



# A Corpus-Based Study of Gender Representation in Chinese EFL

## Textbooks

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**Abstract:** *Aiming to explore whether the Chinese government's attempt to promote a "gender-equal" society in the new era is reflected in the teaching materials, this paper investigates the gender representation in English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks for high school in mainland China. The present study made an analysis of one popular series of English language textbooks published in 2004 for local Chinese students with corpus linguistic tools (e.g. concordancing, keyword in context) to investigate the ratio of female-to-male appearances, the extent of use of gender-neutral and gender-marked constructions, the order of appearance of women, and men. The findings suggest that gender equity was tried to promote.*

**Keywords:** *Gender representation, EFL textbooks, corpus-based*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years more and more international organizations, researchers have become more interested in the area of gender and education, in response to the international human rights programmes which aim to bring about "gender equality in and through education for females and males" (Mustapha & Mills, 2015, p. 9). Mustapha and Mills (2015) argue that "working towards gender equality in education should not only focus on equal access to or provision of education to men and women", but also give further attention to "the content of education and the hidden curriculum" (p. 12).

Language teaching and learning are not ideologically neutral practices; they are located within specific political, historical and sociocultural contexts, all of which are "mediated through the textual and visual worlds of textbooks" (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015, p. 1). In the school educational materials transmit a large part of the social values and attitude to the young (Richardson, 1983, cited from Li, 2016). Thus, they are recognized as "the first official agent and the most powerful engine" for gender socialization (Foroutan, 2012, p. 771). It is therefore important to understand how foreign language textbooks relate to an contribute to broader societal objects (Yang, 2011).

Traditionally China has been a male-dominated society, treating the two genders unequally in the social, economic and political domains, being influenced by the Confucian culture and values. Although from the foundation of PRC in 1949 the official status of women began to improve and they gained a legal status previously denied them (Fang, Granrose & Kong, 2005), the belief that 'men are superior, women are inferior' is still deeply rooted in Chinese society (Fang, 2005).

Under the ideology of Communism and the influence of the international feminist movement, there has been a series of political endeavors since the 1990s to promote gender equality in China. For

instance, in 1992 the PRC promoted the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests; in 1995 the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (1995–2000) (Fang, 2005). Although women did not attain full equality with men because it was difficult to change the customs and attitudes shaped by Confucianism which had dominated China for over 2000 years (Hooper, 1975), Chinese women embraced a new notion of femininity. As a result, a traditional conception of womanhood was revised, and some new role models were constructed, for example, the coexistence of “virtuous wife and kind mother” with “professional women” (Zhang, 2003, p. 214, cited from Li, 2016, p. 479).

In this context, to what extent is the gender-equality promoted in contemporary China? Textbooks provide a useful means to understand the social, political and economic settings. In addition, as Bag and Bay yurt (2008) stated, representations of gender in textbooks explicitly or implicitly convey messages to students about attitudes towards various roles in the reproduction of gender roles within society. Informed by the corpus-based approach, the purpose of this article is to examine a textbook series used in the high school in China on the issue of to what extent these textbooks are consistent with the promotion of equality and equal opportunities.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the era of increasing globalization, English, as a Lingua Franca, is the most commonly taught second or foreign language in different types of educational institutions. Against this backdrop, EFL textbooks have attracted much attention from scholars. In terms of the ways in which women and men are represented in these textbooks gender representation has gained attention from the end of the last century (Porreca, 1984; Lee & Collins, 2009; Yang, 2011; Namatende-Sakwa, 2018).

Over the past three decades, textbook studies on gender construction have provided both content and linguistic analyses of written discourse and pictures (e.g. Cincotta 1978; Evans and Davis 2000; Kobia 2009; Lee & Collins, 2009, 2010; Sunderland 2000; Yang, 2011). These studies include investigations of gender stereotyping, male firstness, sexist language. Common findings include the use of pseudogeneric pronouns, underrepresentation of females, descriptions of women and women engaged in stereotypical activities, the ordering of men before women, descriptions of men as powerful, brave and adventurous and of women as emotional, weak, submissive and dependent. While these studies were conducted based on content and manual methods of numbering, which may make limitations in the findings.

