

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS: MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

One of nowadays concern in junior high school English material such as textbooks is lack of fair and inclusive gender representation, which can influence students' point of view of gender roles from an early stage. UNESCO (2020) emphasised that the representation of women in school textbooks in several countries is still limited, and when the characters are represented, it is often limited to domestic jobs, thus strengthening gender bias in formal education material. Textbooks, as one of multimodal educational tools, build meanings not only through written language but also through visual image that show characters' identities, activates, and roles. This research examines how gendered identities are represented in the *English for Nusantara* textbooks used for seventh grade students based on Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. These textbooks were chosen since the book have wide circulation in junior high schools and its intensive use of character-based dialogue accompanied by images, offering a valuable source of data for analysis. Using the Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework, the research examining how male and female characters are visually portrayed in the textbook. Based on the analysis of comic strips in the *English for Nusantara* textbook for seventh grade students, the number of male and female character show diverse according to activity. Conversing is the most frequent, with males that have more representation than females, while studying shows equal participation. Other activities are more specific in gender such as; men are dominant in hobbies and cooking, while women are dominant in teaching. Passive participation occurs in both genders, with men slightly more dominant.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse, gender representation, English textbook, educational instrument.

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are one of important learning materials that not only helping students in building linguistic competence but also serve as essential media for comprehend culture, identity, and social values. Apart its instructional role, textbooks function as an instrument of social development by conveying ideas about appropriate social behaviour, including the role of gender. This socializing function is clearly appeared Textbooks often portray male and female characters through text and images in an unequal situation. Often, male and female characters do not receive the same level of visibility, speaking opportunities, or involvement in classroom and social activities. These differences are important because the content shape how students understand gender roles during their formative years, influencing their perspective on what boys and girls can or should do both in education and in society.

The above issues are also supported by several arguments. UNESCO (2020) points out that female figures is represented less often than male figures in school textbooks in several countries. When the textbooks show a character, women are usually depicted in domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning, or caring for children, which reinforces traditional gender stereotypes and reduces opportunities for students to develop an equitable perspective. In contrast, men are often depicted as leaders, decision-makers, or active in the public sphere, reflecting inequality of gender representation in educational materials (Lee & Collins, 2008). These depictions show that textbooks not only reflect but also shape social reality. As Sunderland (2000) explains, the way gender is represented in textbooks can influence students' views about what men and women can or should do. Over time, these representations can

have a significant impact on how students view themselves and others in relation to behaviour considered appropriate for each gender.

several studies present that gender representation in English textbooks is often unbalanced. Lee and Collins (2008) showed that in Hong Kong textbooks, male characters appear more frequently and are given more active and dominant roles, while female characters are generally limited to passive or supporting roles. Similarly, Barton and Sakwa (2012) discovered that women are more often shown in domestic roles, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes in Ugandan textbooks. In Indonesia, Hermawan and Noer (2012) studied English textbooks used in schools and found that the representation of male and female characters was still heavily influenced by traditional gender stereotypes.

As Indonesia transitions to the Merdeka Curriculum, which stresses inclusivity, equality, and student-centred learning, it is important to look at how gender is represented in the teaching materials. By examining how gender is represented in the English for Nusantara textbook for Year 7 students, this research could give an perspective to textbook authors, policymakers, and educators who are committed to aligning learning resources with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How often are male and female characters represented based on their activities in the English for Nusantara textbook for seventh grade? (2) How are male and female characters represented based on their activities in the English for Nusantara textbook for seventh grade?

METHOD

This research uses qualitative methods to provide a deep description of a social phenomenon. The main objective of descriptive qualitative research is to present a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014). The research data was taken from 25 comic strips in the English for Nusantara book for seventh grade students, because comic strips clearly show characters through visuals, making them effective for examining how gender roles are represented. This analysis uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) framework to examine gender representation. MDA emphasises how meaning is conveyed through various modes, including images, and includes three analytical elements: representational, interactional, and compositional. This research focuses only on the representational element, which examines how participants, actions, and settings are constructed in images. The representational analysis in multimodal discourse examines who appears in the images (participants) and the actions they perform. The aim is to see how male and female characters are depicted through their roles and activities. The analysis was carried out on three main aspects: (a) Participants, which involved identifying the gender of the characters in the textbooks and observing whether they were placed in active or passive positions; (b) Processes, investigating the actions attributed to each gender to discover whether these actions reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles; and (c) Circumstances, investigating the context in which these actions happen, including location and objects, to reveal the gender norms illustrated in the images. This approach enables a more in-depth analysis of how gender roles are represented visually in textbooks. To ensure the credibility of the findings, triangulation was conducted by engaging education experts. According to Denzin (1978), triangulation enhances the validity and depth of qualitative research by combining various perspectives, thereby reducing the risk of bias and strengthening the robustness of the analysis.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Frequency of Male and Female Character Representation based on Their Activities

