



## Diverse ELT reading materials: Cross mapping gender ideas of respective readers

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### APA Citation:

Hameed, A., Jabeen, I. (2021). Diverse ELT reading materials: Cross mapping gender ideas of respective readers. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 1716-1727. Doi: 10.52462/jlls.125

Submission Date: 21/03/2021

Acceptance Date: 03/06/2021

### Abstract

Textbooks including other academic factors play a crucial role in the gender construction process as highlighted by various researchers. However, there is less research to delve into the process. The present study is an attempt to explore the gender conceptions carried by the readers of two diverse varieties of English Language Teaching (ELT) materials produced by local and foreign publishers, in Pakistani academic settings. For the said purpose, a mixed-method research method has been used; whereas, the instruments of the study are a semantic differential score list and a semi open-ended interview. The population of the study is comprised of two groups of students at the elementary level from two different types of Pakistan schooling system i.e. Government sector and private sector, as they are using different types of ELT material. The results of the study reveal that students exposed to these two varieties of materials have a difference in their gender conceptions. There is an observable difference in the way readers of each set of books relate different attributes to each gender group. Further, the participants of the interview also agree that characters in the textbooks are more often relatable and acceptable for them in real life. The research to some extent agrees that gender ideas provided to young minds in their textbooks contribute to their psychological construction of gender along with other instruments; however, more research is still needed. Finally, it is suggested that the revision of textbooks concerning offered stereotypical gender ideologies can help to reduce gender disparity, to some extent.

*Keywords:* gender; textbooks; ELT materials; students; semantic differential score list

### 1. Introduction

The prescription of attributes with regard to the universal binary distinction between masculinity and femininity has been a source of unfinished debate, since time immemorial. Thinkers around the globe, within their respective domains of inquiry, have been aiming at investigating the issue; keeping in view, the myriad explicable facets in an attempt to reach rational conclusions. Often, it is the society that defines appropriate roles and attributes for each gender group (Clemans, DeRose, Graber & Brooks-Gun, 2010) and further transmits it to future generations through various tools including books. Different researches have been carried around the globe to reveal how a society ascribes a culture (ways of acting and believing) to the members of each gender group through a thorough analysis of different linguistic manifestations like books, movies, news articles, proverbs, textbooks, conversations, interviews, views, etc. According to Comeau (2003), “throughout the literary history of

our culture, men have been, and continue to be, the more represented gender” (8). Mattu and Hussain (2004) explores how school texts help young readers to understand the appropriate gender roles. A study around the issue of gender representation includes the work by Lee and Collins (2006) which reports that the female gender is more often misrepresented than the male gender. Malik and Courtney (2011) assert that textbooks can be a key opportunity for closing the gender gap in the future.

In the Pakistani context, gender disparity is already an important concern. There are also few pieces of research available that focus on gender representation in books for children including textbooks (For example Sultan, Shah, & Fazal, 2019; Hameed, 2013; Mirza, 2004). One of these researches has focused meticulously on how English textbooks by two different publishing companies in Pakistan, namely Oxford university press and Punjab textbook board, epitomize both gender groups and has confirmed a varied ratio of gender-biased attitudes in these two sets of textbooks (Hameed, 2013). The study exposes that these two sets of textbooks coming from a foreign source and local source transmit a gender-biased ideology but in a bit varied ratio (ibid, 2013). In this regard, research was much desirable to reconnoitre the gender philosophies of the respective readers of these two sets of textbooks, in order to examine whether or not, they represent similar kinds of differences in their gender beliefs. This would help to reinforce the idea that textbooks play an influential role in gender construction among children.

The aforementioned assumptions demand audacious and enlightening explorations and the present research is premeditated for getting some initial understanding of these ties. It is an attempt to explore the gender-specific conceptions carried by the readers of two different types of ELT materials, thus presenting to them, different gender cultural dogmas as well. The research question formulated for the purpose is that what kind of gender-based ideologies are carried by the readers of English textbooks produced by one local company (i.e. Punjab textbook board) and one foreign company (i.e. Oxford University Press), in Pakistan; more narrowly focused on the kind of adjectives (attributive), readers of two diverse ELT materials use while referring to their gender group or the other? Further, the selected participants are interviewed to get an understanding of how textbook characters inspire their gender-related ideologies. In the very context, the researcher has delimited the study to the elementary level because of the convenience of the analyzed data available for the corresponding textbooks (Hameed, 2013). The objectives set for the study are following:

- To analyze gender conceptions of readers exposed to two different sets of ELT materials in the Pakistani context
- To probe into the connection between ELT textbooks and gender attitudes of their respective readers, if any

The research under observation is significant within the domain of sociolinguistics as it aims to explicate the true nature of apparently posturing conceptions about gender, inducing the lives of individuals with their dynamic implications as evinced differently in different societies. It helps us to know how gender is viewed among readers of different ELT materials produced by different cultures, thus signifying gender philosophies deeply rooted in their respective cultures. In the next section, important terms, concepts, and theories related to the present work are elucidated.

