

Gender representation in senior high school textbook: A critical discourse analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates gender representation in the Indonesian senior high school English textbook Pathway to English for Grade 12 (2017) using Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender Representation Theory, and Multimodality Theory. The analysis of ten purposively selected samples shows a clear imbalance: male characters appear more often and are portrayed in active, authoritative roles, while female characters are less visible and frequently confined to passive or supportive positions. Although a few instances highlight women in empowered roles, these are marginal and overshadowed by dominant patriarchal narratives. The findings indicate that the textbook perpetuates traditional gender ideologies rather than challenging them, emphasizing the need for more gender-sensitive educational materials that provide equitable role models for learners.

Keywords: Gender representation; critical discourse analysis; English textbook;

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks play a vital role in formal education, functioning not only as instruments of academic instruction but also as vehicles for transmitting cultural norms and ideological messages. Beyond conveying grammatical and lexical content, textbooks subtly shape learners' worldviews by embedding assumptions about identity, power, and social roles. One critical area where this influence is particularly evident is gender representation. As Ullah and Skelton (2013) argue, textbooks often reflect the dominant ideologies of their producers, thereby reinforcing gendered expectations in the learning environment.

Numerous studies have revealed that gender bias in educational materials remains prevalent. Durrani (2008) and Samadikhah and Shahrokhi (2015) found that male characters are frequently portrayed as active, professional, and authoritative, while female characters are often depicted in domestic or passive roles. Sunderland (2000) emphasizes that these patterns not only reflect societal hierarchies but also perpetuate unequal gender ideologies through classroom discourse. In the Indonesian context, Fidyaningsih and Oktavianti (2024) reported that male characters dominate leadership roles in junior high school textbooks, while Yanti and Wirza (2022) observed the under-representation of female characters and their frequent association with passive traits in vocational ELT materials.

Despite such findings, most existing research has focused on junior high school materials or relied solely on either textual or visual analysis. Few studies have examined gender representation in Indonesian senior high school textbooks through a fully multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. For example, Adawiyah and Oktavianti (2023) applied corpus-assisted CDA to identify lexical disparities in male and female references but did not address how visual elements contribute to gender construction. Similarly, while Susanto and Chojimah (2024) identified traditional gender ideologies embedded in textual discourse, their analysis did not comprehensively incorporate multimodal elements.

To address these limitations, the present study investigates how gender is represented in an Indonesian senior high school English textbook through the combined lens of CDA, gender representation theory, and multimodality. Specifically, this study aims to (1) examine how male and female characters are portrayed linguistically and visually, and (2) analyze how vocabulary choices, syntactic structures, conversational roles, and imagery contribute to the construction of gendered meanings. By applying Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model alongside multimodal analysis, the study seeks to uncover the implicit ideologies that shape representations of gender in educational texts.

This study's novelty lies in its fully integrated multimodal CDA framework, which has rarely been applied to senior high school English textbooks in Indonesia. By bridging linguistic and visual analysis, the research offers a more comprehensive account of gender representation in ELT materials. The findings are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions on educational equity and to support the development of more inclusive, gender-sensitive teaching resources aligned with Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

METHOD

Data source

The data were collected from the *Pathway to English* textbook for Grade 12, published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2017), and used in a senior high school in Majalengka. The study employed purposive sampling to select specific units containing rich gender representations across various formats. These included pictorial elements (e.g., illustrations and photos), reading passages, dialogues, and exercises. Documentation served as the primary data collection method, allowing systematic retrieval of textual and visual content for analysis while maintaining contextual integrity (Bowen, 2009).

Instruments

The main analytical instrument was Fairclough's (2010) CDA framework, supported by analytical categories adapted from Amerian and Esmaili (2015). The three levels of analysis include:

- Textual analysis: Focuses on vocabulary, transitivity, agency, modality, pronoun use, and multimodal aspects such as images and layout.

- Discursive practice: Examines how the textbook is produced, distributed, and consumed, including the role of the Ministry of Education and classroom interaction.
- Social practice: Investigates how textbook discourse reflects and reproduces dominant gender ideologies within Indonesian educational and cultural contexts.

Procedures

The data for this study were collected from an English textbook for Grade 12, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (2017). This textbook is widely used in senior high schools and serves as the primary data source for examining gender representations in educational discourse.

