

# FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY: EVALUATING LANGUAGE AND GENDER POLICY IN EFL TEXTBOOKS

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**W**riting or compiling a textbook is not an easy task; it requires strong academic abilities, patience, and experience. For a long period of time Armenia has been involved in the compilation process of a number of foreign language textbooks. The present paper focuses on the analysis of gender policy aspects involved in textbook writing and compiling. The applied techniques and discussed issues can be generalized and applied to other foreign language textbook compilation processes, since those principles, regardless of a language, are mostly the same. In the present study qualitative and quantitative research methods of analyses have been applied, the quantitative – in terms of carrying out surveys among students, and the qualitative one – by content analysis of the material and conducting in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the Armenian compilers of the textbook.

**Key words:** EFL textbooks, gender policy, quantitative and qualitative research methods.

## **Introduction**

*“The language both reflects and creates how we see ourselves  
and the world. And we are who we are partly  
because of the way we use language.”*

(Litosseliti 2006)

Linguistic studies have been investigating the connection between gender and linguistic development since 1970s (Hirst 1982:95-113). Scholars claim that gender

differences in first (L1) and second language (L2) learning are socially constructed. Recent studies of language learning and gender reveal that L2 acquisition is also a social phenomenon directly influencing one's gender identity (Norton 2004:540-41).

Motivation for learning a foreign language, including learners' attitude toward the foreign language, plays a crucial role in female and male students' learning in L2 classrooms. Attitudes include those toward the language, teacher, language learning-teaching materials, and language learning-teaching activities (Sunderland 2000:202-22). These days the issue of gender sensitivity is also taken seriously, and those responsible for developing and designing such learning-teaching materials should be encouraged to understand and address this sensitivity correctly and accurately. Learning/teaching materials have often included traditional examples of intensive use of language and role-modelling, in this sense, men are mostly portrayed as scientists, inventors, directors, rulers, and doers (active, progressive, aggressive, etc.), whereas women are often depicted as mothers, sisters, house-wives, daughters, teachers, etc. These modeled, verbally and visually fixed stereotypes serve as a "reliable basis" for reinforcing the traditional roles that have been projected on female and male students and circulated among them for a long period of time.

Sunderland (2000) notes that during the 1970-90s there was an abundance of studies in the area of language teaching textbooks. Some of those studies were related to L1 English teaching and others – to teaching a foreign language. The majority of studies focus on textbooks for teaching English as a second or foreign language (Puglsey 1992:5-13). Most of those studies showed that female characters in teaching materials were poorly presented in terms of their visibility and negatively presented characters in terms of personal traits and professional occupations and roles, both in text and illustration. Moreover, content analyses of EFL textbooks revealed that male characters were overrepresented. Analysis of 131 passages from three ELT textbooks used in schools revealed that 80 per cent of the speakers in the passages were men, whereas women personages in the same passages were very passively depicted. Despite such observations, the gendered messages and characters, as well as gender discourses are widely circulated in educational settings. And though some scholars claim that gender bias in language

teaching texts may have no impact on the learning process itself, nevertheless, it contributes directly to shaping learners' social attitudes and expectations around issues of gender.

The present research paper aims to find out whether an EFL textbook is gendered in the Armenian teaching environment, and whether the textbook compilers are aware of gendered messages while compiling educational materials. It also aims at investigating students' attitude toward the gendered messages in those materials. And finally, it also aims at increasing the gender sensitivity among book compilers and educators in various educational settings.

In the present study qualitative and quantitative research methods of analyses have been applied, the quantitative – in terms of carrying out surveys among students, and the qualitative one – by content analysis of the material and conducting in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the Armenian compilers of the textbook.

The paper does not seek to provide hints or tips how to write a “good” textbook rather than it explores the ways of composing and compiling the already-made products, thus investigating the strong and successful as well as weak points of the materials. For the research the following material has been considered – “A Basic English Grammar: Morphology” (hereafter EGM), first published in 2011. The selection of the material is not accidental. First, I used the mentioned textbooks in university teaching during the academic years 2014-2015, 2015-2016. Secondly, in Armenia “A Basic English Grammar: Morphology” is considered one of the most successful English grammar textbooks in a university teaching environment.