### *1.1. Literature review*

Sex and gender are two different concepts, according to the recent theoretical perspectives that consider sex as something organic and gender as a socio-cultural trait. This sex-gender realization with a series of cultural connotations, deliberate manipulation of ideologies, discrimination, social hierarchies, and a range of other enduring vital facets, has given rise to the scholarly influential realms of investigation including Gender studies, Socio-linguistics, Feminism, Phenomenology, Cultural

studies, etc. Here, it is also suggested that the fundamental essence of the meanings associated with the twofold division in question has been regarded, more often for gender, as a culturally and linguistically constructed set of beliefs by the modern researchers pertaining to the field (Kubota, 2003). More often, the term ‘gender’ is defined in contrast to the term ‘sex’ in research. Lorber (2005) defines sex as a physiological, anatomical, and chromosomal design that differentiates the male body from the female one and gender as purely a social construct. Gender is both created and designed by social establishments such as the religion, educational, medical, and other political and social systems, and this “institutionalized gender refers to the ways that gender is rooted in and expressed through these large social systems, through the different responses, values, expectations, roles, and responsibilities given to individuals and groups according to gender” (Johnson et al., 2007). The proponents of gender as a social construct also believe that there is no innate truth to gender; it is assembled by social prospects and gender enactment. Thus, culture becomes an important dimension while studying language and gender relationships.

The term culture, here, refers to something that determines and is determined by shared beliefs, norms, values, traditions, taboos, and folk facets within a particular community. This community can be defined on broader perspectives of nationalism as well as can be narrowed down to the sole aspects like gender, race, ethnicity, etc. Thus culture, as representative of society, has an influential role in the process of gender construction. The gender-culture conception can be related to cultural descriptions provided for members of each gender group to act and behave in an appropriate way; again the ethos of appropriation varies in a variety of cultures. According to Fenstermaker and West (2002), “There is a structural element to the accomplishment of ‘appropriate’ gender, ensuring this process is neither voluntaristic nor transcendent of social demands. As constraint is exercised, the structure is imposed on the proceedings.” (212–13) Language serves as a mirror to culture. Tanaka (2004) declares language as the most enduring record of a society’s culture. Here the term culture encompasses the ways of doing and believing for every single prospect and move made by a society. With respect to gender, it exposes the true nature of society by divulging its frame of references defined for each gender grouping. The same stance was adopted by Feminism in order to expose culturally defined gender behaviors and actions during the second wave. The feminist linguists publicized how language exposes gender-biased views of a cultural system thus introducing the concept of gender stereotypes. According to Basow (1992), gender stereotypes are generalizations, embellishments, generalities, and diminutions of men and women as two separate groupings (2ff). Reutler (2013) asserts that gender stereotypes are a universal phenomenon but the discrete features that societies attribute to them do vary from one culture to the next. Malszecki and Cavar (2005) also assert that males and females are treated differently in different parts of the world.

Keeping in mind the knots between language, culture, and gender, it can be proclaimed that language carries gender ideologies of a specific culture; it bounds gender to behave and act in cultural-specific ways; on the other hand, culture infuses language with the ideologies related to gender; and finally, gender represents cultural values through the language tool. All three dimensions are interconnected in a dense environment of dogmas, creeds, ideals, and ethics, reflected in either spoken or written language form.

One of the influential written language forms is the books that culture produces as an embodiment of its ways of living and patterns of thinking about a gender group. The different researches across the globe have already advocated the books as a cultural personification of gender, with long-lasting effects on its readers’ psyche. For example, Yonata and Mujiyanto (2017) are of the view that books serve the purpose of transmitting cultural values to the next generations and in particular, gender ideologies are best transferred through them at both conscious and unconscious levels. Sovic and Hus (2015) assert that books provide their readers, eloquently or inaudibly, with a code of conduct for apt

gender behaviors, that they absorb without even knowing about it. Elliker (2005) suggests that books encompass gender typecasts that a culture desires to transfer to its forthcoming generations. Mendoza and Reese (2001) urge that books, and in particular books for children, are echoes of a society's anticipations about explicit and more importantly acceptable gender roles. With reference to children's book, Taylor (2003) has also a strong opinion that they serve as an imperative cultural mechanism for conveying defined gender roles to young children.

