Representation of Culture and Gender in *English for Today* at Higher Secondary Level in Bangladesh

Masnadul Ferdus

M.Phil. (1st Year) University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

masnadulf@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Culture and Gender are the unique attributes of a particular group of people, distinct in everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, arts, and lifestyle. Thus, culture finds expression in language; as such, learning a new language without familiarity with its culture retards the learning process. This study investigates the representation of gender and culture in *English for Today*, the language textbook for the H.S.C level and tries to find out its impact on English language learning. Its importance in everyday life is immeasurable as can be seen by its unofficial status of the second language in Bangladesh. The government has mandated twelve years of learning of the language. Unfortunately, this mandate has not been translated to concrete results and the overall standard of the L2 in our country has remained appalling. To collect relevant data, the researcher has used mixed method (both qualitative and quantitative methods). As research tools of data collection, teachers` interviews, and questionnaire survey have been included. After collecting data, they have been analyzed. The findings show that the representation of gender and culture in English for Today textbook at the HSC level is well-balanced but whatever outcome we see or find in terms of language learning is not the product of the textbook rather a predigested guidebook.

Keywords: Bangladesh, *English for Today* textbook, gender, culture, learning

Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Gender and culture prejudiced language in textbooks can influence students negatively in learning the L2. Gender and culture biased language is most often groundless and iniquitous (Cameron, 1990, pp. 13) and helps create a repressive and intolerant nation. Studies of gender, culture and language have found that culturally biased and gender stereotypes in written text and pictures have deleterious effects for male and female students (Lesikin, 2001, pp. 281). These issues incorporate feelings of exclusion, depression, segregation, and lowered expectations.

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Keeping all these factors in mind, the education authorities have suggested diverse criteria for selecting appropriate and relevant content for the textbooks. One of these is that the content of the textbooks should be consistent with and relevant to the sex of the intended learners (Eisner, 1985, pp. 201-202). The content of textbooks is useful and efficient when it is consistent with the learner's age and sex. Therefore, the issues, sentence models and examples must be represented in such a way that both male and female learners feel that they are equally valuable to the society. Textbooks should not impose on the readers the idea that male students have more social prominence than females.

This paper aims to find whether these precepts have been manifested in the EFT textbook and its teaching at the HSC level of the country.

Objective
Literature Review
For this study the researcher has reviewed two types of literature, in the first part the researcher discussed about the key constructs and the second part contains a brief discussion of the previous studies on language ,culture and gender in the textbooks. So the literature review that follows includes a brief analysis of some key constructs like culture, gender and the relationship between culture and gender, acculturation, and identity as well as studies that have dealt with impacts of the inclusion of the target culture identity on teaching a second languages, conflicts of host culture and target culture.

It is expected that any kind of research or study done on any textbook will aid future curricula designers and textbook writers to reflect on and work towards improvement. Incorporation of cultural contents in language textbooks is quite a new trend in the mainstream textbooks in Bangladesh. This study will allow future textbook designers to think more on the implementation of intercultural competence as well as the extent and ways these skills ought to be taught via the textbook-teacher partnership. Hopefully, this will ultimately create a better intercultural exposure through English Language Teaching opportunities for producing more effective teaching-learning materials

The study further focuses on Gender representation in the book as this is one of the key components of identity. Numerous observers (Lakoff, 1988) have described a woman's speech as being different from that of man. We communicate with others through language, and establish our identities, both gender and otherwise, with the help of language.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether these textbooks consist of any gender stereotypical elements that may affect students' assumptions and development. The results of

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this study are expected to raise awareness among the material developers and English teachers and will help to reshape stereotypical gender representation (if any) in language textbooks.

The Bangladeshi government is committed to improving the ELT scenario at the Higher Secondary level the desired result has not been reached. At present it is seen that the prevalent instruction of English is inadequate for global communication. Though students are passing out from schools and colleges, they are not competent enough to carry on communicative activities because of lack of communicative skills in English. But, the communicative competence is the key to success for participation in any affairs inside and outside the country

Research Questions

However, there has been little focus on "The Representation of gender and culture in English Language Textbooks at the Higher Secondary Level in Bangladesh and its impact on learning outcome". So this study tried to find answers for the following questions:

- Comparative analysis of the portrayal of men and women.

