

Gender Representation in Indonesian EFL Textbooks: A Sociolinguistic Study of “English for Nusantara”

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ABSTRACT

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Gender representation in textbooks has a powerful impact on students' perceptions and social identities. Unbalanced gender portrayal can influence how students view their roles and opportunities in society. This study aimed to investigate how gender is represented in educational material, *English for Nusantara* textbook for eighth-grade students. A mixed-method design was employed, combining content analysis and discourse analysis, to examine how often male and female characters are represented in the textbook. Brugeilles and Cromer's (2009) model was employed to inform analysis, focusing on the frequency of activities, roles, and characters' appearances. The findings revealed that male and female characters appear in nearly equal numbers however traditional gender roles are still dominated. Male characters are more frequently depicted in physical, competitive, and public roles, such as workers and rescuers, while female characters are more often shown in domestic, educational, and cultural contexts. These findings suggest that numerical balance does not necessarily indicate gender equality in representation. The study highlights the need for more diverse and equitable representation of both genders in educational materials. It also suggests that future research explores students' perceptions of gender and how teachers address gendered content in classroom settings to support more inclusive English language learning.

Keywords: English for Nusantara, Gender Bias, Gender Representation, Sociolinguistic, Textbook Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Textbook is one of the main tools used in English Language Teaching (ELT). According to Brugeilles and Cromer (2009), textbooks are essential learning materials that not only support students in developing language skills but also help them understand culture, identity, and social values. They provide students with both linguistic and cultural input that reflects real-life situations and guide how students view the world. As Iriana et al. (2024) mentioned, textbooks can greatly influence learners' social attitudes, including how they view gender roles. In fact, English textbooks are known to depict gender equality in both direct and subtle ways (Lee, 2018). Therefore, the kind of input students receive through textbooks does not only affect their language learning but also shapes their understanding of social roles, especially gender.

In the context of language education, Risager (1998) emphasized that the textbooks are cultural tools that showed how individuals live and work in society, including the portrayal of gender roles, into language learning content. This means that students may learn indirect communication regarding what men and women ought to do. By often representing men as active, professional, or public figures, and women as domestic or supportive figures, textbook may reinforce stereotypical gender roles. This is important since adolescence is an important time when students are developing their identity and textbooks take a role for students' perception and

social identities regarding how should they behave as man or woman. If gender roles in textbooks are not balanced, it can affect how students see their future roles and opportunities in society.

Gender is a social concept that refers to the roles, behaviors, and expectations that society considers appropriate for men and women. These ideas are not fixed but are learned and repeated through social interactions, including the use of language. As Butler (1999) explained gender is not something we are born with but something we perform based on what we see and learn from our surroundings. This means that educational materials, including textbooks, play a key role in teaching students how to understand and express gender. When students repeatedly see certain roles associated with either men or women in their textbooks, they may begin to internalize these roles as natural or normal. According to Sunderland (2000), how genders are shown in textbooks can shape students' beliefs about what men and women can or should do. Over time, these portrayals influence how students view themselves and others in terms of what is expected or acceptable behavior for each gender.

Unfortunately, gender inequality is still a major issue around the world, including in Indonesia. According to the Global Gender Gap Index by the Forum (2023), Indonesia is ranked 87 out of 143 countries, which shows that there is still a significant gap between men and women in terms of education, job opportunities, and

social participation. As Krook and Mackay (2011) pointed out, chances for women are often given in involving the politics, employment, and education fewer than chances for men. This reflects larger social structures where men are more likely to be in positions of power, while women are expected to take on supporting roles. These problems also exist in education, where women may not be as visible in school materials or leadership positions. This can affect how students view women's roles and abilities.

To reduce gender inequality, we need to make changes in many areas, including school policies, learning materials, and the way society sees gender. One important step is to carefully review textbooks, because they are used by many students and strongly influence how young learners think about gender. If textbooks keep showing men and women in unequal or stereotypical ways, they reinforce these repeated patterns and slow down progress toward gender equality. According to Blumberg (2008), textbooks that include gender bias can shape students' behavior, goals, and confidence. Textbooks should show balanced roles for men and women and avoid repeating old gender stereotypes. UNESCO (2017) also stated that gender bias in learning materials goes against the goal of fair and equal education. To provide better education, we need textbooks that show both men and women in diverse and equal roles.