The corpus-based study is performed with the help of a computer with specialized software by taking into account the frequency of the phenomena investigated. Carroll and Kowitz's (1994) pioneering corpus study demonstrated the effectiveness of using corpus tools including frequency counts, distributional analysis, collocation and Key Word in Context (KWIC) concordances to study gender construction in textbooks. Their findings show that corpus-based approaches, such as KWIC (Key Word in Context) and collocational analysis, can reveal gender representation and even gender stereotyping. Following Carroll and Kowitz (1994), studies of gender representation in different genres and in different contexts were conducted.

### 3. THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to compare how women and men are represented in one popular series of Chinese EFL textbooks published by the People Education Press (PEP) for high school students. The study is regarded as important for the following reasons. First, the Chinese government has placed more emphasis on the integration of moral education within the curriculum. While the hidden curriculum relating to gender construction in school textbooks may have some influence on the students' stereotypical thinking, their views of themselves and the opposite sex, even their career choices (Lee & Collins, 2015; Witt, 2001). Second, although the Chinese government has made effort

to guarantee gender equality from the foundation of PRC, it has been argued that there is still a gap between the reality and the ideals, for instance, the gender biases on the job market, the differences in the income between women and men. So far many studies on gender representation from other contexts, for instance, Japan (Lee, 2016), Uganda (Namatende-Sakwa, 2018), Turkey (Bag & Bayyurt, 2015), Kenya (Kobia, 2009), however, relatively less quantitative evidence from Chinese contexts.

As mentioned previously, the purpose of this study is to reveal the gender representation embedded in EFL textbooks by tracing the frequency of recurring linguistic evidence in the corpus. To be specific, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the ratio of female-to-male appearances in the PEP textbooks?
- 2) To what extent are gender-neutral and gender-marked constructions used?
- 3) What are the common adjectives used to describe women and men in the textbooks?
- 4) What is the order of appearance of women and men when both are referred to?
- 5) What are the common types of occupations associated with women and men?

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1. Sample

One popular series of EFL textbooks for high school students officially published in China were chosen as a sample for this study. They are New Senior English for China by People Education Press (PEP): Student's Books 1-5 (compulsory).

**Table 4.1.** *EFL textbooks analysed*

Textbook	Units	Pages	Word Types	Word Tokens
PEP1	5	77	1475	6555
PEP2	5	77	1405	6658
PEP3	5	77	1595	7895
PEP4	5	77	1551	6411
PEP5	5	77	1747	7475
Total	25	385		34994

All the scanned textbooks were converted into plain text format with the help of specific software. For the sake of better understanding the contents of the textbooks and further content analysis, the researcher has checked the accuracy of the converted file through line-by-line reading and revising. Consequently, a specific-purpose corpus of PEP EFL textbooks (PEP Corpus) for high school students was constructed. Altogether, the corpus contains 34994 tokens. Table 1 illustrates the components and composition of the PEP Corpus.

As seen from Table 4.1, the PEP corpus includes 5 compulsory books from this series. For the purpose of this study, the researcher included texts, reading passages, dialogues, paragraphs as contents of the corpus, considering that they contain texts “where ideologies and values are more easily detected” (Hong & He, 2015, p. 94). The category of “Texts” refers to passages for intensive reading purpose in the student’s book, “Reading passages” refers to the passages for extensive reading purpose in the “Workbook” part, while “Paragraph” refers to the reading materials in the exercises which contain gender markers. The researcher did not consider other parts, such as vocabulary, grammar and exercises with gap-filling since “corpus analysis works best with connected text where lexico-grammatical patterns can surface” (Hong & He, 2015, p. 94).

In addition, the following issues should be paid attention: 1) pictures and other visual images were not analyzed in this study, considering their relatively lower coverage rate in the textbooks, 2) the inclusion of the two textbook series is pursuing the representativeness and size of the corpus rather than the comparison of different series.

**4.2. Method of Analysis**

The main method of this study is quantitative in nature combining a corpus-based approach with content analysis as an auxiliary explanation, in response to “the criticism of the earlier gender studies” concerning the reliability (Lee, 2016, p. 385). The data analysis procedure consists of two steps: corpus-based analysis and content analysis.