Among the books for children, textbooks are of important concern as children spend a lot of time with them. Sultan, Shah, and Fazal (2019) comment that textbooks are of vital importance in transmitting gender culture to the young population. This is also supported by Social Cognitive Theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), according to which imposed environmental settings including the textbooks in schools enforces the children to adapt to the given social parameters. Thus, the textbooks serve as a tool to communicate gender ideologies in parameters as reckoned suitable by society. Waqar and Ghani (2019) propose that these books for children not only teach gender roles to young minds but in fact the stereotypical roles where one is powerful and the other group is powerless. Dean (2007) explains that textbooks contain a gendered picture of the world where each gender group has a defined set of behaviors and actions; sadly, readers adapt themselves to these stereotypes consciously or unconsciously. Many researchers have explored this phenomenon, for example, Sultan, Shah, and Fazal, (2019) conducted a research study on textbooks taught in public schools of Baluchistan province in Pakistan and reported gender disparity in the selected texts. Hameed (2012) analyzed English textbooks produced by the local board in Punjab and foreign board (OUP) and reported the gender stereotyping elements in the books. She further highlighted the ways gender was depicted in each set of books from various perspectives like images, characterization, language, etc. The findings of her study revealed that there is a minor difference in the ways gender is represented in the two different sets of textbooks produced by local and foreign publishers (ibid, 2012). Brugeilles and Cromer (2009) suggest that in order to change gender conceptions of the future generations, one of the integral steps is to monitor and revise textbooks used in academia. The important aspect of these studies is that textbooks play an important role in the construction of gender ideologies. Hence, it can be assumed that the ways gender is represented in textbooks would have a direct influence on the respective readers' mindsets. Following the lines, the present study intends to study gender conceptions of the students exposed to different sets of textbooks (as explained above) in order to see whether or not, they differ in their gender beliefs in accordance with the textbooks they read. As per the researcher's knowledge, no such study is available previously.

## *1.2. Research question*

What kind of gender-based ideologies are carried by the readers exposed to two different kinds of English textbooks?

## **2. Method**

The research method is mixed-method in nature as it is based on the usage of one numerical research tool called semantic differential score list and another semi open-ended interview. The usage of the tools helped the researcher to view the situation from both quantitative as well qualitative perspectives. Further details are provided below:

### *2.1. Participants*

For the first tool, the participants of the study were two groups of elementary level from two sets of schools. The reasons are mentioned above. Each set further was comprised of three groups (six

government sector schools and three private sector schools selected through convenience sampling method). There were six government sector schools whereas three private sectors as government sector schools have different divisions for boys and girls. However, the sample population was kept equal chosen through the random sampling method. The details are provided below in table one.

**Table 1.** Sample Population for the Study

|                      | Level 6 |    | Level 7 |    | Level 8 |    |
|----------------------|---------|----|---------|----|---------|----|
|                      | M       | F  | M       | F  | M       | F  |
| Govt. Sector Schools | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 |
|                      | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 |
|                      | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 |
| Pvt. Sector Schools  | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 |
|                      | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 |
|                      | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 | 10      | 10 |
| Total                | 360     |    |         |    |         |    |

For the second tool, which was a semi open-ended interview, only six candidates were selected from each set of school (from level eight as they are mature enough to respond to a simple set of questions). Thus, 12 participants were part to a short interview.

## 2.2. Instrument(s)

As mentioned above, for the present research two tools were used. The first tool was used to see if the members of two different sets of schools (explained below) differ in their gender conceptions focusing on the use of adjectives. Andersdotte (2005) explains that adjectives or attributes are the easiest way to study gender beliefs in any type of text or population. With respect to the semantic differential score list, it is a helpful technique to study people's definitions of a certain concept. It was originally devised by Osgood to study and sketch out people's connotations words; however, was widely used to understand social attitudes as well in the fields of linguistics and social psychology. In this tool, the partakers are presented with a word along with a number of bipolar adjectives. The use of these bipolar adjectives while measuring attitudes is based on the fact that human actions or feelings have an intensity as well as direction and it can be adapted to a bipolar continuum with zero or neutral middle point. The five or seven spaces between them signify the different degrees of intensity in the association of the adjective with the concept; that is, the closer the space to the adjective and the stronger is the association of that adjective with the concept. (Algeo, 37). The person concepts were 'girl' and 'boy' for this study. Further, each concept was presented on a separate page with nine expressive scales. The spaces were assigned values for which mean scores were calculated after gathering the data. The graphical representation of the data is based on the mean scores.

