

Textbook and gender stereotypes: a case study of the Tunisian 7th year basic education English student book

الكتاب المدرسي والقوالب النمطية الجندرية: دراسة حالة لكتاب اللغة الإنجليزية لتلاميذ السنة السابعة من التعليم الأساسي في تونس

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Received:22/11/2025

Accepted:13/12/2025

Published:31/12/2025

Abstract:

This study examines the Tunisian 7th year basic education English student book to determine whether or not it propagates gender stereotypes. Using Laurence Bardin's (1977) Content Analysis method, this textbook is examined both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results of this research revealed that male characters dominated the units we analysed in the textbook. In addition, the characters are portrayed differently according to their gender in terms of physical characteristics, dress code, activities, professions, etc. Consequently, pupils at this stage of their education are confronted with a reality that is completely different and outdated with regard to men and women.

Keywords: Gender stereotype, Textbook, Hidden curriculum, English language

ملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كتاب مدرسي للغة الإنجليزية مخصص لتلاميذ السنة السابعة من التعليم الأساسي في تونس، بهدف التأكد مما إذا كان هذا الكتاب يكرس الصور النمطية القائمة على الجندر. تم تحليل الكتاب باستخدام طريقة تحليل المحتوى التي أنشأتها لورانس باردن (1977)، من منظورين كمي ونوعي. وقد أظهرت نتائج هذا البحث هيمنة الشخصيات الذكورية في الوحدات التي تم تحليلها في هذا الكتاب المدرسي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم تصوير الشخصيات بشكل مختلف حسب الجندر فيما يتعلق

بالخصائص الجسدية والملابس والأنشطة والمهن، وما إلى ذلك. ونتيجة لذلك، يواجه التلاميذ في هذه المرحلة من تعليمهم واقعًا مختلفًا تمامًا وقديمًا فيما يتعلق بتصورهم عن الرجال والنساء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصور النمطية الجندرية، الكتاب المدرسي، المنهج الخفي، اللغة الإنجليزية

INTRODUCTION

From a sociological perspective, school, family, the political sphere and the workplace are all considered agents of socialisation. Schools, in particular, are institutions that fulfil social functions, including socialisation, by preparing individuals to integrate into society (Duru-Bellat and Zanten, 2012: 8). The social role of schools is even more apparent when it comes to transmitting knowledge about the social world alongside academic knowledge (Mosconi, 2010: 7). Values, gender norms and stereotypes can be incorporated into school tools, contributing to the reinforcement of power relations between the two sexes (Duru-Bellat and Zanten, 2012: 130). It may be said that gender stereotypes exist in texts and illustrations that confine men and women to gender-related functions and roles (Lignon, 2014: 93). When pupils are confronted with such a fictional reality, they absorb it as it is. Their social knowledge about gender is then constructed on the basis of what they have learnt and seen at school, in particular the images, texts and examples concerning the two sexes. In Tunisia, the publishing sector is very limited. Educational materials are the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Education. It therefore seems necessary to verify whether primary school textbooks are subject to control and verification by the Tunisian State in this regard. Thus, we chose to examine the Tunisian English language textbook for pupils in Year 7 of basic education. Our objective is to detect gender stereotypes, if they exist in this corpus, and to analyse them.

Gender stereotyping and textbooks is a topic that has long been the subject of research. Several studies have addressed this issue

(Baie, 2017; Cromer et al, 2005; Brugeilles et al, 2002; Brugeilles and Abassi, 2007; Lignon et al, 2013; Dominguez, 2003; Chamek, 2011; Barka, 2011; Amadio, 2011; Yang, 2014; Michel, 1986; Abichou, 1981; Bouchoucha et al, 2011). As in previous studies, this research sheds light on the sociological role of school textbooks by analysing the Tunisian English textbook intended for pupils in year 7 of basic education. The following questions then arise: do gender stereotypes exist in this textbook under examination? How are Tunisian women represented? Are they represented according to the traditional model or rather according to a contemporary model? Is there a balance between male and female representations in the texts, illustrations, exercises and examples? Is there a gender distinction between girls and boys?