The data collection process involved a purposive sampling strategy, which focused on specific units within the textbook that feature rich representations of both linguistic and visual elements. These include:

- Pictorial representations (e.g., illustrations, photographs)
- Reading passages (e.g., narratives, informational texts)
- Dialogues or conversational texts
- Exercises (e.g., grammar tasks, comprehension questions)

These components were selected based on their potential to reflect gender-related discursive patterns and to allow a thorough multimodal analysis. The inclusion of diverse text types ensures a comprehensive understanding of how gender is constructed across various forms of communication in the textbook.

To ensure analytical consistency, the data were organized and categorized using coding sheets aligned with the CDA framework. Each selected excerpt was analyzed according to the three dimensions of Fairclough's (2010) model: textual features, discursive practices, and social practices.

This method allows the study to uncover both explicit and implicit gender representations, providing insights into the ideological functions of the textbook as a pedagogical tool.

Data analysis

This study employs Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze how gender is represented in the selected English textbook. The model consists of three interrelated stages:

By applying this comprehensive framework, the study aims to critically uncover both explicit and subtle representations of gender and to understand how such representations may shape students' worldviews through institutionalized discourse.

1. Textual analysis (description):

At this stage, the study examines the linguistic and visual features of the textbook content. This includes analyzing vocabulary, transitivity, agency, pronoun use, and modality, as well as multimodal elements such as images, layouts, and color schemes. The criteria adapted from Amerian and Esmaili (2015) are used to guide this analysis,

particularly in assessing gendered patterns across pictorial, narrative, conversational, and task-based content.

2. Discursive practice (interpretation):

This dimension involves analyzing how the textbook is produced, distributed, and consumed. It considers the intentions of the textbook authors, the role of the Ministry of Education as a publisher, and how teachers and students engage with the text in classroom settings. The interaction between producer and interpreter helps reveal how discourses are reproduced or challenged within educational spaces.

3. Social practice (explanation)

The final dimension connects the findings to broader social and cultural contexts. It explores how textbook discourses reflect or reinforce dominant ideologies, particularly regarding gender norms in Indonesian society. This step situates the text within the institutional and ideological structures that influence curriculum design, gender policies, and educational equity.

To operationalize these dimensions, this study will use analytical categories adapted from Amerian and Esmaili (2015). These categories include:

- Pictorial elements (illustrations, photos)
- Reading passages
- Dialogues or conversation texts
- Exercises or comprehension tasks

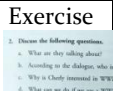
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender representation in the textbook

This study investigated gender representation in the Indonesian senior high school English textbook *Pathway to English* for Grade 12, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2017). A total of ten purposively selected samples were analyzed, comprising dialogues, reading passages, exercises, and visual illustrations. The analysis employed Fairclough’s (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, along with Gender Representation Theory and Multimodality Theory, to explore how gender is constructed through both textual and visual modes.

Table 1. Gender Representation Across Content Types in the English Textbook

No	Page	Text Type	Characters & Gender	Activity / Theme	Reason for Selection	Summary	Gender Representation Notes
1	34	Combination 	Male	Carrying a sack of money/corruption	Visual and text show masculine stereotype (power, money)	The text explains word classes with clip art of an old man carrying money	Male associated with power and potential corruption

2	61	Reading Text 	Female (Ava)	Short conversation, anti-social	Shows female as passive, reserved	A story about Ava avoiding conversation at a party	Female portrayed as silent and socially distant
3	143	Reading Text 	5 Females	Friendship and mutual support	Positive example of female solidarity	Narrative on empathy and communication between female friends	Women represented as supportive and empathetic
4	44	Dialogue 	1 Male, 2 Females	Discussion on corruption	Male initiates serious topic	Conversation among students about corruption	Males are seen as leader in critical thinking
5	132	Dialogue 	1 Male, 1 Female	Discussion on WWF & climate change	Both equally engaged in global issues	John and Cheryl talk about becoming WWF supporters	Equal representation of male and female perspectives
6	163	Exercise 	Aladdin (Male), Jasmine (Female), Jafar (Male - Villain)	Film review of Aladdin	Evaluate gender content through media	Comprehension questions about film review	Representation includes hero (male), villain (male), and supportive female character
7	132	Exercise 	John (Male), Cheryl (Female)	Follow-up questions from previous dialogue	Linked to data item 5 for deeper context	Questions about the WWF discussion	Both genders portrayed discussing environmental activism equally
8	69	Image 	6 Males	Athletic achievement	All male athletes show masculine domain dominance	Photos of famous male athletes	Lack of female representation in sports imagery
9	106	Image 	2 Males, 2 Females	Debate / Discussion	Balanced gender in intellectual activity	People laughing while holding books	Positive and equal gender representation in academic context
10	121	Image 	5 Males, 4 Females	Learning situation, male teacher	Male shown in authoritative educational role	Male teacher with laptop surrounded by students	Traditional representation of male authority in education