### **Case Study of “A Basic English Grammar: Morphology”**

As already mentioned, the present research is based on one year of passive and active observations and teaching experience in a classroom environment in 2014-2015, 2015-2016.

Research analyses and observations carried out by various researchers have indicated that educational materials in Armenian educational settings are gendered.<sup>1</sup> However, researchers have mostly focused on school textbooks. So far the Armenian university textbook material analyses have not been carried out. The

present research results come to prove that university teaching materials are also gendered and should be considered and re-considered from this perspective too.

Another question that needs to be covered here is whether gendered messages and characters portrayed in EFL textbooks directly influence the language learning process. Research has shown that direct influence has not been experienced in a language learning process. However, the way those gendered messages are provided and gendered characters are depicted develop the way people start thinking, speaking, paraphrasing, uttering, and communicating. This directly influences the gender formation of an individual since from post-structuralism perspective people become who they are partly because of the language they use.

A textbook is considered to be material used as a standard source of information or knowledge on a particular subject. It has a tendency to standardize and normalize certain things included and circulated in it. Therefore, a careful and thorough analysis of a textbook and its policy becomes crucial and justified. Secondly, the fact that English is a foreign language in Armenia, and we are non-bearers and non-native speakers of English makes us more vulnerable about gendered issues in English, their gendered nature and language use. The same is the case with teachers. The latter, being non-native speakers too, often follow the book patterns and whatever is given there without any further explanation, consideration and discussion. One of such examples can also be observed in the EGM. The textbook includes a unit on the Category of Gender in English.<sup>2</sup> However, the book does not provide any further explanation on the theme, topic and its background, often providing rules and examples that are either bookish or are often out of use in Modern English, but which, at the same time, are important for a future language-specialist (in this contexts, for a language student) to learn, know, recognize, yet not to generalize. Thus, the textbook states: "...certain words function as sex-indicators: *girl-friend, boy-friend, woman-doctor, man-servant, he-bear, she-bear, Tom-cat, Jane-cat, cock-pheasant, hen-pheasant, billy goat, nanny-goat*; or different words are used for male and female gender indication: *bachelor-spinster*; or/but the general tendency as with regard to animals is as follows: nouns denoting larger and fiercer animals refer to the masculine gender (*horse, elephant, dog*), while nouns denoting smaller and weaker animals refer to the feminine

gender (*cat, hare, parrot*). Abstract notions are personified, the masculine gender is used with nouns suggesting such ideas as strength, power, fierceness... (*anger, death, war*), while feminine gender is associated with ideas of beauty, gentleness (*spring, peace, dawn*). There are certain traditional associations: the nouns *moon* and *earth* are related to the feminine gender, the noun *sun* to the masculine gender.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is worth noting that, for example, the word *spinster* has acquired a negative connotation in Modern English; it is either out of use or even if it is used it has a pejorative meaning. The Oxford online dictionary (<<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/spinster>>) provides the following definition and explanation of the word *spinster*: “The development of the word *spinster* is a good example of the way in which a word acquires strong connotations to the extent that it can no longer be used in a neutral sense. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century the word was appended to names as the official legal description of an unmarried woman: *Elizabeth Harris of London, Spinster*. This type of use survives today in some legal and religious contexts. In modern everyday English, however, *spinster* cannot be used to mean simply unmarried woman; now it has a derogatory shade, referring or alluding to a stereotype of an older woman who is unmarried, childless, prissy, and repressed.” The EGM textbook, however, does not provide any further information on the word and does not lead to any discussion on the topic. Therefore, a first-year student gains information without any specific critical glance or knowledge on the issue.<sup>4</sup>

The textbook also includes such tasks and exercises as: “Write the corresponding nouns of masculine gender and of feminine gender: *she-wolf* - \_\_, *woman-driver* - \_\_, *she-bear* - \_\_.” Such tasks, rules and examples are provided without appropriate background and further explanation on the topic, and students learn to talk and communicate like that. They start using those patterns widely in their daily routine and communication, spoken and written, formal and informal.