1. Conceptual framework

There are some key concepts that need to be defined in this research. To begin with, the textbook, known as a “book of books” (Fonatinini, 2007: 3), is an educational and pedagogical tool intended for both students and teachers. For the latter, the textbook “is a fundamental, and sometimes unique, educational resource” (Brugeilles and Cromer, 2007: 14). For pupils, it is a faithful companion throughout their school journey (Bendib and Hafdalal, 2015: 10). Generally composed of texts and/or images, it imparts knowledge, develops skills and competences, and consolidates learning. The textbook has three main functions: to provide information, to structure and organise learning, and to guide this learning (Senguin, 1989: 22-23). In addition to the knowledge and educational skills transmitted through textbooks, social skills are also transmitted. Indeed, “models of behaviour, roles and values are learned and these, reshape gender identities based on social relations between the sexes” (Mosconi, 1999: 88). The teaching materials used in primary school are the first ones that pupils have access to in their school career (Brugeilles, Cromer, 2006: 148). Pupils are thus confronted with behaviours, attributes and writing styles that differ

according to gender. At this stage, it is necessary to introduce the concept of “curriculum” which refers to activities designed to educate pupils (Perrenoud, 1995: 238). It differs from the “prescribed curriculum”, which refers to educational objectives, programmes, methodological guidelines or study plans proposed or imposed on pupils (Perrenoud, 1995: 240). The “actual curriculum” is “the way in which the prescribed curriculum is implemented in practice in a classroom” (Perrenoud, 1995: 240), but not everything that is learned at school is explicitly mentioned in the prescribed curriculum; this refers to the “hidden curriculum” (Perrenoud, 1995: 240). It transmits “patterns of thought that shape the way individuals educated in the same school will read and process reality” (Duru-Bellat and Zanten, 2012: 136). The concept of the hidden curriculum is useful for understanding gendered education in schools (Mosconi, 1999: 88). In this respect, the hidden curriculum refers to hidden social knowledge that contributes to the socialisation of children through the implicit inculcation of a social order that is sometimes characterised by inequalities and hierarchies. This “unspoken” aspect can be said to take the form of gender stereotypes conveyed in texts and illustrations that confine men and women to gender-specific functions and roles (Lignon, 2014: 93). With regards to the concept of gender stereotype, it is defined as social roles attributed to women and men. It differs across social, economic, political and cultural contexts and is influenced by other factors, including age, social class and ethnicity (Gurung, 2025 :148).

2. Methodology

2.1 Textbook description

The textbook under investigation is an English student book entitled “Let's Learn English” and it's aimed for 7th grade students in basic education. As such, this study focuses solely and exclusively on this particular textbook, and the findings of this research cannot be generalised to all Tunisian textbooks. Provided by the Tunisian

Ministry of Education and published by the National Pedagogic Centre, this textbook is made up of 165 pages. It contains five modules. Each module is divided into four input sections and a review section. Each section offers several activities. It is written by three education inspectors and an English teacher. The textbook under investigation, along with an activity book, are the only teaching tools available to pupils at this level for learning English and are used in all Tunisian state schools. Their content complies with the official curricula established by the Ministry of Education. We focus primarily and exclusively on the student book.

2.2 Investigation technique

In order to analyse it and to verify whether this textbook perpetuates gender stereotypes that emphasise the power imbalance between men and women, we have opted for Laurence Bardin's (1977) "Content Analysis" as our analytical technique. It includes operations that facilitate the interpretation of this material. We use two main research methods: quantitative and qualitative. In general, the study of gender stereotypes requires a numerical description supplemented by in-depth analysis, in the sense that all data must be decoded. Laurence Bardin defines Content Analysis as "a set of communication analysis techniques that use systematic and objective procedures to describe the content of statements in order to obtain indicators (quantitative or otherwise) that allow conclusions to be drawn about the conditions of production/reception (deduced variables) of these statements " (Bardin, 1977: 43). This analytical technique involves three key chronological phases: pre-analysis, data processing and finally interpretation. It also involves operations that are essential for data processing, such as cutting, classifying, categorizing, deducing and interpreting.