- Exploring the impact of the portrayal of women in English language textbook at the higher secondary level in Bangladesh on the learners in English language learning.

Methodology
3.1. Introduction

Research methodology is a logical way to solve a problem. It is a science of studying how research is to be carried out. In actual fact, it is the procedures by which researchers go about their work of describing, explaining and predicting phenomena are called research methodology. The study was conducted in Dhaka Division in 2015. It was carried out to identify the status of teaching and learning outcome of English language at the Intermediate level in Bangladesh.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

This research aims to find other problems that have not been discussed and to develop solution. It also intends to fulfill the time gap between previous studies and the present one. The investigation went around some domains directly related to English language teaching: textbook materials, syllabi and curricula, teaching methods and approaches, skill of teachers, teaching aids and equipment, perception of needs of English, preference of learning strategies, testing and assessment, etc.

Sampling

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The sample group consists of eight teachers of English courses of eight private colleges in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Respondents were selected randomly irrespective of their sex, age, years of teaching experience and educational background. Of this sample group, three of the teachers were female while five were male and all the participants were aged between 30 and 40. Sample size of the study was limited to eight due to time and cost constraint. Though the participants were different from one another with regard to their socio-economic, psychological and educational conditions, they all share the same certain broad similarities which come from their sharing of the same culture and the same L1. Again, all of them studied English as a compulsory subject from primary level to higher secondary level.

Before the survey the participants were assured that the information provided by them shall be used for research purpose only and that all confidentiality shall be ensured. Also, their privacy will be strictly maintained by researcher. This made the participants feel free and comfortable in answering the questions. Their consent was obtained orally.

3.5. Setting

To conduct the survey, the researcher had to meet the respondents personally. Researcher met the participants according to the appointed time and place. Previously set questions were given to respondents and they were requested to provide their opinions about those. Modern technology was utilized for one interviewee's response due to distance and time limitation.

3.6. Instrumentation

Qualitative method has been followed in this research in order to find what others think. Usually, qualitative methods are used in research to offer an in-depth description and analysis of a specific program, practice or setting (Mertens,1998: p.159). Denzin and Lincoln (1994: p.2) say that qualitative research involves the collection of a variety of empirical materials such as case study, interviews, observational study, historical, visual texts that describe the problematic events and understanding in individual lives.

3.7. Data Analysis Procedure

To analyze the data, researcher uses qualitative method since it is easier to sum up a result when numbers of the respondent participants are limited.

Participants- there are 148 participants for questionnaire survey. I have selected six different colleges from three different categories from NCTB list where colleges' names are given according to the academic performance. In questionnaire survey I selected participants randomly so that I might have all possible answers from different angles.

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Instruments-for students I set 14 questions altogether. Among these, most were close-ended, a few were semi-open and the rest were open ended questions. For interview, I set 10 questions and used recorder. The duration of each interview was forty minutes. I recorded the interview on audio recorder. The participant teachers have been named Interviewee- Teacher A, Interview- Teacher B, Interview- Teacher C, Interview- Teacher D, Interview- Teacher E.

There are a number of ways to design questionnaire, open-ended free response is one of the common ways. It opens the scope for the respondent to reply confidently and comfortably. In this study both open and close ended questions were designed. In the survey questionnaire (mixed), there is a total of 14 questions, while the interview questionnaire includes 10 open-ended questions. Questionnaires are printed forms for data collection. The questionnaires were available in two versions and the respondents, too, answered in both languages as the occasion required.

Obstacles Encountered / Limitations
The following are the obstacles faced by the researcher.
• The political instability of the country meant that it was risky to roam around while collecting data.
• Since it was not possible to synchronize the researcher's time with that of the teachers, not all the teachers from all participating colleges could take part in the survey.

Teachers' Interviews

4. Data Analysis
The collected data was analyzed in MS Excel and report written in MS Word.

Q.1. Does the content of the book talk about ethnic minority group? 70% answered in the negative, 20% answered in the positive, and 10% replied that they were oblivious. This, again, may be attributed to their drive to excel in grades rather than any real thirst for knowledge.