As the first analytic step, AntConc, a concordance corpus tool, was employed to investigate the linguistic evidence of gender representation in the EFL textbooks. The Concordance Tool could be used to find the frequency counts of selected words and to organize data in a Keyword list (KWIC) so that the collocation features could be identified (Lee, 2016). In order to find the linguistic evidence of gender representation, several categories of gender markers were selected (see Table 4.2, adapted from Lee, 2016).

**Table4.2. Methods of analysis**

Categories	Criteria	Codes
Female and male appearances (RQ 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Frequency of selected gendered words (e.g. wife/wives/wife’s/wives’, husband, girl, boy, man, woman, etc.)</li> <li>● Frequency of occurrence of feminine pronouns (she, her, hers, herself) and masculine pronouns (he, him, his, himself)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Female</li> <li>● Male</li> </ul>
Gender-neutral and gender-marked constructions (RQ 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Frequency of occurrence of pseudo-generic man/men, the compound words ending with a masculine morpheme (i.e. -woman/women, -girl(s), mistress(es)) and their corresponding gender-neutral counterparts</li> <li>● Frequency of occurrence of gender-inclusive paired pronouns (he or she, her/him, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gender-neutral</li> <li>● Gender-marked</li> </ul>
Attributes (RQ 3)	Adjectives collocating with selected gendered nouns and their plural forms (woman, man, boy and girl), and the pronouns he and she	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Male</li> <li>● Female</li> </ul>
Order of appearance (RQ 4)	Order of mention of men and women in a phrase coordinated by and/or	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Female first</li> <li>● Male first</li> </ul>
The kinds of occupations associated with gender (RQ 5)	Through an analysis of the pronouns he and she.	

**4.3. Reliability Issues**

Though data analysis in this research was assisted by corpus tools, the coding and categories were mainly done manually. Some inconsistencies may occur when categorizing themes, especially in the case of ambiguity of word meaning or when coders interpret the data differently. To ensure high

reliability, the coding and categorizing were performed separately by the researcher of this study and an assistant. When discrepancies occurred, the researchers discussed them until they could come to an agreement to ensure high inter-coder reliability.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Female and Male Appearances

To answer the first research question “What is the ratio of female-to-male appearances in the PEP textbooks?”, the frequencies of some selected gendered words (e.g. man/men, woman/women, mother, father, boy, girl) were recorded, as shown in Table 5.1. The ratio of female- to male-gendered terms was 1:1.515. This ratio indicates the female under-representation in PEP series textbooks.

The study also included frequency counts of feminine and masculine pronouns (see Table 5.2). The ratio of 2.133:1 shows that there were substantially more occurrences of masculine pronouns than feminine pronouns. This result is consistent with the finding on gendered vocabulary.

Table5.1. Frequencies of selected gendered words

Male	PEP 1-5	Female	PEP 1-5
man/men	46	woman/women	25
Mr	14	Ms/Miss/Mrs	8
boy	6	Girl	10
father	5	Mother	5
Dad	7	Mum (Mummy)	3
Husband	3	wife	2
son	6	daughter	2
Brother	9	Sister	6
Grandfather	1	Grandmother	1
grandson	1	Granddaughter	2
gentleman	5	lady	4
Total	103	Total	68

Table5.2. Masculine and Feminine Pronouns

	Nominative		Accusative		Genitive		Reflexive		Total	
PEP	he	she	him	her	his	her/hers	himself	herself	Masculine	Feminine
Total	326	134	57	73	152	46	9	2	544	255

5.2. Gender-Neutral and Gender-Marked Vocabulary

To compare the incidence of gender-marked and gender-neutral terms in this set of textbooks, a search was conducted for pseudogeneric man, the compound words ending with a masculine morpheme (i.e. -man/men, -master) and a feminine morpheme (i.e. -woman/women, -girl[s], -ress[es]) and their corresponding gender-neutral counterparts. The findings are summarized in Table 5.3.