2.3 Coding procedure

We carefully followed the steps described by Laurence Bardin's Content Analysis (1977). We first chose "the character" as the unit of recording, as it embodies the social construction of gender (Brugilles et al, 2005:25). We then divided our material into four units of analysis: images, texts, exercises and examples. Our initial analysis consisted of counting the total number of images, texts, examples and exercises. We then recounted them from a gender perspective. That is, to determine the representation of each gender in the units of analysis. In this regard, Table (1) presents a quantitative coding analysis of gender in the textbook.

Table 1 : Coding table for the gender quantitative analysis in the textbook

Unit of analysis	Total	Feminine representation in the unit	Masculine representation in the unit
Images			
Texts			
Examples			
Exercises			

This enables us to make a statistical comparison between the representations of women and men in images, texts, exercises and examples. But also to verify whether this textbook perpetuates and reinforces the hierarchy between men and women. Our second stage involved a qualitative analysis of the textbook. Due to their significant number in this textbook, we paid particular attention to the images and exercises that refer to the female gender, the male gender, or both. For the images, they are two main formats: real world photographs and fictive illustrations. we paid attention to gender, public or private spheres, physical characteristics and

costumes, as well as the activities carried out by the characters depicted in the image. Here is an example of a coding table (2) for gender representation in images.

Table 2 : Coding table for gender representation in images

N° of the image	Gender representation			Sphere		Characteristics		Activity				Presence of stereotype	
	Male	Female	Both	Private	Public	Physical	Clothing	Scholar	Professional	Domestic	Other	Yes	No

With regard to the exercises, we focused on those aimed at one gender or both genders. Our aim was to ascertain whether or not gender stereotypes do exist within the exercises of this textbook. Thus, we listed the exercises, then extracted a sample of each exercise from the textbook. We classified them according to whether they were aimed at males, females, or both. Next, we highlighted the activity described in the exercise and the theme, then finalised our analysis by determining whether or not stereotypes were apparent. Here is a coding table (3) for gender representation in exercises.

Table 3 : Coding table for gender representations in the exercises

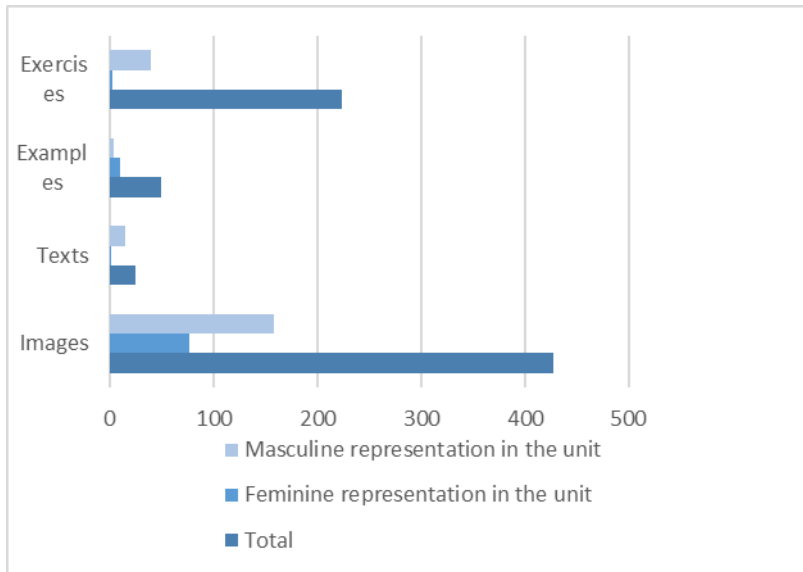
N° of Exercise / Page	Gender representation			Activity				Theme			Interpretation note
	Male	Female	Both	Scholar	Professional	Domestic	Other	Traditional	Traditional	Equal participation	