Participants	Comments	Percentage (%)
103	No	70
30	Yes	20
15	Do not know	10

Figure: 02

Q. 2. Which tribal groups are mentioned in EFT book?

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In response to this question, 50% replied that they found nothing noticeable on this point. The remaining 50% answered that Marma, Chakma, Garo, Saontal tribal groups have been mentioned in the EFT book. This question has significance in terms of the level of concentration of the respondents for the researcher as the answers show reverse response for the study.**(for discussion)

Q. 3. Have any tribal groups been found with greater importance?
100% replied that there is no such group that is given greater importance in this book.

Q. 4. Does the content include a variety of cultures or just specific one? For example: British or American culture.

100% students answered positively that their textbook includes a variety of cultures such as Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Brazilian, German, etc. Cultures have been highlighted globally thus the lesson content covers a wide range of different cultures. It is also found that majority of the students read this portion from curiosity though it not always suggested by their teachers. They feel interested about cultures and love to learn about the different cultures. This is one of the most interesting parts to the students. They also shared that through exposure they can learn English in a better way. They found the information to be interesting and important for eventual real-life use in the future.

Q. 5. What cultural and social groups are represented?
93% answered that the norm for culture and social groups are mentioned.
7% answered about specific representation of the culture and social groups like the Samba, Religious festivals of Myanmar, the British Royal family, daily manner, and etiquettes differences amongst the multitude of cultures.

Q. 6. Is an adequate coverage of a variety of people?
Everyone says it has satisfactorily covered most cultural norms and there is a lot of variety in the texts.

Q. 7. Is the cultural information presented with comments? Such as being good or being bad.
100% students answered that there is no bias given regarding culture in the textbook. That indicates that there is neutral representation of culture in the EFT textbook.

Q. 8. Do they represent the reality about the target culture or the author's view?

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95% answered that the target culture is represented directly and without any alteration. The textbook attempts to represent these cultural issues authentically. Target culture has been explained with a true reality and it is beneficial for the students to be familiarized with such kind of representation. Students also think that author's view was added along with the real presentation and 5% opine that both the target culture and the author's view are represented together. Students view regarding cultural issues is very positive and they are prone to credit this part with the highest importance.
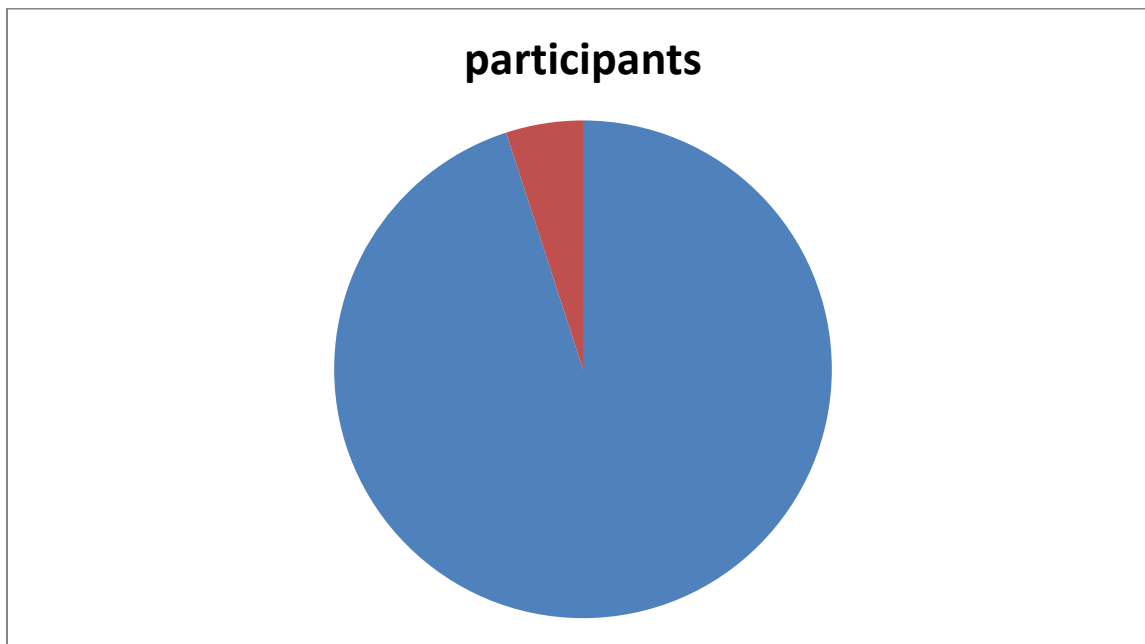

participants

Chart- 01

Q. 9. Have man and woman portrayed equally in terms of ability and intelligence?
100% answered that the representation is equal in terms of ability and intelligence.