The study recorded a total of 66 gender-marked terms in PEP series EFL textbooks, and the corresponding gender-neutral terms found were 250. This finding suggests that this series textbooks’ authors tend to use more gender-neutral terms, for example, people, person(s), human in place of man. However, it is worth noting that some gender-neutral terms (e.g. athlete, owner, actor) are more often used in place of their gender-marked counterparts (e.g. sportsman, hostess, actress). While some other unmarked terms (e.g. servant) are less often used in place of their marked counterparts (e.g. waiter). This may be concerned with linguistic issues.

**Table5.3.** *Gender-Neutral and Gender-Marked Vocabulary*

Vocabulary (the plural forms included)	Gender-neutral (N)/ Gender-marked (M)	PEP
pseudogeneric man	M	0
people	N	177
Person	N	18
Human/human being	N	13
Policeman	M	1
police	N	2
sportsman	M	3
athlete	N	9
owner	N	16
hostess	M	7
God	N	3
goddess	M	3
queen	M	11
king	M	22
prince	M	2
princess	M	2

### 5.3. Adjectives

To answer the third research question “What are the common adjectives used to describe women and men in the textbooks?”, a collocational analysis was conducted to investigate the types of properties and characteristics most commonly ascribed to males and females. All the personal predicative and attributive adjectives used with pronouns (she, he) and the gendered nouns (man/men, woman/women, girl(s) and boy(s) were recorded. Table 5.4 illustrates the findings.

**Table5.4.** *Personal Adjectives Collocating with Female- and Male-Referring Expressions*

Category	Adjective	Male	Female
Age	1. young	7	1
	2. old	4	0
	3. little	1	0
Physical appearance	4. big (size)	1	0
	5. beautiful	0	1
	6. tall	1	0
Personality	7. good	2	0
	8. brave	1	0
	9. wise	1	0
	10. generous	3	0
	11. quiet	1	0
	12. reliable	0	1
	13. unfair	1	0
Intelligence	14. foolish	1	0
	15. clever	2	0
Physical state	16. fast	1	2
	17. ill	1	0

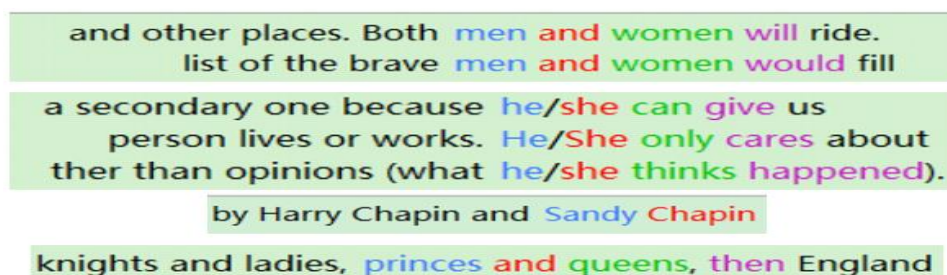
Wealth	18. poor	1	0
	19. rich	1	0
Emotions	20. calm	1	0
	21. hopeful	1	0
	22. happy	1	2
	23. alone	1	0
	24. homeless	1	0
	25. guilty	1	0
	26. overjoyed	1	0
	27. excited	0	1
	28. angry	0	2
	29. stubborn	0	1
	30. thrilled	0	1
Evaluation	31. popular	1	0
	32. best known	1	0
	33. great	1	1
	34. famous	1	1
	35. lucky	1	0
	36. right	0	1
	37. proud	0	1
Total		41	16

One notable aspect of the findings is that twice as many adjectives were used to portray men as women in this series of EFL textbooks (41:16). Another notable aspect of the findings is that there were half the numbers of adjectives were concerned with emotions among the limited range of adjectives associated with female characters. This may have the effect of making them appear more gender-stereotyped.

Of the 37 adjectives found, 24 were used to describe men, 8 to describe women and 5 to describe both genders. Beautiful, reliable, excited, angry, stubborn, thrilled, right and proud collocated exclusively with females, suggesting a concern with two general properties: appearance, emotionality. On the other hand, males were more often associated with success (famous, well-known, popular), wealth (rich, poor, generous), as well as physical and mental strength (good, wise, brave). The findings of the present study is persistence of the problems of gender imbalance and gender stereotyping associated with adjectives noted in Lee & Collins's (2015) study.