Many researchers have studied gender representation in textbooks and

found that inequality is still common. Azad (2020) found that male characters are often shown as more active and powerful in the Iranian high school textbook images, while female characters are more passive and emotional. A study by Adawiyah & Oktavianti (2023) showed similar results in Indonesian textbooks. They noted that male characters were shown less often and with limited emotional expressions, while female characters were more expressive but still shown in traditional roles.

In Indonesia, studies have also found that English textbooks still contain traditional gender stereotypes which assign specific roles and traits to men and women according to cultural beliefs. Eagly and Wood (2012) explained these stereotypes portray men were typically involved in paid work outside the home, and women were responsible for domestic tasks such as caregiving, cleaning, or cooking. Iriana et al. (2024) and 'Aini et al. (2021) found that female characters were often shown doing housework, while male characters were more often shown outside the home or in professional roles. These messages reflect old gender norms and may limit how students think about gender roles today.

Another researcher, Suwarno et al. (2021) analyzed the "Think Globally, Act Locally" textbook for ninth-grade students. They found that some progress had been made in using gender-neutral language and showing an equal number of male and female characters in pictures. However, stereotypes still appeared when it came to jobs, hobbies, and achievements. Similarly,

Iriana et al. (2024) examined gender representation in the "English for Nusantara" textbook for seventh-grade students. Their findings indicate a gradual shift towards more balanced portrayals of domestic roles, yet traditional stereotypes remain evident. Adawiyah and Oktavianti (2023) found that textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum still showed male characters as less emotional, while female characters expressed a wider range of emotions such as love, shame, and anger.

These studies show that gender bias is still present in many textbooks even though there have been improvements. Most of the existing research has focused on older textbooks or on specific grade levels. There is still limited research on newer textbooks, such as those in the *English for Nusantara* series used in junior high schools. *English for Nusantara* is a recent textbook published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. This textbook is nationally distributed and officially used to support English language learning in the classroom across Indonesia, especially in public schools. Studying this textbook can provide insights into whether newer materials offer more balanced and fair representations of gender.

Understanding how these newer materials present gender is important, especially as the Indonesian government works to create a more inclusive and modern education system. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the *English for Nusantara* textbook used by eighth-grade

students. The main goal is to understand how male and female characters are represented in this textbook. The study will look at how often male and female characters appear, what roles they play, what jobs or activities they are shown doing, and how their emotions are described. The study will also examine whether the textbook challenges or supports traditional gender stereotypes.

The results of this study will be useful for many people. For teachers, it can help them be more aware of gender messages in their teaching materials. For textbook writers and curriculum developers, it can offer ideas for making textbooks more balanced and fair. For policymakers, the study can give evidence that supports gender equality in education. In the long term, making textbooks more inclusive can help students develop a more open and equal view of gender roles in society. In conclusion, textbooks are more than just tools for teaching language. They are powerful resources that influence how students think about themselves and others. Because of this, it is important to make sure that textbooks promote gender equality and do not reinforce outdated stereotypes. This study hopes to contribute to that goal by exploring how gender is represented in a key English textbook used in Indonesian junior high schools. The findings can help support better, fairer, and more inclusive education for all students.

Research Questions:

1. What is the frequency of male and female representation in the "English for

Nusantara" textbook for Eighth-grade students?

2. How are male and female characters represented based on their roles, attributes, and behaviorism?

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative and quantitative approach to analyze how gender is represented in an English textbook. Specifically, content analysis was used as the main method to examine the content of the textbook. Content analysis was a systematic way to study texts by focusing on the meaning and messages within the content rather than the grammar or sentence structure Sunderland (2010). This method is suitable for exploring gender representation, as it allows the researcher to identify and count the appearance of gendered elements in the textbook. To support the analysis, this study also used discourse analysis. Discourse analysis helps to understand how gender is portrayed in different situations, such as in conversations, stories, or other forms of text. By combining content analysis and discourse analysis, the study did not only counts gender-related items but also explored how male and female characters are described and represented in different contexts.

Data Collection

The main source of data was the *English for Nusantara* textbook for eighth-grade students which took the male and

female characters representation in the textbook. This textbook is published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture and is officially used in junior high schools across the country. The textbook was selected because it represents current educational materials in Indonesia and is widely used in classrooms, especially for public school in Indonesia. Therefore, it is an important source for understanding how gender is currently portrayed in English learning materials.

