
Stop, eat, go	6	11
Review	6	33

### Data collection

The first step in this quantitative research is to systematically collect data from a selected university textbook. First, there is a need to identify and obtain a copy of a textbook that is in wide use in the academic discipline concerned, thus ascertaining that it conforms to current educational standards and societal expectations. The chosen textbook should be representative of the curriculum and contain the demographic diversity of the student population. Following the acquisition of the textbook, the next step is to systematically categorize its contents into three distinct classes: passages, exercises, and illustrations. This classification is necessary since it allows for a much more systematic analysis of the different elements that go into the representation of gender. Each of these categories will be analyzed independently in order to ensure that all relevant data points are well recorded. For instance, chapters may contain narrative elements, and activities may include questions or scenarios that also portray gender roles. Images can also be representations that are equally important to learning about gender dynamics. Such a structured approach ensures an all-rounded analysis and no part of the textbook goes unexamined, thus creating a solid foundation into the coding and later analytic phases.

### Coding scheme

It was necessary to draw a coding scheme for analyzing gender representation within the textbook once data collection was successfully done. The scheme would consist of names, occupations, pronouns used, ethnic identities of the characters, and the representation of women as seen in hijab. Essentially, here all the names mentioned in the textbook will be identified and categorized into either masculine, feminine, or ambiguous, as denoted by cultural naming conventions. This initial categorization would give a brief description of the gender distribution of characters and individuals referenced throughout the text. The next analysis would see the inclusion of occupations as they are mentioned in the text, where each category will classify the job as typically male-dominated, female-dominated, or gender-neutral, using labor statistics of the region or context. This classification is crucial for understanding how the profession is viewed in formulating the gender roles in that

profession. The masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral used pronouns would also be counted for language analysis of the textbook. Ethnic representation would be measured by names and descriptions that refer to Arab or non-Arabs. This would allow a thorough understanding of cultural diversity. And for the illustrations that may depict a woman, it would have a coding whether she is represented covering her head or not. This coding scheme, thus, would permit the qualitative and quantitative analysis of gender and ethnic representation and also give insights into possible biases found in the educational material.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the investigation of several categories (e.g., the number of males and females, Arabs or non-Arabs) showed that males and females are equally represented in the textbook. In addition, the statistical analysis revealed no statistically significant differences (chi-square test) between males and females in the selected textbook, except for pronoun repetition. In other words, the textbook under investigation exhibited a balanced portrayal of males and females.

### 1. Jobs

The chi-square test showed no significant statistical difference between males and females in the textbook. The p-value (0.150) is above the common significance level (e.g., 0.05), indicating that we fail to reject the null hypothesis. There is no statistically significant difference between the distribution of males and females across units, meaning the distribution could be due to random chance. Table 2 shows the distribution of jobs related to males and females in the textbook.

**Table 2: Job distribution for males and females**

Unit	Male	Female
1	5	5
2	4	4
3	0	0
4	3	0
5	0	0
6	2	0
7	0	0
8	0	0
9	0	0
10	0	0
11	0	2
12	0	0

### 2. Masculine and feminine names

The study also examined the number of masculine and feminine names used in the designated textbook. The study results revealed that the textbook there is no gender bias in the textbook. The chi-square test yielded a statistic of 11.202 with a p-value of 0.426. Since the p-value is significantly higher than the conventional threshold of 0.05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis. This implies that there is no statistically significant association between the distribution of males and females across the 12 units. Table 3 shows the number of masculine and feminine names in the textbook. It also shows the total number of masculine and feminine names in the textbook.

**Table 3: Masculine and feminine names**

Unit	Males	Females
1	16	15
2	19	18
3	2	5
4	11	9
5	5	13
6	16	14
7	19	17
8	16	14
9	5	13

10	19	17
11	13	9
12	8	4

### 3. Muhajeb (Hair-covered) vs Non-Muhajeb (Non-hair-covered) females

The number of Muhajeb (Hair-covered) and Non-Muhajeb (Non-hair-covered) was also examined. Table 4 shows the distribution of Muhajeb and Non-Muhajeb in the textbook. Table 4 demonstrates that the number of Muhajeb is almost equal to non-Muhajeb except for units 5, 8, and 12. Moreover, a chi-square test was conducted to reveal a more in-depth analysis of this category. The chi-square test produced a statistic of 6.160 with a p-value of 0.862, well above the threshold for statistical significance (0.05). As a result, we fail to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that there is no significant association between the distribution of Muhajeb and Non-Muhajeb across the 12 units. In other words, a balanced depiction of Muhajeb and non-Muhajeb is an indication of cultural and religious diversity.

**Table 4: Number of Muhajeb (Hair-covered) vs Non-Muhajeb (Non-hair covered)**

Unit	Muhajeb	Non-Muhajeb
1	7	6
2	12	11
3	2	1
4	4	4
5	5	8
6	9	8
7	8	9
8	4	10
9	10	7
10	5	6
11	4	5
12	7	3

### 4. Pronoun repetition (male vs female)

The study also examined another important aspect of gender equality in textbooks. The study investigated masculine and feminine pronoun repetition. This category indicated the presence of gender bias against females. The number of masculine pronoun repetitions was higher than that of feminine pronouns. Table 5 shows that the textbook under investigation contains significant differences in the number of masculine and feminine pronoun repetitions (e.g. units 2, 5, 11). In addition, the chi-square test suggests that the observed values significantly deviate from the expected frequencies under the assumption of independence, reinforcing the idea that gender may influence pronoun repetition. In other words, the gender gap between males and females is strongly visible in the textbook.