Language is a means of communication and then school and university students start communicating in a way they use their language, and if their language is gendered then their communication cannot be anything else but gendered too. Moreover, visual gendered characters and images depicted in those textbooks worsen the communication practice, thus forming and producing gendered identities in a community and society. Education as one of the most powerful social

constructions and institutions, and educational materials as an essential part of that institution, directly influence the formation of an identity. As social psychologists claim, formation of identity, and gender particularly being part of a social identity, starts to develop at the age of five or six, which, in turn, corresponds to the school age of a child. Therefore, studying educational materials and making appropriate suggestions on them become essential.

Statistically, in many different units of the textbook male characters are overrepresented in exercises, whereas the female ones are either underrepresented or are entirely “silenced” or made invisible, that is to say excluded from the whole passage. Thus, here are some of those exercises:<sup>5</sup>

*Ex.27. Fill in the pronouns **each, every** or **all**:*

1. He tried to speak three times and \_\_\_ time he failed. 2. \_\_\_ the people were cheering loudly. 3. He has \_\_\_ chance to win. 4. He looked at \_\_\_ of us in turn. 5. The two little girls held his hands, one on \_\_\_ side. 6. His mother taught him that \_\_\_ pleasure must be paid for. 7. That’s the sort of job \_\_\_ boys like doing. 8. She had \_\_\_ opportunity to continue her scientific research. 9. \_\_\_ few hours a fishing village came in to sight. 10. \_\_\_ of us had to make a speech at the conference. 11. They did not talk much about what \_\_\_ feared most. 12. He had no doubt that she meant \_\_\_ word she said. 13. \_\_\_ who visited him that night were friends from the time they were children. (p. 157)

*Ex.9. Join the following sentences by using conjunctions:*

1. He spent a sleepless night. He wrote his resignation to the chairman of the board of directors. 2. The children were all smiling at me. I came toward them. 3. I did not watch the film to the end. It was not interesting. 4. He stood there as a statue would. He didn’t speak. He didn’t move. 5. He was tired and alone. He was not lost. 6. The expedition may be dangerous. He would take part in it. 7. Can you feed the dog? I’ll be away. 8. I shall pay you back. 10. My brother collects coins. He collects stamps 11. It was quite clear. Our team was going to lose. 12. Swallows migrate in winter. Robins stay during the whole year. 13 The windows in

*the hall were open. It was hot. 14. The travelers left early in the morning. They wanted to reach the village before sunset. (pp. 193-194).*

It is also important to notice that female characters are presented in a more passive and weaker way. They are mostly represented as weak, hyperemotional, tender and indecisive characters whose outer looks are emphasized, whereas in case of male figures, the image is quite the opposite; they act, they own or possess, they are decisive, they have a dominant position over female characters, etc. The following examples come to prove the above mentioned facts:<sup>6</sup>

- *Angela's hair **is/are** very beautiful* (ex. 15, p. 133).
- *The interest of Jessica, the youngest daughter of the Jacksons, in mathematics was unpredictable.* (ex. 22, p.135)
- *Lucy is a beautiful dancer.* (ex. 5, p. 171)
- *The girl was (**deep, deeply**) moved by the sad film.* (ex. 7, p. 171)
- *A drugstore owned by Mr. Brown* (ex. 17, p. 133)
- *A horse whose owner is Edward.* (ex. 17, p. 133)
- *His hands were shaped like **the hands of the woman**.* (ex. 23, p. 136)
- *Thomas is a careful driver.* (ex. 5, p. 171)

Thus, through these examples certain images, gender roles and gendered mentality are revealed and circulated. The survey results indicate that most of the students (35 out of 45) have noticed gendered messages in the EGM textbook and most of them prefer to see less gendered messages in it. The students also stated that in exercises most of the time female figures are depicted as weak, indecisive emotional and passive characters, whereas male personages – as strong, dynamic, independent and possessive.

