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## Gender Representation in ELT Materials: A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Top Notch*

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### Abstract

This study was carried out to investigate aspects of gender as represented in one of the currently used English language series in Iran, namely, *Top Notch*. In effect, the study analyzed the series in terms of nine major aspects of gender: female and male's characters, female and male's pictorial representations, female and male's titles, activities, firstness of female and male in the mixed gender dialogues. To this end, Fairclough's (2001) three dimensional model was adopted in order to extract the ideology behind these textbooks. This results revealed that the series tends to favor a certain gender.

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*Keywords:* critical discourse analysis, ideology, ELT materials, gender representation

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### 1. Introduction

Sexist language has been a concern among discourse analysts and sociolinguists for quite some time. This concern can be best seen in the work of Tannen (1991). She makes a distinction between sex and gender. The former is considered to be a biological characteristic but the latter is social. It follows that society expects and molds each person into what is accepted and thought of as being feminine or masculine. The fact is that what is practiced in the society can be based on some conceptions which may be against expectations of one gender. Such a discursive practice may also be reflected in education systems, in general, and in teaching materials, in particular. English language teaching materials are no exception. In the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's many

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EFL texts were biased against femininity (Healy, 2009).

At that time, the world was a different place. A woman's place was in the home raising a family and supporting her husband from the sidelines (Healy, 2009). One of the issues which has attracted the attention of many researchers is the presentation of gender in ELT textbooks. Since the representation of gender in textbooks including ELT textbooks is an issue that according to Rifkin (1998) influences students' learning in a positive or negative way. Furthermore, Gershuny (1997) warns that biased ELT textbooks may perpetuate wrong "gender roles and social values" (p.150) since textbooks have binary roles. On the one hand, they are supposed to transmit some information and knowledge; on the other hand, they are considered as a manipulative instrument employed by elites.

Recently, ELT textbooks have been investigated through critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." (Van Dijk, 1998, p.1). In fact, CDA is a method to investigate "the power relations, ideological manipulations, and hegemony" (Rahimi & Sahragard, 2007, p.1).

The purpose of this paper was to discuss how ELT textbooks represent men and women. This paper investigated the representation of gender and gender roles in ELT books. The aim was to see how women and men are described and to what extent the textbooks show equality between the sexes. In order to perform the present study the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) Are there any differences between the representation of female and male characters in terms of discourse features in the conversations of *Top Notch* series
- 2) Are there any differences in the picture representation of male and female in the series?

## **2. Background**

The essential and major instrument for language learning is textbooks. Textbooks provide structured framework to study and learn a language in a systematic way. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest that without textbook, no teaching learning classroom is perfect. Textbooks are universal part of teaching that are produced by numerous aid projects in different countries every year. Sheldon (1988) observed that textbooks are not only at the heart of any ELT program but also offer considerable advantages - for both the student and the teacher - when they are being used in the ESL/EFL classroom. Cunningsworth (1995) states that teachers spend much time using ELT textbooks in class, so to make the most effective use of a textbook; they must decide which textbooks are appropriate for their needs. He also mentioned that regarding textbook selection, teachers should ensure that the textbook would meet learners' specific and general needs as well as the materials,

purpose, methods and values of the course.

Parrish (2004) accounted for the benefits of using textbook as providing assurance regarding structure, consistency, and logical progression in a class, decreasing the preparation time for teachers to present in class, providing opportunities for learners to review materials or preview other lessons, meeting learner's needs or expectations to have something tangible to study and take home for further study, providing novice teachers with guidance in course and activity design, and providing multiple resources: tapes, CDs, videos, self-study work

Textbooks, as an important component of any language course, play a crucial role in teaching and learning language all over the world. Textbooks are one of the means employed as a manipulative instrument for power relations, in order to form opinions and perspectives of learners. Gender is one of the socio-cultural issues shaped by textbooks, in general, and ELT materials, in particular. In addition, most investigated ELT textbooks showed that gender is always presented in a biased way (e.g. Esmaili, 2011; Nazeri, 2010; Johansson, 2009; Farooq, 1999).