Q. 10. What types of family roles do female characters represent in your English language textbook?

All the participants answered that female characters play a wide range of roles in the family and the professions. Women play an important role inside and outside the home. Even being a housewife their voice can be heard in decision making and in other issues. Families are benefited economically since the women have been working outside the homes. The textbook gives special importance on women rights and equality in every sector of this society. Students feel encouraged when they read those lessons. Teaching is a common profession for women but they are capable at doing different jobs equally well. The prevalent picture of working women has been depicted well.

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Q. 11. Does it talk about Bangladeshi food, norms, and values?

80% answered that it talks about Bangladeshi food, norms, and values. 10% answered that the existing amount of discussion is not sufficient, and they think more content/discussion can be added. 10% answered that they do not have any idea regarding the issues that the question talks about. Additionally most of the times in exercise part students are required to make a comparison between target culture and the host culture. There was an effort to make the content more contextualized. This part could have added more topics regarding host culture though it was sufficient. To some students the content about Bangladeshi food, norms and values were insufficient and backdated or that the changing cultures were not included adequately.
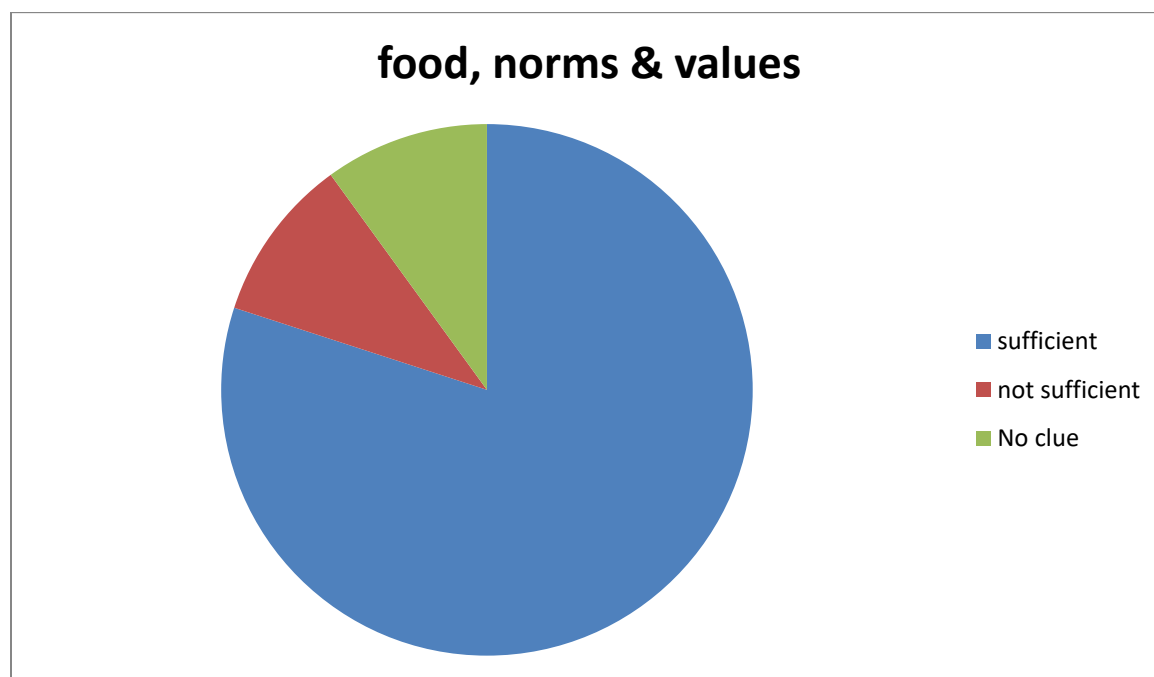

Chart-02

Q. 12. Do you think your identity as a man or as a woman has been represented well?

All participants believe that both the male and female identity is presented well in the EFT textbook.

Q. 13. How gender and culture help them in English language learning?

Commonly, all of the participants think that the portion that covers issues about culture, gender, and identity in this book is sufficient for English language learning, but they do not have any scope to share their views as their speaking skills are not used in or out of the classroom**.** As learning is examination-oriented, guidebooks and test papers are given equal importance. But there are 10% students who believe in only studying the textbook itself is guidance enough even though they share their counterpart's concern about their results.