The frequency of male and female characters in comic strips in the English for Nusantara book for Year 7 students can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. frequency of male and female character representations based on their activities

| Activities | Male | | Female | |
|--------------------------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|
| | number | frequency | number | frequency |
| Conversing | 34 | 54% | 29 | 46% |
| Participating in Hobbies | 2 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| Passive Participation | 2 | 60 | 3 | 40 |
| teaching | 0 | 0% | 3 | 100% |
| Cooking | 1 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| Studying | 2 | 50% | 2 | 50% |

Based on the table, the frequency of male and female characters based on their activities in the comic strips in the English for Nusantara book shows different numbers. Conversing appear most frequently, with male characters accounting for 54% and female characters 46%. The activity of studying is showed equally (50% each) between males and females. Other activities are more gender-specific such as: participating in hobbies only appears among males, teaching only among females, and cooking is only represented by males. In the other hand, passive participation is slightly higher among males (60%).

The Analysis of Representation Male and Female Character based on Their Activities

The comic strips in the English for Nusantara textbook generally showed male and female characters participating in several daily activities. Male characters were often depicted in interactive and dynamic roles, such as talking with peers, participating in hobbies, or engaging in social interactions outside the classroom. On the other hand, female characters are represented in education activities then male, such as teacher. Meanwhile, both genders are portrayed in various settings, such as, at school, at home, and in public spaces, it is providing a visual representation of their participation in various aspects of daily life.

An analysis of the representation points out that the portrayal of characters' roles and activities follows certain patterns related to gender. Both men and women are illustrated in several contexts, even though the forms of their roles differ. Men tend to be illustrated more often in do some hobbies and social interactions, on the other hand women are more often shown through activities that emphasise learning, cooperation, and giving directions. Thus, the comics in the textbook present a variety of activities for both genders and visually show how the social roles and actions of male and female characters are positioned in the learning



narrative. The analysis is presented using only two representative images from the textbook, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2

Figure 1. Representation of a Male Student Engaged in Mobile Gaming Activity

Figure 1 illustrates a scene in which a male student is actively playing a mobile game in the school lobby. In the subsequent panel, another male student, depicted as a friend, approaches while inviting a new female student to join the interaction. From the perspective of representational analysis in multimodal discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), the focus is on the participants and their actions within the image. The male characters are shown engaging in leisure and social interaction through gaming, while the female character participates through the conversational exchange. There are no visual indicators that suggest hierarchy or dominance; every character is portrayed with the same level of interactions. Proportional positioning and two-way engagement highlight an equality of participation, in this case, both male and female students are shown to be equally active in the social situation. The example of Figure 1 illustrated that learning materials, whether intentionally or not, are contributing to the normalization of gender norms by highlighting boys' connection to technology, on the other hand ignoring other forms of representation that could challenge the content. The lack of female characters in this kind of setting implicitly places women on the outside of the digital setting, thus this science reinforcing the construction of gender roles in the school context.



Figure 2. Representation of a Father Cooking Lunch for His Family

Figure 2 shows a domestic situation, where a father is preparing a meal for his wife and two daughters, who are seated at the dining table. Using representational analysis in multimodal discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), attention is directed to the participants and their actions in the image. The father is portrayed served a meal that he cooked to his family, a traditionally household activity associated with women, while his wife and daughters are positioned as recipients of his actions. This illustration emphasizes the domestic activities did by a male.

The activity of the the male character, where a father do housework and female family members is waiting, show an egalitarian representation of domestic responsibilities. this scene emphasises an difference model of masculinity, where men are involved in domestic job. This representation is contrast with data from the Central Statistics Agency (2023), which suggests that domestic work in Indonesia is still dominated by women, thus this image can be interpreted as challenging traditional gender roles. Male participation in domestic activities is portrayed as normal, reflecting a more balanced representation of gender in textbooks.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on an analysis of the comic strips in the English for Nusantara textbook for 7 grade students, the number of representations of male and female characters differs depending on the type of activity. The most common activity is conversing, with male characters represented more than female characters, then learning activities show balanced participation. the other activities tend to be more specific in gender representation such as; the male character is dominant in do some hobbies and cooking, on the other hand females are shown in teaching

activities. Passive participation is illustrated in both genders; however, it is slightly done by male characters.

In terms of how male and female characters are illustrated, the comic strips often portray male characters in interactive and recreation activities, such as playing games and socialising, on the other hand female characters are often portrayed in educational setting, such as; teaching. Both genders are present across different settings, including school, home, and public spaces, without one gender being completely absent from any particular activity. The two representative images illustrate these patterns: one comic strip shows male students engaging in mobile gaming while a female student participates through conversation, highlighting balanced social interaction. In the other hand, other of comic strip showed a domestic scene where a father cooks for his wife and daughters, showing male participation in household activities.

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