An assumption of this study is that ELT materials as other textbooks present a particular worldview. In fact, "cultural capital" and "selected knowledge" (Keshavarz & Malek 2009, p. 9) included in textbooks present a specific point of view to students regarding the real world. It is worth mentioning that this perspective is designed based on the interests of the elites. Subsequently, English language textbooks, according to Kobia, (2009), are considered a significant factor in socializing and conveying the issue of gender to the learners. Accordingly, the second assumption is that textbooks are places for presenting social and cultural issues through language (Kobia, 2009).

A rich and growing body of studies has investigated the role of gender in language acquisitions studies. Among all, there are research studies that measured the relationship between gender and language or discourse (Goddard & Patterson, 2000; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002); the special concerns and issues of immigrant women (Frye, 1999; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; Kouritzin, 2000; Norton, 2000; Rivera, 1999); and women's needs and voices in EFL situations (McMahill, 1997, 2001; Saft & Ohara, 2004). Three theories were known behind the gender and language research: (1) Deficit theory indicates that females are disadvantaged speakers and communicators, particularly in the professional world, due to their upbringing and socialization as females (Block, 2002). (2) Dominance framework: "In this model women are perceived to perform their 'woman-ness' in an ethnomethodological frame as they continually negotiate their position of relative powerlessness vis a vis men" (Block, 2002, p.53). (3) Difference framework (also known as dual culture model) in the 1980s, states that men and women have separate but equal cultures which predate the development of individuals who are socialized into them (Block, 2002). In other words, girls and boys are socialized into different ways of relating to one another in their predominately same-sex interactions and, thus, acquire different communicative styles within the community they live (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004).

A recent approach to the investigation of the role of language and gender is critical discourse analysis. Fairclough (2001) argues that there are two main purposes in designing the CDA framework of discourse and language, one is more theoretical: "to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power". Fairclough's second purpose which is more practical is: "to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step toward emancipation" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 1).

Thus, CDA is known as a recent trend in analyzing different components of language. CDA has the capacity to deal with the texts that are being used in new contexts. It is useful for gaining understandings about the theoretical aspects of education. With regard to the significance of textbooks in language education, the present study intended to analyze the *Top Notch* series within the framework of CDA.

### 3. Method

A set of ELT series was selected as the materials of this study, namely, *Top Notch* series. The *Top Notch* series is multiple skills general English textbooks authored by John Saslow and Allen Ascher and published by Pearson Education and released in 2006 and republished during next years. *Top Notch*, a dynamic 6-level course for international communication, sets a new standard, using the natural language that people really speak with a learner-centered approach. The *Top Notch* series includes three groups of student's books, Work books, and teacher's books along with Disk and printable activities as well as TV Video programs, These extra materials are useful in that they provide authentic material for foreign students, there are four volumes of *Top Notch*, namely, *Top Notch Fundamentals*, *Top Notch 1*, *Top Notch 2*, and *Top Notch 3*. The volumes compose of 14, 10, 10, and 9 units, respectively. Each unit consists of four core modules: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The following table shows the number of units and conversations in the *Top Notch* series.

**Table 1. Number of units and conversations**

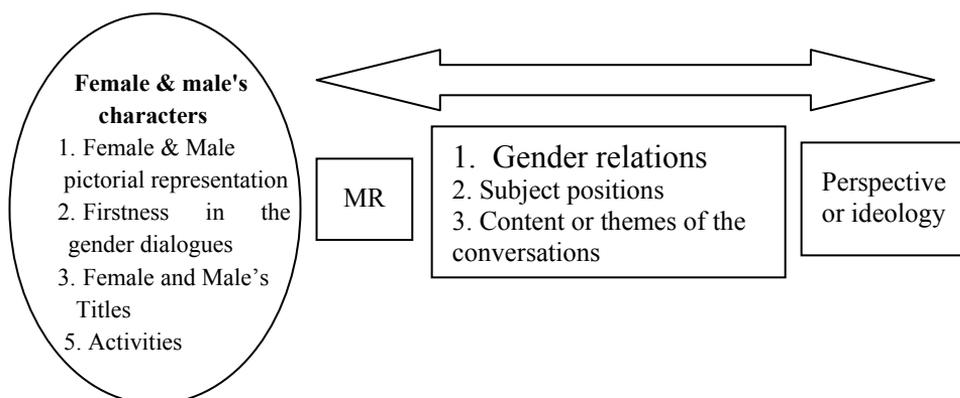
<b>Book</b>	<b>No. of Units</b>	<b>No. of Conversations</b>
Fundamentals	14	42
<i>Top Notch 1</i>	10	30
<i>Top Notch 2</i>	10	30
<i>Top Notch 3</i>	9	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>129</b>