#### 5.4. Order of Mention

In previous investigations (e.g. Lee & Collins, 2016; Lee, 2016) the researchers have suggested the conventional male-first order of mention through observation of EFL textbooks corpora in Hong Kong (Lee & Collins, 2016) and in Japan (Lee, 2019). While the paired expressions identified in the present study were relatively fewer, as shown in Figures 5.1 – 5.6. Although these figures have shown a higher ratio of male firstness (eight instances among the total ten), it may be hasty to assert gender inequality based on the limited evidence.



Figures 5.1-5.4. Male Firstness

11/300B (Earthtime) Dear Mum and Dad. I still like Song Zuying or Liu Huan? To be honest,

Figures 5.5-5.6. Female Firstness

5.5. Occupations of Males And Females

Table 5.5. Engagement and Activities Associated With He and She

Activities associated with he	Freq.	Activities associate with she	Freq.		
“Saying”	say	15	“Saying”	say	12
	tell	9		tell	4
	call	3	“Emotional state”	want	1
	advise	2	“Senses”	see	3
	ask	2		feel	2
	explain	2	“Cognitive”	discover	2
“Emotional state”	think	10	“Action”	give	6
	want	5		help	3
	believe	3		spend	3
	find	3		marry	2
	wonder	2		meet	2
	decide	2		visit	2
	look forward	2	“Engagement”	work	3
“Senses”	see	6			
	feel	4			
	hear	3			
	notice	2			
	smile	2			
	look at	2			
“Cognitive”	know	6			
	discover	2			
	suggest	2			
“Engagement”	do	14			
	make	10			
	work	7			
	study	2			
	learn	2			
	win	2			
“Action”	give	6			
	go	5			
	come	4			
	walk	4			
	leave	3			
	write	4			
	show	3			



	drive	2			
	eat	2			
	follow	2			
	throw	2			
	kill	2			
“Changing”	become	4			
	get	3			
	grow	3			
	change	2			
	fell	2			
Total	45		Total	13	

To investigate what activities the two genders are likely to be engaged in, the clusters tool was employed to identify the semantic categories of the verbs and complements collocating with the nominative pronouns he and she. Specifically, the researcher set the “Cluster Size” at two, three, five respectively in order to better identify the collocating with he and she verbs associated with activities. The findings were demonstrated in Table 5.5, listing all the identified verbs with frequency of 2 and higher. The researcher excluded the verbs which appeared only one time based on previous researchers’ practices (e.g. Lee & Collins, 2015).

The findings, as presented in Table 4.5, indicate the presence of gender bias to some extent. First, females tend to be portrayed in a limited range of activities, including say, want (to do something), give, spend (time), work and visit. Men, on the other hand, are presented as being engaged in a wider range of activities: make, work, study, win, drive, think, decide, say (including tell, explain, advise). However, it will be doubted that the obvious difference in ratio of activities may be caused by the difference of frequency counts of masculine and feminine pronouns. Correspondingly, the researcher compared the former ratio (3.462:1) with the later (2.433:1), therefore, the researcher argues that the activities engaged in by women were fewer compared to men. Nevertheless, challenges to women’s traditional roles could still be found in this series, for example, women work, help others, visit (or meet) with others.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study has provided insights into gender representation in Mainland China high school English-language textbooks published in 2004. It represents an important contribution to the under-researched area of gender representation in textbooks in Asian countries. The present study suggests that males and females were unequally represented in PEP series of EFL textbooks for high school students in China. Although the writer of this series tries to use more gender-neutral terms, the corpus-based evidences of selected gendered words, feminine and masculine pronouns, as well as the adjectives collocating with females and males indicate the unbalanced treatment of females and males in this series of textbooks.

The limitation of this study is that the selected textbooks from one series which was published in 2004. In the future study more series of textbooks from the same or different contexts could be included in order to gain a more holistic and critical analysis of the gender construction in textbooks. On the one hand, we could conduct a comparative study of the same series published in different years, for example, between PEP EFL textbooks published in 2004 and in 2019. On the other hand, the comparative study could be conducted based on the larger corpora which consists of several popular series published in the same period in the Chinese context.

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