This research also analyses the use of language, which may also perpetuate gender stereotypes and representations. Indeed, when we communicate about others, we tend, whether intentionally or not, to categorise them using certain linguistic expressions, words and terms. These expressions tend to accentuate differences between certain social categories. It therefore seems necessary to draw attention to the language used in the textbook in question, when referring to women and men.

3. Results

3.1 Superiority of male representation in the textbook

Figure 1 Overall frequencies of male and female representations in the textbook



The hierarchy between the two sexes is evident in the superiority and overrepresentation of male characters in this textbook. In fact, the graph above shows that there is a certain imbalance between female and male representation in the units. The analysis of 427 images revealed the overrepresentation of male figures, with 158 appearances compared to 76 for women. Similarly, the texts also highlight gender imbalance in representations. Of the 24 texts in total, 15 are devoted exclusively to men, compared with only one devoted to women. The gender imbalance is also evident in the exercises. We analysed the 224 exercises and found that 39 are male-only, compared to 13 that are female-only. However, if we look at the examples closely, we notice that the results differ slightly from those in the other categories. Of the 49 examples we found, 9 mention only male characters, while 10 mention only female characters. Through this summative analysis, we observe a certain predominance of men and boys over women and girls, since the male characters are mentioned and represented more frequently in the images, exercises, and texts.

3.2 Gender-based division of domestic and outdoor activities

The qualitative analysis of this textbook revealed the classic and traditional division of gender roles between domestic and non-domestic activities. In fact, some of the exercises and illustrations show women confined to the home, engaged in domestic tasks, i.e. childcare, cooking, cleaning or even simply watching television “His mother is preparing couscous for lunch”. The men, on the other hand, are depicted in the typical, traditional images of Tunisian society. They repair things in the garage, clean the car or look after the garden. When they are at home, they are shown holding a newspaper or simply sitting, in line with the dominant image of the father. Boys and girls are also depicted in this way. Girls are either shown helping their mothers with household chores “His sister is tidying up Peter’s room” or dancing, singing or watching television at home with their friends and sisters. As for the boys, they are shown outside playing football and, when they are at home, playing video games. Overall, this textbook emphasises and reproduces the typical image of “women at home, men outside”.

3.3 Gendered use of colours and portraits

An analysis of the illustrations in this manual reveals a gender-based distinction in terms of colours, dress codes and physical characteristics. The blue-pink palette predominates in all the scenes, whether individual or mixed. On the one hand, the female characters are mainly associated with soft colours such as violet, pink or light orange. On the other hand, the male characters are associated with dark colours such as blue, brown or grey. The blue-pink pairing is even apparent in the background of the illustrations. In fact, in five cases, we found that the boy was directly associated with a blue bed, a blue bicycle, a blue wall, etc. This colour palette is repeated in the illustrations of the classroom scenes, where the school uniforms are blue for the boys and pink for the girls. As far as the dress code is concerned, we have noticed that women and girls are generally

represented in dresses, long skirts and very rarely in trousers, while boys and men are represented in trousers and shorts. This distinction prevails in both the domestic and external environments. A scene depicting a family in this textbook highlights this traditional distinction between the sexes when it comes to clothing. The grandfather, father and three boys wear long trousers and dark T-shirts, while the grandmother, mother and daughter wear long skirts in different shades of pink and purple. In terms of physical characteristics, the analysis revealed the persistence of a gender-based distinction in physical characteristics. Male characters are generally depicted with masculine features such as broad shoulders, short hair, muscles, moustaches and beards for grandfathers. Female characters, on the other hand, are associated with short or medium-length hair, always with a smile and a gentle gaze. Boys in this textbook, also have short hair, while girls generally wear accessories that emphasise their femininity. They are usually depicted with a headband or with their hair parted in two braids, which accentuates their girly look. These physical motifs are to be found throughout most of the textbook, where fictitious illustrations are featured