Data Analysis

The focus of the study was on all textbook content that relates to gender. To guide the analysis, this study used the framework developed by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009), which focused on analyzing gender representation in school textbooks. Their framework was originally created to examine gender in general educational materials. However, in this study, the framework has been adapted to better fit the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook in Indonesia. Some categories from the original framework were removed or modified because they were not relevant to language learning materials. The adjustments help to make the analysis more accurate and focused on the specific content of the textbook being studied. The modified framework still includes key categories such as the number of male and female characters, the roles they play (e.g., student, teacher, parent, professional), the activities they are involved in, and how they are

described in terms of emotions, behaviors, and physical appearance. By using a modified version of the Bruegilles and Cromer (2009) framework, the study aims to identify both the quantity and quality of gender representation in the selected material. The findings will help to evaluate whether the textbook promotes gender equality or continues to reflect traditional gender roles.

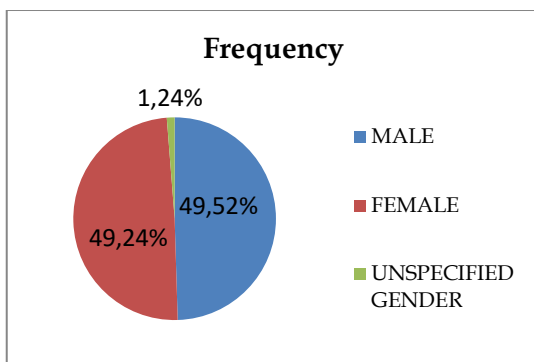
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of gender representation in the "English for Nusantara" textbook for Eighth-Grade Junior High School students.

The Frequency of Male and Female Characters in Textbooks

The analysis of male and female characters that represent in "English for Nusantara" course book for Eighth-Grade Junior High School students can be seen in the following graphic:



Graphic 1. Percentage of Male and Female Characters

Based on Graphic 1 above, male and female characters appear in almost equal numbers across all identified activities in the "English for Nusantara" textbook for eighth-grade students. As shown in the chart, male characters represent 49.52% while female characters represent 49.24% of the total figured analyzed. This indicated that there is only a small difference of 0.28%, with slightly more male characters. In addition, 1.24% of the characters are depicted into unspecified gender. These unspecified-gender characters appear in activities where the visual or written context does not make it clear whether the character is male or female. In total, there are 722 character appearances in the textbook which consist of 360 male characters, 358 female characters, and 9 unspecified-gender characters.

Male and Female Roles in Textbook

The analysis of character occupations in the *English for Nusantara* textbook for eighth-grade students shows that male and female characters are almost equally represented across various roles. The roles of the character can be shown in the table below.

Table 1. Roles of Male and Female Characters in textbook

Roles	Male	Female	Unspecified Gender
Students	280	275	7
Parents	27	25	-
Teacher	-	3	-
Fictional Character	4	6	-
Baby/Toddler/Children	20	30	2
Fire-fighter	2	-	-

Soldiers	5	-	-
Rescuers	7	-	-
Elderly	1	1	-
Preacher	1	-	-
Volunteers	8	6	-
Citizen	5	10	-
Models	-	2	-

The data on table 1 showed that the most common role found for both genders is students, with 280 male and 275 female student characters, along with 7 of unspecified gender. This suggests that the textbook gives nearly equal emphasis to male and female learners. In other common roles, parents also has nearly equal distribution which 27 males and 25 females. However, there is some gender imbalances found in specific occupations. Teachers and models are only represented as female. While some roles are specialized as masculine which are firefighters, soldiers, rescuers, and ustadz/preachers are portrayed exclusively as male. In addition, there some roles have a relatively balanced distribution such as fictional characters, volunteers, and citizens. While the role of babies or toddlers/children, it is slightly more female than male, with 2 unspecified-genders.

Typical Activities of Male and Female Characters in Textbook

Table 2 below showed the analysis of typical activities based on gender in the *English for Nusantara* textbook for Eighth-Grade students. It reveals the distinct patterns in how male and female characters are portrayed.