**Table 5: Pronoun repetitions (males vs females)**

Unit	Male	Female
1	0	2
2	78	46
3	18	17
4	6	2
5	58	0
6	13	12
7	17	22
8	12	15
9	11	8
10	26	21
11	19	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>162</b>

## 5. Arabs and non-Arabs

The present study examined the presence of Arabs and non-Arabs by investigating the number of occurrences in the textbook. Table 6 shows that there is a slight difference in the number of occurrences of Arabs and non-Arabs. In general, this difference has no impact on the learners. Moreover, the Chi-square test was administered to get deep insights into the representation of Arabs and non-Arabs in the designated textbook. The Chi-Square Test results suggest no significant association between the categories of Arab and Non-Arab participants ( $p$ -value = 0.386). Since the  $p$ -value is greater than the common threshold of 0.05, we cannot reject the null hypothesis, indicating that there is no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their distribution across units.

**Table 6: Arabs vs non-Arabs**

Unit	Arab	Non-Arab
1	18	17
2	23	22
3	17	5
4	6	9
5	6	7
6	6	2
7	12	13
8	9	3
9	5	5
10	5	7
11	11	7
12	10	7
<b>Total</b>	121	104

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research paper emphasizes the overall effectiveness of the English language textbook in fostering gender balance, cultural diversity, and inclusive representation. The textbook does a commendable job of providing a balanced depiction of both Arab and non-Arab characters, ensuring that individuals from various cultural backgrounds are represented fairly. Furthermore, the representation of Muhajeb and non-Muhajeb individuals demonstrates a thoughtful approach to diversity, showcasing characters with different cultural practices in a range of social and professional settings, free from stereotypes. The distribution of jobs and professional roles is also notably equitable, with both male and female characters portrayed in leadership, academic, and professional positions, reflecting modern and fair societal structures. However, the research identifies a significant issue with the disproportionate use of male pronouns (he, him) compared to female pronouns (she, her), particularly in language exercises and reading materials. This subtle imbalance indicates that gender representation in language may still harbor biases that can influence students' perceptions of gender roles. It is essential to address this issue to ensure that the textbook offers a fully balanced representation of both genders, promoting equal visibility throughout the content. Overall, while the textbook succeeds in many aspects of representation, this study highlights the importance of ongoing revisions and careful attention to language patterns to eliminate any remaining gender biases, ultimately contributing to the development of educational resources that are genuinely inclusive and representative of all individuals, regardless of gender, cultural background, or personal identity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This research leads to several recommendations aimed at enhancing gender balance and representation in the English language textbook. Firstly, while the textbook does a commendable job of featuring both Arab and non-Arab characters, masculine and feminine names, as well as Muhajeb and non-Muhajeb individuals, it could benefit from a more intentional effort to eliminate subtle gender biases, especially in language exercises. The current tendency for male pronouns (he, him) to appear more frequently than female pronouns (she, her) needs to be addressed. This can be achieved by revising reading passages and exercises to ensure an equal representation of both male and female pronouns, which would help promote gender neutrality in language learning. The textbook could



include more examples where female characters take center stage, ensuring a balanced distribution of pronouns in various contexts. Additionally, featuring diverse and dynamic female characters in professional, academic, and leadership roles—on par with their male counterparts—would further demonstrate the textbook's commitment to gender equality. Moreover, diversifying character roles to portray female characters as decision-makers, innovators, and experts in different fields would help prevent the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes. Finally, regular reviews and updates of the textbook, informed by ongoing research into gender representation, are crucial for consistently addressing and correcting these imbalances in future editions. By adopting these recommendations, the textbook can remain an inclusive and balanced educational resource, fostering a more equitable learning environment for all students.

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research on gender balance and representation in an English language textbook carry important implications for teachers using it in university courses. The textbook's effectiveness in showcasing a balanced representation of Arab and non-Arab characters, as well as Muhajeb and non-Muhajeb individuals, provides educators with a valuable tool for fostering inclusivity and cultural awareness in their classrooms. By incorporating a diverse array of characters, the textbook invites students to engage with global viewpoints and appreciate the complexities of identity in a multicultural setting. However, the noticeable disparity in pronoun usage—where male pronouns appear more frequently than female ones—raises a significant concern for educators. Teachers should be aware of this imbalance when utilizing the textbook, as it could inadvertently reinforce traditional gender norms and shape students' views on gender roles. To address this, educators can bring attention to the imbalance during class discussions, prompting students to critically analyze the language presented in the textbook and its broader societal implications. Additionally, teachers might consider supplementing the textbook with resources that promote gender-neutral language and ensure that female characters are equally represented in both written and spoken contexts. Furthermore, instructors can create activities that emphasize gender equality, such as revising passages to achieve balanced pronoun usage or developing role-play scenarios where both male and female characters assume leadership or expert positions. By doing so, the textbook can serve as a catalyst for more profound conversations about gender equality and inclusivity. Ultimately, the teaching approach should empower students to identify and challenge gender biases in educational materials and the wider social landscape, contributing to a more equitable learning environment.

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