It is worth mentioning that the focus of the present study was on the representation of gender in conversation parts of the series, as well as on pictorial representation in terms of gender. It is worthwhile to mention and

emphasize that the focus of this study was on linguistic features and not on paralinguistic or extralinguistic features like intonation. The following table shows the number of units and conversations in the *Top Notch* series.

### 3.1. Model of Analysis

The following figure (Figure 1) illustrates the particular model based on which the study was conducted. In the first part, for analyzing the conversations, five factors were extracted. In other words, for doing the first step of the Fairclough's model of CDA, namely, text analysis, female and male's characters, female and male pictorial representation, the issue of firstness, female and male's titles, as well as and their activities were studied. Furthermore, the extracted data was interpreted in order to conduct the second step of Fairclough's model, that is, interpretation. In effect, the extracted data was interpreted based on the concept of member resources suggested by Fairclough. This step leads to social roles, subject positions as well as content or themes of the topics spoken by interactants. Finally, the extracted data were explained in order to access to ideology by which the conversations were analyzed.



**Figure 1. Model of analysis based on Fairclough (1989)**

The following illustrates the factors investigated in the conversations of the *Top Notch* Series:

#### 3.1.1. Female and male characters

Omission, is one of the issues investigated in different textbooks in order to determine sexism or sex bias. Omission means exclusion of one gender, male or female. if one of the genders is omitted or does not appear as many times as the other one; that gender and their issues are not as worthy as other one (Esmaili, 2011).

### 3.1.2. *Appearances in photographs*

Females and males' pictorial representation in the *Top Notch* series was also counted. Here females and males were counted by numbers of individual people and also by total number of photographs for each gender.

### 3.1.3. *Firstness in mixed gender dialogues*

According to Stockdale (2006), when two gender-specific nouns or pronouns appear as a pair in a text, like mother and father or he/she, the one appearing in the first position can be interpreted as having a higher status. Mixed-gender dialogues include characters of more than one gender.

### 3.1.4. *Female and male titles*

Investigating titles, is another factor denoting the differences between female' and male's characters. In fact, English, make differences between females and males' titles in terms of marital status it means that signaling the marital status of female's character is crucial. Put it in another way, Ms. is coined as a female title equivalent to Mr. in which the marital status of women is not revealed in order to decrease gender bias (Esmaili, 2011).

### 3.1.5. *Activities*

In this part, the activities that both genders were engaged in were investigated.

## 4. Procedures

As it was stated before the main thrust of this paper was to determine the ideology behind a series of international English textbooks. Each of the above categories was investigated to determine if *Top Notch* series was sufficiently gender-balanced or if a significant imbalance existed. In fact, gender representation in conversations as well as pictorial representation of gender in the series were described and analyzed by applying a critical discourse analysis perspective. To this end, Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional model was chosen and adopted. In effect, the five factors as outlined above were extracted and analyzed.

## 5. Results

This part includes the results obtained from analyzing the textbooks in terms of five factors: a) female and male characters, b) female and male's pictorial representation, c) firstness of female and male in the mixed gender dialogues, d) female and male's titles, and e) activities. To this end, the data related to these five factors were collected from the conversations and described. The results of the analyzing these dimensions in the order mentioned above are as follows:

### 5.1. Female and male characters

In this section the frequency of females and males is presented.