Table 2. Activities of Male and Female Characters in textbook

Activities	Males	Females
Competition	59	51
Work Activity	22	11
Leisure	90	78
Sociability	121	121
Teaching and Learning	22	35
Domestic Activity	5	31
Cultural Related Activity	2	4
Everyday Activity	39	27

According to the Table 2 above, male characters in textbook appear more frequently in competition, work activity, leisure, and everyday activity categories. For example, they are slightly more involved in 59 competition scenes, while female characters involved only in 51 scenes. A larger gap can be seen also in work activities where males appear in 22 instances compared to 11 for females. It suggests a stronger portrayal of males in physically active or labor-related roles. Similarly, in leisure activities, males are shown more often than females, reinforcing their association with active or playful behavior.

On the other hand, female characters are more active in teaching and learning activities. They are shown 35 times in this category, while male characters appear only 22 times. Female characters also appear more often in domestic activities such as doing household tasks. There are 31 female appearances in this category, while male characters appear only 5 times. Interestingly, the sociability category shows an equal number of portrayals for

both genders which appear on 121 scenes. This suggests that the textbook presents social interaction as a shared space between males and females. Overall, the textbook showed male characters are more active in public, physical, and competitive roles. On the other hand, female characters are more involved in educational, domestic, and cultural activities. Although some activities are balanced between genders, traditional roles still appear in many parts of the textbook.

Discussion

This study examined gender representation in the *English for Nusantara* textbook for eighth-grade students, with the analysis guided by two primary research questions: (1) What is the frequency of male and female representation in the textbook? and (2) How are male and female characters represented based on their roles, attributes, and behaviors? The findings show that while there is almost equal numerical representation of male and female characters. The percentages are 49.52% for male representation and 49.24% for female representation. According to data analyzed, the textbook still reflects stereotypical gender portrayals, especially in terms of the roles and types of activities assigned to each gender. According to the framework proposed by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009), evaluating gender equality in educational materials goes beyond counting the number of male and female characters. True equality must also

consider the quality and diversity of representation: the roles played by each gender, the behaviors they display, and the symbolic value associated with their actions. In this study, although the figures for male and female appearances are nearly identical, the types of roles and activities associated with each gender suggest an imbalance. Male characters tend to dominate public, professional, and physically active roles, while female characters are more frequently involved in domestic, educational, and cultural activities.

More specifically, male characters are shown participating in competitions, engaging in work-related tasks, and being involved in physically demanding roles such as firefighters, soldiers, and rescuers. These portrayals align with traditional views of masculinity associating males with strength, independence, and public visibility. On the other hand, female characters are often depicted in more nurturing or supportive roles. They are more frequently shown teaching, learning, engaging in household chores, and participating in social or cultural activities. Although these portrayals reflect important aspects of life, they risk reinforcing a narrow view of femininity if not balanced by portrayals of women in active, professional, or leadership roles. These findings echo Zahra et al. (2024) argument that gender bias in textbooks can influence students' conscious and subconscious perception on their own attitude, career choice and social behaviour. The way

gender is portrayed in learning materials shape and reinforce stereotypes social construct about men are presented in leading and active roles, while women are presented in passive or secondary positions and it can restrict students' understanding of gender roles and limit their aspirations.

Azad (2020) similarly noted that Iranian high school textbook content often portrays male characters as dominant, active, and central to the storyline, whereas female characters are depicted as passive, secondary, or background figures. This can be observed in the current study, where males were more frequently involved in work and competition, while females were mostly involved in domestic settings or learning environments. While female participation in education-related tasks is positive, the overall trend still aligns with traditional expectations: men work and act, while women care and support. Further supporting this view is the research by Adawiyah and Oktavianti (2023), who analyzed English textbooks used under the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The textbooks are used for senior high school students at 10th grade, 11th grade and 12th grade. They found that male characters appeared less frequently and expressed fewer emotions, whereas female characters were portrayed as more emotionally expressive and independent. Although this may suggest a shift toward recognizing the emotional range and agency of female characters, it also raises concerns about the lack of emotional expression in male characters.

In the *English for Nusantara* textbooks for Eighth-Grade that analyzed in this study, a similar trend is observed. Female characters are actively engaged in teaching, sociability, and school-related activities, which may point to growing recognition of women's roles in intellectual and emotional domains. However, the fact that male characters still dominate physically active and high-status occupations such as soldiers, rescuers, and preachers indicates that traditional gender divisions remain firmly embedded in the textbook content. Furthermore, the absence of male characters in domestic or teaching roles and the lack of female representation in labor-intensive or leadership roles show that gender expectations are still rigid in certain areas.