Gender representation in characters and roles

A focused analysis of the nine selected textbook samples highlighted recurring trends in the portrayal of male and female characters. This section explores how gender is constructed through both textual narratives and visual depictions, uncovering the underlying ideologies embedded within educational discourse

Table 2 Characters and roles

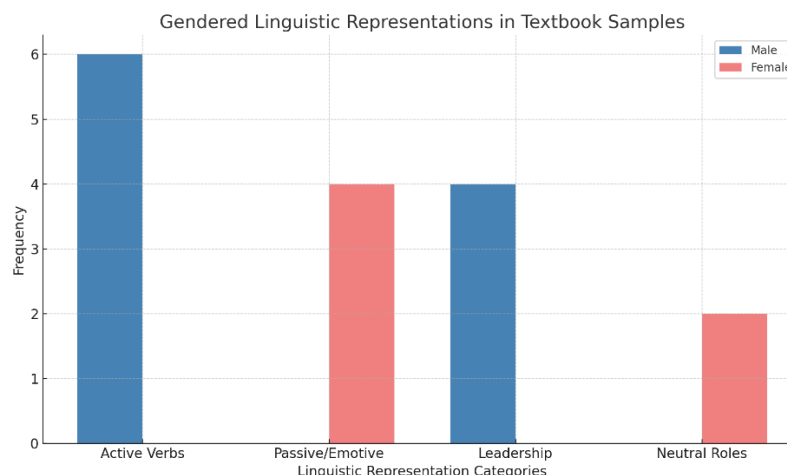
No	Gender & Characters	Male	Female
1	Male	1	0
2	Female (Ava)	0	1
3	1 Male, 2 Females	1	2
4	1 Male, 1 Female	1	1
5	Aladdin (M), Jasmine (F), Jafar (M)	2	1
6	John (M), Cheryl (F)	1	1
7	6 Males	6	0
8	2 Males, 2 Females	2	2
9	5 Males, 4 Females	5	4
Total		19	12

The total number of identified characters consisted of 19 males and 12 females. Although the numerical contrast may appear modest, the qualitative distribution of roles reveals more significant discrepancies. Male characters were frequently positioned in roles that emphasized action, leadership, and authority. For example, Sample 7 (page 69) exclusively showcases six male athletes, implicitly reinforcing the notion that athletic success is a predominantly male domain. Likewise, Sample 9 (page 121) centers a male teacher as the authoritative figure in a learning environment, with female students placed around him in passive roles. Another clear illustration can be found in Sample 1 (page 34), where an elderly man is depicted carrying a sack of money, visually supporting themes of power and corruption often associated with masculinity.

In contrast, female figures were commonly assigned secondary or passive roles. Sample 2 (page 61), for instance, features Ava, a young woman portrayed as quiet and socially withdrawn, an embodiment of traditional gender expectations surrounding female emotional restraint and social passivity. Even when female characters appeared in balanced interactions, as in Samples 4 and 6, their roles tended to support rather than initiate dialogue. This pattern suggests that while women are present within the content, their representation frequently lacks assertiveness or central narrative function

Linguistic analysis (textual practices)

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, particularly at the textual level, the linguistic choices within the nine selected samples reveal how gender roles are constructed and conveyed through verbs, sentence structures, and character speech. The following outlines the textual patterns observed across the data:



1. Sample 1 (Page 34):

The term "man" is used to demonstrate the verb "carry" in a vocabulary explanation. This pairing reinforces the traditional view of men as physically strong or labour-orientated, subtly associating masculinity with action and financial control through the imagery of an old man carrying a sack of money.

2. Sample 2 (Page 61):

Ava, a female character, is portrayed with limited speech and avoids interaction at a party. She is not assigned any assertive verbs or extended dialogue. The language constructs her as passive and socially withdrawn, reflecting stereotypical notions of female reservation and emotional distance.

3. Sample 3 (Page 44):

In the classroom dialogue, Malik, the male student, introduces and leads a discussion on corruption. His speech includes guiding statements and questions, while the two female students respond briefly. This interaction reflects discursive dominance by the male character and limited agency for the females.

4. Sample 4 (Page 132):

John and Cheryl discuss environmental issues equally. However, John's lines contain more directive and confident language, including action verbs like "join" and "support", whereas Cheryl's responses are more reactive. This subtly reinforces male assertiveness, despite the overall balanced theme.