The second tool was a semi open-ended interview. The questions were semi open-ended to remain in line with the topic of discussion. A simple set of questions was used (due to the age and level of participants) with focus to delve into their ideas regarding gender and the role of textbooks in gender construction.

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

The data for the first tool was collected through survey method. The researcher to collect responses from the students personally visited all the selected schools. For the second tool, the selected participants were invited to one school (convenient and approachable for participants) for an interview.

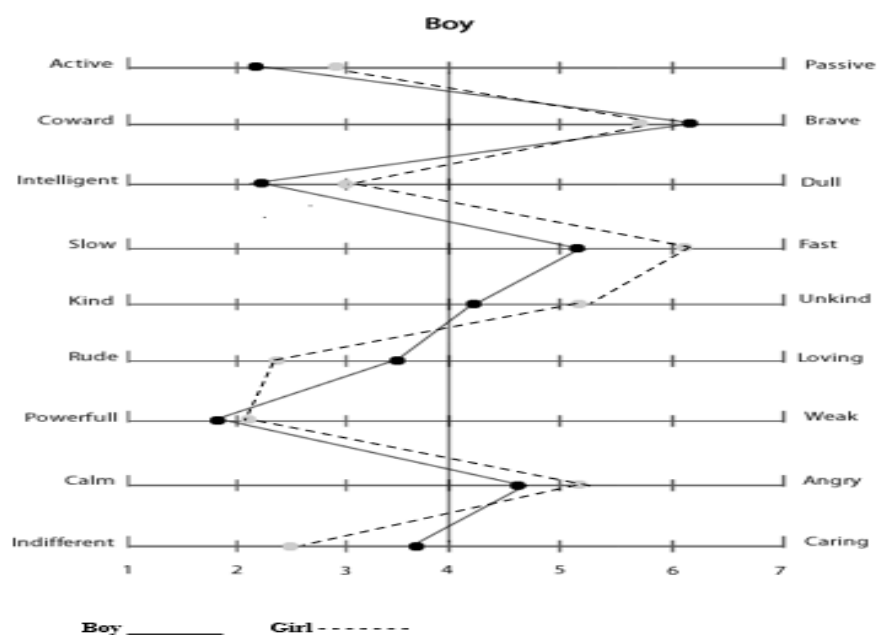
The responses of the semantic differential score list were analysed using statistical procedures (calculating mean values and placing it on the final graph for each attribute). The content of the interview were analysed using content analysis method.

## 3. Results

The section provides the findings of the study separately for both tools used for the study. Firstly, the findings of the study are presented below on the score lists (figures one and two for government sector schools). Figure one demonstrates data for the concept ‘boy’; whereas, figure two represents data for the concept ‘girl’.

The data in figure one (below) reveals that the students attribute the male gender with the majority of positive traits like bravery, intelligence, power. They are also considered as fast, active and different. The negative male attributes are rude, unkind, and angry, yet, it should be kept in mind that these are taken as strengths of the male character in the majority of the societies. The polarity values by both gender groups reveal similar results regarding the attribution of each gender group. Another interesting observation is the extremity of the values in the majority of the polarized sets (like active-passive, coward-brave, intelligent-dull, powerful-weak, etc.). The few exceptions, in this case, are of the categories like kind-unkind, calm-angry, indifferent-caring.