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Some comments – we read the book thoroughly for two reasons- exam and exam. We have learnt a lot of stuff about culture and gender which will be helpful for our future life. "I read a little from the text as I followed the guide book mostly" "I practiced model questions only " "whenever we have faced any problem to understand the text we took help from the guide book" "sometimes it happens that teacher could not explain these issues in that case we got help from the textbook" "it helps us a lot to know about the English language " " at exam time we follow the guide book " " we come to know about different issues from our EFT book" it is a complete and perfect book to learn English through culture and gender" "gender and cultural factors are really important to know English language more" "we come to know about lot of information but most of the time we cannot practice those in our practical life" "our reading and writing skills may get improved but for speaking and listening skills we do not practice anything at all" it would be better if we could have applied those ideas in our real life" "gender and cultural points are very helpful to learn better English" .

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of findings revealed that there is no imbalance in gender and cultural representation in EFT textbook. As English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh is a state-run education program, it is designed to meet the local and international cultural and gender ideologies. Although this study showed improvement to some areas of the textbooks when compared with the results of the previous research which examined the same textbooks (2000), there is still more room for improvement to provide an equal opportunity for learning for all students.

Though the following parts of the findings are not the focus of this paper, it has an immediate bearing on the process of language learning and so may be considered significant as recommendation for improvement:

Most of the Teachers, especially in the rural areas, did not receive any training on the textbook, they do not know much about the CLT approach and its prospects, there was no teachers' guidebook even after 15 years of the launching of the book.

This paper finds that the most crucial point regarding the usage of EFT in the classroom is that sometimes the teachers by themselves arrange workshops inside the institute, but these instances are rare and not the common practice of all education institutes. There is no prescribed policy defined by the NCTB. This paper finds that the NCTB ought to take the lead in arranging nationwide workshops or training programs in order to better attain the learning objectives.

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The pedagogical implication is that the CLT curriculum in Bangladesh needs to be reexamined as the content of instructional materials significantly affects students' learning attitudes, dispositions, their understanding of norms, culture, and the world around them. Therefore, Educational Authorities should provide guidelines for the use of fair treatment of gender in all aspects of textbook design such as equal visibility for female and male characters and equal female/male-oriented topic presentations in dialogues and reading passages with a wider range of occupational possibilities and personal traits.

Recommendations

1. Bangladeshi English language teachers at the higher secondary should be properly equipped to implement their classroom practices.
2. Autonomy should be allowed to the teachers to make necessary modification to the teaching techniques and procedures.
3. Learners should be made habituated with the communicative learning practice from the very beginning of the school year.
4. The teachers, too, should become more proficient in the use of CLT themselves. They should try to assume various roles such as facilitator, instructor or performer depending on the task. Nunan (1989) and Richards and Rogers (2001) mentioned the above mentioned roles for teachers.
5. Authentic materials should be designed for use in the classrooms for language teaching.
6. Proper training should be provided for English teachers to develop their teaching techniques and methods.
7. Teachers should also be involved in material development and textbook procedure. They should know designing materials as learners` need and interest.
8. Students should be provided additional practice books.
9. At exams, marks should be allotted for speaking and listening skills.

The results of this study are expected to raise awareness among the stakeholders, material developers and English teachers so that gender stereotyping in the language textbooks may be avoided at all costs and that cultural sensitivity is ensured throughout.

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Questionnaire

1. Does the content of the book talk about ethnic minority group?
2. Which tribal groups are mentioned in EFT book?
3. Have any tribal groups been found with greater importance?
4. Does the content include a variety of cultures or just specific one? For example: British or American culture.
5. What cultural and social groups are represented?
6. Is there an adequate coverage of a variety of people?
7. Is the cultural information presented with comments? Such as being good or being bad.

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8. Do they represent the reality about the target culture or the author's view?

9. What types of family roles do female characters represent in your English language textbook?

10. Have man and woman portrayed equally in terms of ability and intelligence?

11. Does it talk about Bangladeshi food, norms, and values?

12. Do you think your identity as a man or as a woman has been represented well?

13. How gender and culture is helping them in English language learning?

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