The authors of the textbook seemed to be less sensitive to the gendered policy and ethics in the textbook. They stated that the book is a grammar textbook and if they had focused on the gendered issues, the content, meaning and purpose of the book as a grammar textbook would be lost or obscured. However, they stated that they will also take into consideration some of the suggestions and recommendations made in this research in further editions of the textbook.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Scientific thought and research trends lead to the assumption that it is not gender that creates communication but communication itself creates gender identities within society (De Francisco 2007). In the context of education this communication is provided through teaching and learning materials. Interactions and communications that take place in educational contexts through teaching materials enable students and also their teachers and lecturers to develop sensitivity to their own and others' rights and responsibilities as citizens in a society. The educational materials influence the social norms concerning such a category as gender, since they present some certain paradigms and models of gender-roles depicted both verbally and visually in them, thus automatically presenting ways and means that will make them such.

The present study and its results may be considered a proper platform which can serve as a guide for designing accurate teaching and learning materials in terms of gender sensitivity and ethics in the future.

As the Content Analysis of the case study has shown the EFL educational materials are often gendered in different terms and perspectives. All the above discussed examples come to prove that statements mentioned in the introductory part are also true for EFL textbooks in the Armenian higher educational context. EFL teachers and textbook compilers very often regard textbook materials only as a means of teaching a foreign language. They often ignore the fact that teaching and learning a language is more than learning a language itself; it is also getting knowledge about the given culture and linguo-cultural identity, and in this case EFL materials become a means of transition of cultural values. Therefore, editors, authors, teachers who are involved in a teaching-learning process should not ignore gendered messages produced and presented in those educational materials which, in turn, gradually influence the gender formation and reinforcement of traditional gender roles and stereotypes in that specific culture.

## NOTES

1. For more details see Ruzanna Tsaturyan's work *Gender Roles in Armenian Elementary School Textbooks* (2015).
2. See Mkhitarian, N. Hambardzumyan, A. Markaryan, N. Avakyan's *A Basic English Grammar: Morphology* (2011:15-18).
3. Ibid, 129-137.
4. For more details consult *The Oxford Online Dictionary*, and *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (see the references).
5. Note, there are many gendered examples in various units of the textbook, and only a few of them have been presented or discussed in this particular piece of work.
6. Ibid.

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## SOURCE OF DATA

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**Պրակտիկայից դեպի ուսումնասիրություն և տեսականացում.  
անգլերեն դասագրքերում գենդերային և լեզվական հարցերի  
քաղաքականությունը**

Դասագիրք գրելը կամ կազմելը դյուրին աշխատանք չէ. այն պահանջում է պրոֆեսիոնալություն և ակադեմիական հմտություններ: Հայաստանում մասնագետները երկար տարիներ է, ինչ մասնակցում են և ներգրավված են դասագիրք կազմելու գործընթացներին: Սույն հոդվածում քննարկվում է գենդերային քաղաքականությունն անգլերենի դասագիրք գրելու համատեքստում: Փորձ է արվում պարզել, թե ինչպիսի գենդերային դերեր են առկա դասագրքում, ինչպիսի մոտեցում ունեն դրանց վերաբերյալ ուսանողները, և արդյոք դասագիրք կազմելիս հեղինակները հաշվի են առնում գենդերային չափանիշը: Կիրառված մեթոդները, ինչպես նաև քննարկված հարցերը կարող են ընդհանրացվել և կիրառվել ոչ միայն անգլերենի, այլև այլ օտար լեզուներով դասագրքաստեղծման գործընթացում:

**От практики к политике: языковая и гендерная политика в  
английских учебниках**

Написать учебник нелегкая задача и требует академических способностей, опыта и терпения. В течение длительного периода армянские специалисты были вовлечены в процесс составления учебников иностранных языков. В данной статье обсуждаются проблемы гендерной и языковой политики в английских учебниках. Делается попытка выяснить: какие гендерные роли представлены в учебниках, как относятся к ним учащиеся и придерживаются ли авторы учебников стандартов и принципов гендерной политики. Методы и обсуждаемые вопросы могут быть обобщены и применимы к процессам составления учебников на других иностранных языках.