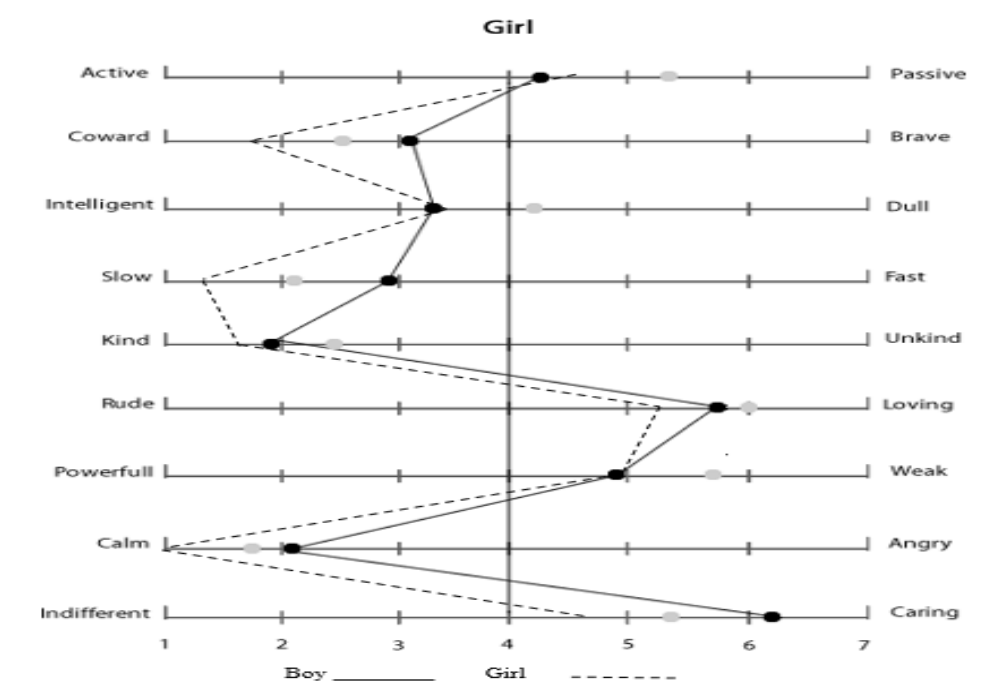
The second figure (two) represents also the gender polarized conceptions of the students. Interestingly, it can be seen that the female gender has more lowered values for their own gender group. More than the boys, girls associate their gender with orthodox beliefs strongly.



**Figure 1.** Attribution for the concept ‘boy ’by Govt. Schools Students

Figure two below also shows that the female gender is more often related to the qualities of being intelligent, kind, loving, calm, and caring. They are also attributed with negative traits like being passive, coward, slow, and weak. However, these negative traits are considered as positive qualities of being feminine. The qualities like power, fast, bravery, and rudeness are often taken as masculine character's traits and women with such qualities are considered as 'tom-boys', being like boys. Some attribute-sets, like calm-angry, caring-indifferent, loving-rude, and kind-unkind values are more inclined towards extremes showing their firm beliefs in this regard. Thus, the data reveals that females are associated with their typical traits.

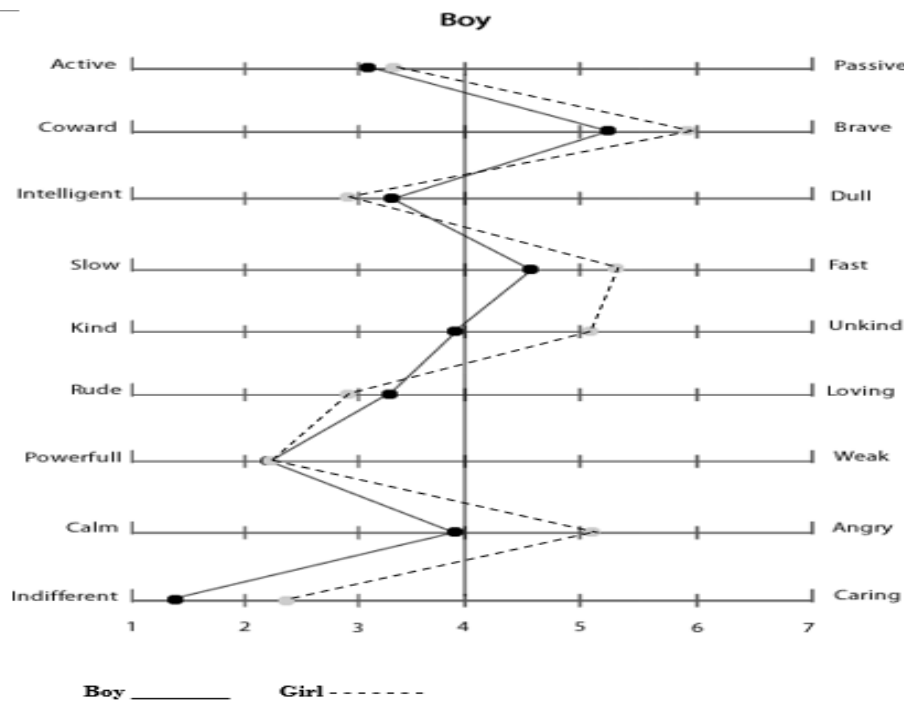
Overall, figures one and two also reveal the intemperate nature of the attributes associated with each gender grouping by the students of these schools. It is quite clear that students associate their own as well as the other gender grouping in the same frame equipped by the society.