**Table 2. Female and male’s frequency**

Textbooks	<i>Top Notch Fundamentals</i>		<i>Top Notch 1</i>		<i>Top Notch 2</i>		<i>Top Notch 3</i>		Total	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
f	56	50	26	36	22	19	32	27	136	132
%	53	47	42	58	54	46	54	46	50.7	49.3

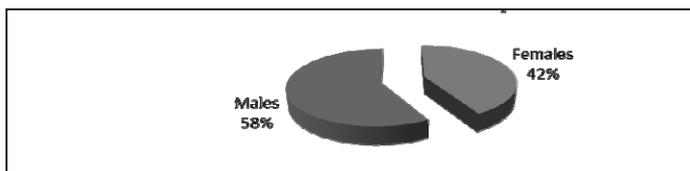
Investigating *Top Notch Fundamentals* showed the supremacy of females over males. Generally, 56 cases out of 106 are related to females in forms of proper nouns, pronouns; while, males occupy 50 cases. In fact, this textbook addresses female characters in 53% of cases, and male characters in 47%. The following figure illustrates the distribution of gender more clearly:



**Figure 2. Distribution of Females and males in the conversations of *Top Notch Fundamentals***

As Figure 2 shows the distribution of both genders is nearly balanced in this textbook. In fact, there is a non-significant difference between the frequencies of both genders in this textbook; but this difference is so little that it can be overlooked. It is worth mentioning that this part has just focused on linguistic distribution of nouns, pronouns and other gender-related issues; and it does not take into account pictorial representation.

The analysis of *Top Notch 1* showed a bit different results comparing to the ones observed in *Top Notch Fundamentals*. In other words, in *Top Notch 1*, it is the males that have overtaken females with 58% to 42%. The following figure illustrates this issue clearly:



**Figure 3. Females and males representation in the conversations of the *Top Notch 1***

Investigating *Top Notch 2 & 3* delivered the same results in which females with 54% and males with 46% appeared in conversations as figures 4 and 5 depict:

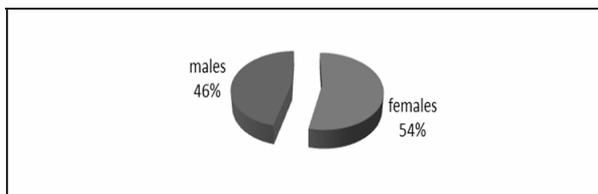


Figure 4. Females and males representation in the conversations of *Top Notch 2*

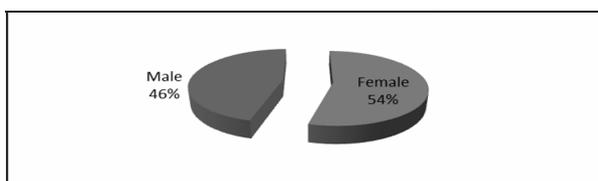


Figure 5. Females and males representation in the conversations of *Top Notch 3*

### 5.2. Female and male pictorial representation

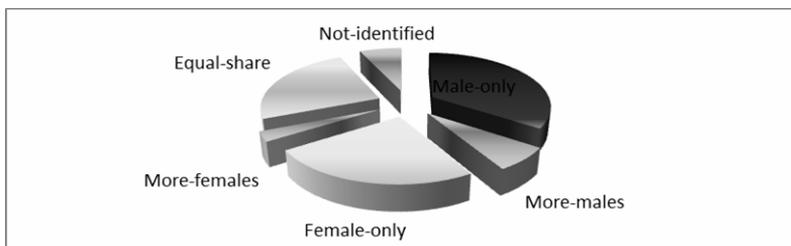
This part examines pictorial representation in the Series. Table 3 summarizes the pictorial representation in the series. This table underscores males as breadwinners and females as in charge of the family.

Table 3. Frequencies of Pictorial representation

Pictorial representation	Male only	More males	Female only	More females	Equal share	Not-identified	Total
Fundamentals	72	10	38	3	37	4	164
<i>Top Notch 1</i>	46	5	33	5	37	7	133
<i>Top Notch 2</i>	35	16	37	5	34	19	146
<i>Top Notch 3</i>	37	15	41	15	37	4	149
Total	190	46	149	28	145	34	592

The Series contain 592 pictures relating to gender, out of which, 190, 46, 149, 28, and 145 cases manifest “male only”, “male and females with the supremacy of males”, “females only”, “male and females with the supremacy of females” and “equal sharing between females and males”, respectively. Furthermore, 34 cases could not be recognized whether they represented females or males.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of gender in six categories of “male only”, “more males”, “female only”, “more females”, “equal sharing” and “not identified”. As the figure shows, 32% of pictures presents male-only and 25% female-only; in addition, 24% of these pictures denote equal sharing between females and males, 7% and 3% show mixed gender when the males outnumbered and also when the females outnumbered, respectively.