5. Sample 5 (Page 163):

In the film review, Aladdin and Jafar (both male) are described using active verbs such as "fight", "defeat", and "control". Jasmine is framed in terms of appearance and personality as "kind" and "beautiful" rather than action, illustrating reduced narrative agency for the female character.

6. Sample 6 (Page 132):

The follow-up exercise continues the discussion from Sample 4. The questions focus more on John's suggestions and statements, reinforcing his role as

association between masculinity and financial control. The absence of female figures in this context suggests that economic power is represented as an exclusively male domain.

Sample 5 (Page 163)



The exercise on page 163 involves a visual from the film *Aladdin*, displaying the characters Aladdin, Jasmine, and Jafar. Aladdin and Jafar (both male) are portrayed in dynamic poses, Aladdin with a sword and Jafar with an intimidating expression and staff, both symbolizing action, control, and confrontation. Jasmine, on the other hand, is shown standing in a decorative position, with her appearance emphasized through costume and body posture. This visual representation aligns with the textual portrayal in which the male characters dominate the narrative, while the female character serves a largely aesthetic or emotional function. The composition reinforces gendered binaries: active/protective male versus passive/supportive female.

Sample 7 (Page 69)



This sample contains a photograph montage of six famous male athletes, including footballers, runners, and a basketball player. All figures are captured in motion or in victorious poses, often with trophies or medals. The framing, lighting, and placement of the images emphasize strength, speed, and competitive success, qualities traditionally aligned with masculinity. The total absence of female athletes further marginalizes female presence in the domain of sports. This multimodal presentation constructs the visual narrative that athleticism and achievement are inherently male traits, thereby excluding or minimizing female contributions to sports.

Sample 9 (Page 121)



The visual on this page portrays a classroom scene, with a male teacher at the front of the room, standing and using a laptop while explaining to a group of students. The students include both males and females, yet the teacher is the most prominent figure, placed centrally and higher in spatial hierarchy. Male students are seated near the teacher, suggesting proximity to authority, while female students are slightly more dispersed. This composition reinforces a traditional gender dynamic in educational settings, where males are positioned as knowledge holders and females as passive recipients. Although subtle, the visual grammar (foregrounding, salience, and eye-line vectors) privileges male authority and leadership within the classroom environment.

The visual representations across these four samples consistently reinforce traditional gender roles. Males are portrayed as active, powerful, and central figures, whether in economic, heroic, athletic, or educational contexts. Females, when present, are often positioned in supportive or background roles, with emphasis on appearance rather than action. These visual semiotic choices, when combined with the textual narrative, contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes in educational discourse.

The gender disparity highlighted in Table 1 reflects the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in educational materials. This finding supports the argument by Amerian and Esmaili (2015) that gender-biased textbooks contribute to the normalization of unequal gender ideologies in the classroom. The over-representation of males can implicitly communicate to students that men occupy more active, important, and public roles, while women are less visible and less significant.

From the perspective of Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis, this pattern is indicative of underlying discursive strategies that naturalize gender hierarchies. At the level of **textual analysis**, the lexical and grammatical choices often assign agency to male characters, while females are shown in passive roles or domestic contexts. At the **discursive practice** level, the textbook's production by institutional authorities such as the Ministry of Education reflects a reproduction of dominant social values.

Finally, at the level of **social practice**, this gender representation mirrors wider societal norms in Indonesia, where men are frequently associated with authority and leadership, and women with supportive or background roles. This is problematic within the context of Indonesia's national commitment to gender equality in education, as outlined in various policy documents and curriculum reforms.

These findings call for a more gender-sensitive approach in textbook design and curriculum development to ensure balanced representation and to foster an inclusive learning environment that challenges stereotypes rather than reinforcing them.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the *Pathway to English* textbook for Grade 12 reveals a clear imbalance in gender representation. Male characters appear more frequently and are consistently associated with authority, action, and achievement, while female characters are less visible and often confined to passive or supportive roles. Linguistic patterns highlight male dominance through assertive verbs and discursive control, whereas females are constructed as silent, reactive, or valued primarily for appearance. Visual elements further reinforce these disparities, with males depicted as central, active figures and females marginalized in background or aesthetic positions.

These findings suggest that the textbook reproduces traditional gender ideologies, aligning masculinity with leadership and power while limiting female agency. Such representations risk normalizing inequality in the classroom and contradict national goals for gender equity in education. A more gender-sensitive approach to textbook design is therefore necessary to promote balanced representation and foster inclusive learning environments.

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