3.4 Gendered distinction in leisure and sports

Football, running, playing rugby, playing golf and cycling were the sports associated with the male characters in this textbook. When it comes to fitness, there are a few illustrations showing a boy doing push-ups as an example. They were portrayed as active and competitive, while the female characters were generally depicted indoors, less competitive, and associated with sports traditionally seen as feminine. In fact, some of the exercises in this textbook highlight this distinction when it comes to sporting preferences dialogues between the two sexes: “I love football/ I love tennis/ football is my favourite sport”. When it comes to hobbies and pastime activities, we have noticed that video games are essentially

associated with males in this textbook. Whether they are playing together or single, the male characters are always depicted holding the controller. On the other hand, female characters were depicted dancing, singing, watching TV or reading, activities that underline typical femininity.

3.5 Gender stereotyping in occupations

An analysis of the illustrations and exercises in this textbook reveals a gendered division of professions. The illustrations examined, as well as the activities that accompanied them, showed a restricted range of occupations for women and a variable range for men. Female characters are represented in only two traditionally female professions, such as secretary and teacher. We have identified some of the activities featuring female teachers, such as “Mrs Soltane/Mrs Williams”. In addition, some of the illustrations showed women in secretarial positions as part of the matching activity. On the other hand, the male professions presented in this manual are variable. We spotted the headmaster, the policeman, the customs officer, the souk vendor, the farmer and the doctor. The illustrations show them in public places such as the airport, the farm or the institute, while women are generally depicted in the classroom, the office or simply at home. Although there is an example where a woman is shown outside using a vehicle “my mother is a good driver”, this example remains isolated and is not repeated in the rest of the textbook. Overall, this corpus reflects a traditional model of occupational distribution, where men hold more diversified and prestigious jobs, while women hold very limited and under-represented jobs.

3.6 Use of gender-biased language

A thorough analysis of the language used in this textbook reveals a gender difference in the verbs and expressions used to describe the two categories. Indeed, we have carefully examined the verbs, as

well as the sentences, whether they accompany images or are used in exercises. We have noticed that the verbs used for girls and women are rather passive and reflect gender stereotypes. As an example, when describing leisure activities, the verbs associated with female images were “drawing/watching/listening”. When it comes to adult women, cooking is the verb most commonly associated with them “my mother usually cooks”. Whereas for men and boys, we recorded “playing/cycling/swimming/repairing”. It is also worth noting the sentences used, which openly reflect gender stereotypes. In fact, the sentence “I usually play football with my friends” was associated with the image of a boy in an exercise describing favourite pastimes. On the other hand, women and girls were explicitly associated with traditional gender roles. “Where is your mother? She's at home. / Do you sometimes clean the... Imene? Yes, I do. Quite often.” These sentences were part of an exercise on questions. Conclusively, we can state that the language used in this textbook is gender stereotypical.

4. Discussion

Despite the existence of laws and strategies promoting gender equality in Tunisia since independence and the progress made by Tunisian women, the textbook we examined unfortunately does not reflect this evolution. We can explain this by two main reasons: firstly, the absence of educational policies promoting gender equality in Tunisian school curricula and, secondly, the weight of gender norms and stereotypes in Tunisian society which may have influenced the authors. Additionally, school textbooks in Tunisia are not regularly revised by the Ministry of Education, which may also explain the outdated content of this textbook in terms of gender equality. Indeed, it has been so long since the last education reform in Tunisia, which dates back to 2008. This has led to the increasing difficulties we see today in basic primary education. Consequently, one could say that this analysed student textbook, which unfortunately remains unrevised, has an impact on pupils' gender