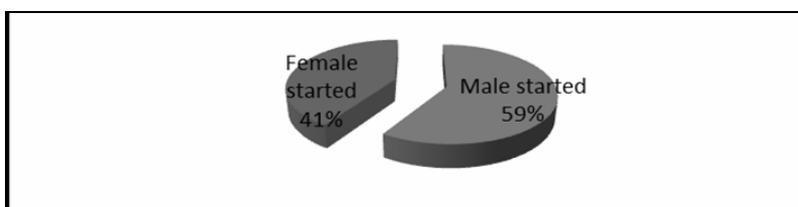
**Figure 6. Pictorial representation in the series**

### 5.3. Firstness in mixed gender dialogues

One of the issues which can shed light on gender inequality, according to Porreca (1984) is “the Order of mention, termed firstness” (p. 706). In effect, when two gender-related nouns or pronouns appear as a pair in a text, the one presented in the first position may denote to enjoy a higher status. The study revealed that 68 out of 129 conversations are dedicated to mixed gender dialogues. Interestingly, this paper revealed some traces of gender bias in favor of male characters; since in 59% of mixed gender dialogues, it is the men who start the conversations.

**Table 4. Distribution of both genders in mixed gender dialogues**

<i>Top Notch Series</i>	Total No. of Mixed Gender	Male started	Female started
<i>Fundamentals</i>	26	19 (72%)	7 (28%)
<i>Top Notch 1</i>	14	7 (50%)	7 (50%)
<i>Top Notch 2</i>	15	8 (54%)	7 (46%)
<i>Top Notch 3</i>	13	6 (46%)	7 (54%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>40 (59%)</b>	<b>28 (41%)</b>



**Figure 7. Distribution of both genders in mixed gender dialogues**

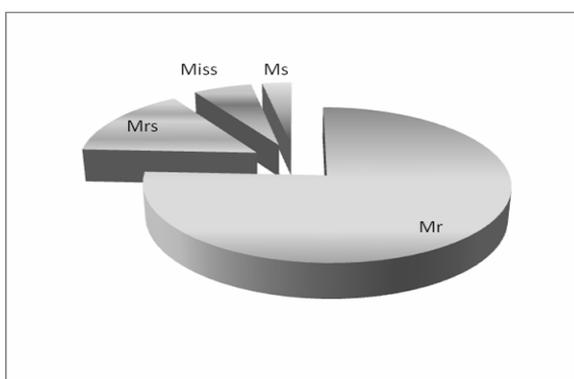
### 5.4. Female and male’s titles

In *Top Notch Series*, there are so few cases of using the titles of Miss or Ms. In fact, two titles of Mr. and Mrs. are the only titles presented in the conversations of these textbooks with the frequency of 16 and 7 respectively. Table 5 clarifies this point:

**Table 5. Female and male’s titles**

<b>Titles</b>	<b>Fundamentals f / %</b>	<b>Book 1 f / %</b>	<b>Book 2 f / %</b>	<b>Book 3 f / %</b>	<b>Total f / %</b>
Mr.	10 (71%)	8 (72%)	7 (58%)	8 (57%)	33 (65%)
Mrs.	4 (29%)	2 (18%)	3 (25%)	4 (28.5%)	13 (25%)
Miss	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (42%)	2 (14%)	4 (0.07%)
Ms.	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.02%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 (27%)</b>	<b>11 (21.5%)</b>	<b>12 (23.5%)</b>	<b>14 (27%)</b>	<b>51 (100%)</b>

Figure 8 sheds light on the similarities and differences between presentations of titles in these series.



**Figure 8. Title presentation in the series**

These figures underscore that whereas Mr. occupied 65% in the Series, Mrs. 25%. The Series also contains two other titles, i.e. Miss and Ms. with .07% and 0.02%, respectively. As the portion of Mrs. is high compared with Miss and Ms. this point comes into mind that the marital status of women is significant. The supremacy of Mr. to the titles specific to females denotes the important roles inculcated for men.