Several other studies conducted in Indonesia also reveal comparable findings. Suwarno et al. (2021), in their analysis of the *Think Globally, Act Locally* textbook, pointed out that despite the use of gender-neutral language, traditional gender stereotypes continued to persist in depictions of professions and achievements. Iriana et al. (2024) conducted a study on the *English for Nusantara* textbook for seventh-grade students and found similar patterns. While they observed more balanced sharing of domestic roles, other stereotypical portrayals remained, such as gendered assignments of professions and leadership. This study on the eighth-grade textbook supports and expands upon those observations. For example, roles such as soldiers, firefighters, and religious leaders

(ustadz or preachers) are exclusively male in the eighth-grade textbook, while teachers and models are exclusively female. These representations reflect enduring gender stereotypes that associate men with authority and physical strength, and women with appearance or nurturing roles.

'Aini et al. (2021) also emphasized this issue, arguing that gender bias in textbooks is particularly evident in occupational portrayals and daily routines. Their findings support the results of this study, which show that male characters are more involved in adventurous, work-related, and competitive roles, while female characters are more visible in domestic, educational, and social contexts. Taken together, these findings suggest that while some progress has been made traditional gender stereotypes still appear throughout the textbook. The consistent portrayal of men in strong, active roles and women in passive, supportive ones limits the scope of gender equality in educational content. This has implications not only for how students view themselves and each other, but also for how they imagine future possibilities in terms of careers, family roles, and personal identity.

To promote a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, textbooks like *English for Nusantara* should strive to portray both male and female characters in a diverse range of roles and activities. Educational materials should avoid reinforcing traditional stereotypes and instead depict both genders as capable of taking on various responsibilities such as at

home, school, workplace, or public life. Girls should see themselves not only as caregivers or students, but also as leaders, professionals, and problem-solvers. Boys, likewise, should be shown as caring, cooperative, and emotionally expressive, in addition to being strong or competitive. A gender-inclusive textbook can help students develop broader perspectives and more flexible understandings of gender roles. This is essential for building an educational culture that values equality, respect, and mutual understanding. As educational materials reflect and shape social values, they hold the potential to challenge outdated norms and inspire new, more equitable ways of thinking.

This study confirms that while numerical gender balance has been achieved in the *English for Nusantara* textbook for eighth-grade students, deeper issues related to stereotypical portrayals remain. True gender equality in educational content involves not just equal visibility, but also balanced representation in terms of roles, activities, and behaviors. Future textbook development under the *Merdeka Curriculum* should aim for more progressive and inclusive portrayals to better support the goals of gender-sensitive education in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined gender representation in the *English for Nusantara* textbook for eighth-grade students by analyzing character frequency, roles, and activities. While male and female characters

appear in nearly equal numbers, the findings revealed persistent gender stereotypes. Male characters were more often portrayed in public, physical, and professional roles, such as workers, rescuers, and soldiers, while female characters were more frequently shown in domestic, educational, and cultural contexts. These portrayals reflect traditional gender roles, suggesting that numerical balance does not necessarily equate to gender-equitable representation. The findings have important implications for educators, textbook authors, and curriculum developers. First, textbook designers need to ensure that both male and female characters are represented not only equally in number but also equitably in terms of roles and character traits. Textbooks should serve as tools for promoting gender sensitivity and inclusivity by portraying both genders in a variety of settings, professions, and emotional expressions. This shift is crucial for fostering a learning environment that encourages respect, equality, and mutual understanding among students. Second, teachers should be aware of the subtle gender messages in their instructional materials. Through critical pedagogy, educators can guide students to question and analyze the content they consume, helping them develop critical awareness about gender stereotypes and encouraging more inclusive thinking. Future research could explore comparisons across different grade levels or textbook series, investigate student perceptions of gender roles in

textbooks, or examine how teachers respond to and address gendered content in classroom practice. Such studies are crucial in promoting gender-sensitive education that aligns with the goals of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and broader efforts toward gender equality in learning environments.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

RA designed the study, conducted the data collection and analysis, and wrote the manuscript. All tasks related to research planning, interpretation, and final editing were completed independently by RA.

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