development. Indeed, the over-representation of male characters in this manual and the gendered representation of the characters contribute eventually to the construction of the pupils' gender identities. In other words, they learn about the existence of a hierarchical gender system through this textbook: boys and men are superior, while girls and women are less valued and more submissive. Subsequently, these imbalances have a direct and indirect influence on pupils' aspirations and their perception of their future status in Tunisian society. In addition, this manual not only reproduces the dress codes associated with each gender, but also images that are not part of those that young readers encounter in their daily lives. Trousers, often associated with men, are now the dress norm for women, to the detriment of skirts and dresses. So-called "unisex" clothing is now worn more by women, such as jeans, jackets, sweatshirts and so on. The manual also reproduces a well-known stereotype: boys in blue, girls in pink. This is a hidden belief that colours are used to mark the difference between masculine and feminine. The professor Nicole Mosconi explains that adults feel the need to give outward signs, especially to infants, in order to distinguish them from other genders, such as the decoration of their room and the colour of their clothes (Mosconi, 2016: 197). Along with gender-based portraits and contrasting colours, the characters in this textbook are also confined to stereotypical professions. The women were portrayed as secretaries or teachers while the men were portrayed as headmasters, doctors, farmers, office assistants, police officers and so on. It should therefore be emphasised that this corpus tends to undermine the professional situation of Tunisian women. The reality is that today, Tunisian women hold a wide variety of jobs, some of which are considered masculine.

The results of this textbook analysis are in line with recent studies and research on this issue. A recent Malaysian study (2024) that examined gender representation in language textbooks in state secondary schools, found that a low ratio of females was discovered in the English textbooks designed for Grades 9 and 10 students

(Mastoi et al, 2024 :141). In addition, the Algerian study by Barka (2011) expresses the same idea. She notes an unequal presence of the female figure compared to the male figure. By examining 5 English textbooks dating from 1987 to 2007 intended for the third year of secondary school, she finds that there are three times as many images and four times as many texts containing a male character. In the same vein, a quantitative Ethiopian study (2022), revealed that women were under-represented in the use of language (particularly in the proper nouns and common nouns used), visibility/illustrations (images and photos) and the professional roles mentioned in the text. In addition, men occupied first place (primacy) in dialogues, points of view, common noun pairs, pronoun pairs and proper noun pairs (Bachore,2022: 175).

CONCLUSION

Gender stereotypes are arbitrary characteristics and traits that society attributes to gender groups. They reinforce the categorisation, but also aggravate the hierarchy between men and women. This in turn leads to inequality and discrimination. These gender stereotypes can be circulated through school textbooks. As a result, learners are confronted with a social order that is sometimes gendered and does not correspond to their reality. For this reason, the aim of this study was to make educators pedagogues, readers and designers aware of the fact that textbooks must be a vehicle for equality between the sexes and not a vehicle for discrimination. Our analysis of the Tunisian 7th year basic education English student book, indicates that the numerical distribution between men and women in the illustrations, texts, examples and exercises is unbalanced in favour of men. In addition, men, women, boys and girls are represented differently according to their sex. Gender stereotypes are reflected in the character's outward appearance, the space they occupy and the professional and sporting activities they

engage in. Women in this textbook are presented according to a typically feminine model. When they have a profession, they are represented in occupations traditionally reserved for women. We therefore found that this textbook does not correspond to Tunisian reality. It conveys a social order that seems totally different from reality. Indeed, young readers of this textbook are confronted with images that do not reflect their environment and the social changes currently taking place. Nonetheless, it is still too early to assert that all Tunisian English textbooks convey gender stereotypes, as the analysis of a single book does not allow such a conclusion to be drawn. These results are therefore not decisive on this type of issue and do not allow us to conclude that the content of Tunisian textbooks is stereotyped. This study is therefore not exhaustive. A more in-depth analysis of other English textbooks, would undoubtedly provide more results.

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