### 5.5. Activities

In this part, the activities that both genders are engaged in are summarized in Table 6. The Table shows that all the activities are monopolized or dominated by males housework, playing and studying or going to school are excepted. It seems that there is a particular pattern governing the activities contributed to each gender. Investigating the textbooks in terms of the activity peculiar to each gender revealed the positive and active roles and activities for men; and on the contrary, the most passive and negative activities for women; this kind of outlook alludes another form of sex bias.

**Table 6. Frequency of Activities in the series**

Activities	Fundamentals		Book 1		Book 2		Book 3		Total	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	male
Making party/going to party	3	2	9	1	7	3	5	4	24	10
driving	0	3	1	5	4	5	7	5	12	18
shopping	3	1	3	0	4	3	1	2	11	6
Going vocations	3	3	5	5	6	6	3	3	17	17
Eating in restaurant	0	1	1	2	2	4	4	2	7	9
Work	11	15	21	43	17	34	3	7	52	99
Studying/ at school	5	2	4	9	7	8	4	5	20	24
Playing	1	7	2	8	4	7	2	3	9	25
Watch TV	1	3	3	2	4	4	3	4	11	13
Engaging in social activities	0	6	2	1	4	8	5	7	11	18
Doing sport	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	6	10	12
Engaging in personal activities	5	7	7	7	6	6	7	4	25	24
travelling	6	1	3	3	5	4	5	5	19	13
housework	3	0	9	8	8	2	3	2	23	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>260</b>

In *Top Notch Series*, the range of activities is diverse which is summarized in Table 6. It seems that women have more diverse activities as men in the series in comparison to the previous investigated ELT; though as other investigated series, the activities women engaged in have lower positions compared with those of men. Furthermore, there are some activities that are dominated by a gender. In the investigated series, some activities are equally distributed between two genders. In effect, there are some activities which are dominated by males for example "working", "playing", or "engaging in social activities"; and some activities which are dominated by females like "making/going to party", "shopping", "traveling" and "housework". Furthermore, there are some activities distributed almost equally between two genders for example, "engaging in "personal activities", "going on vocation", or even "housework".

Luckily, it seems that the series considers the equality between the activities

performed by females and males; although, it is entangled in some inequality between both genders even in terms of activities performed by each gender. It is worthy to mention that no monopolized activity was observed in the *Top Notch* Series.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

One of the aims of this paper was to answer this question: Are there any differences between female and male characters in terms of discourse features in the conversations of *Top Notch* series? To this end, four factors of gender characters, titles, activities as well as the issue of firstness were investigated in the conversations of the series. The findings show that both genders are represented somewhat differently at least in the conversations. In effect, in terms of titles, activities and firstness, it is the women that pay the price of this inequality and prejudices.

In summary, this study revealed the existence of sexism in the conversations of the series. Accordingly, this study supports the findings of previous experimental investigations such as Farooq (1999), Sano, et al. (2001), Stockdale (2006), Paivandi (2008), as well as Johanson (2009) and Esmaili (2011).

In effect, investigating this series as other investigated ELT series upheld that the issue of inequality and prejudices is prolonged.

Another aims of this paper was to answer the question of whether there were any differences between female and male characters pictorially in the series. The findings revealed that the series did not have a neutral perspective toward gender representation pictorially. It means that both genders have not been behaved equally even in terms of picture representation. This study emphasizes the arguments raised by other researchers such as Hartman and Judd (1978), Jones et al. (1995), Bayyurt and Litosseliti (2006), Johansson (2009), Nazeri (2010) as well as Esmaili (2011).

The major intent in the analysis of the series was to investigate gender representation in order to extract the ideology directed the way in which both genders were depicted. The findings of this paper showed that gender representation in the series is reflective of the ideology by which both females and males were represented in these textbooks; this issue denotes what is interpreted by Skleton's (1976) as the "hidden curriculum" imposed to students.

It is evident that some particular values and norms perpetuating throughout these textbooks are inculcated to learners in order to shape the living way expected from them to follow. According to Fairclough (2001), capitalism economy is an ideology aims to expand the economic system in which private ownerships, private productions and private benefits are celebrated. Capitalism inculcates the values and norms related to market as supply, demand, price, distribution, investment.

Consequently, the series as internationally distributed ELT textbooks pursues the ideology of the late twentieth century known as capitalist economy. It seems that this series consciously presents both genders in such a way by which stereotypical norms are ingrained into learners.

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