**Figure 2.** Attribution for the concept 'girl' by Govt. schools' students

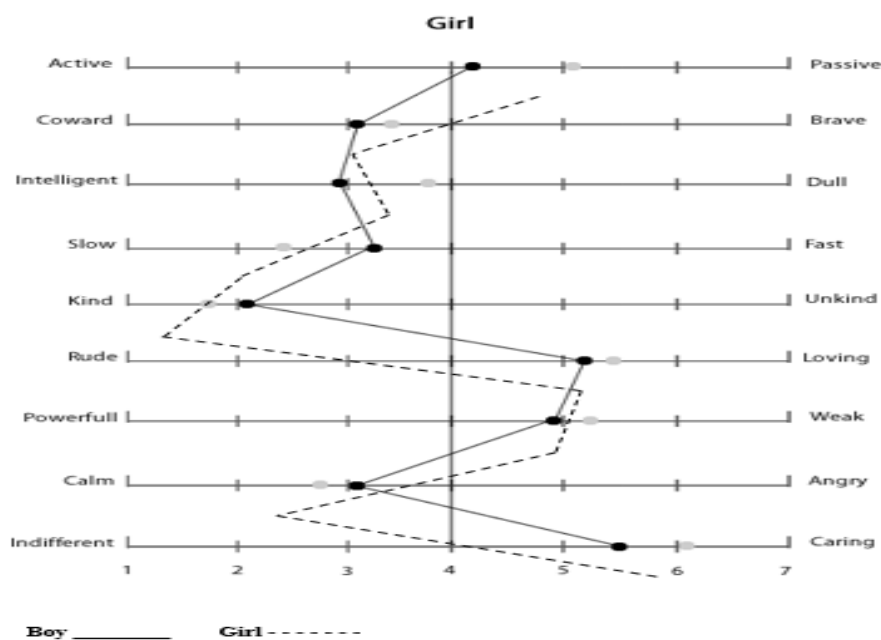
The second set of population samples belongs to elementary level students of private schools, exposed to the ELT material produced by the foreign publishing company. Figures three and four below presents the results from the students of private schools. The results from these students display a bit better results than the government schools' students as values are more inclined towards neutral point than in figures above. This means that overall the students from both types of schools (exposed to two different types of ELT materials) display a stereotypical attitude towards gender-associated attributes. This goes with Waqar and Ghani (2019) who claim that textbooks play an important role in teaching youth the power relationships between gender groups. However, the values reveal a bit better pattern in private schools' students' conceptions.

Another curious observation is that there is not a single set of attributes that showed results in opposite to the data collected from the other set of participants. The difference was only in the severity of the bipolar values. For example, (as per figure three) most of the sets like active-passive, coward-brave, intelligent-dull were more inclined towards the neutral point as compared to the findings in figure one.



**Figure 3.** Attribution for the concept 'boy' by Private schools' students

Correspondingly, the findings for attributes associated with the "girl" concept are quite similar to the results displayed in figure two (see figure four below).



**Figure 4.** Attribution for the concept 'girl' by Private schools' students

The next important section of the findings is comprised of the findings from the short interviews conducted with the selected group of participants. In the first set of questions, they were asked to name some of their favourite stories and important characters. Interestingly, all of these stories were related to some male heroes, whereas only one participant mentioned a female character. The participants



were further inquired specifically to name some females as protagonists. They hardly remember any. An interesting response was

“A female hero? How a woman can be a hero?” (Respondent #3)

Another respondent replied,

“There are some characters in roles like mothers, sisters or friends. But hardly any hero female.” (Respondent # 5)

They were further questioned to think why females are not portrayed as main characters. The responses were very interesting.

“A girl cannot be brave like men.” (Respondent #3)

“A woman cannot do what a hero can. He is bold, powerful and intelligent.” (Respondent #1)

“A woman is important but she cannot be the main character. A story should be about adventures of a man.” (Respondent #11)

The above responses are accurate reflections of the students’ thinking, which is very much stereotypical in nature. This makes it evident that young readers are very much influenced by the materials they get to read and it definitely inspires their patterns of thinking about gender roles. Yonata and Mujiyanto (2017) almost express a similar opinion regarding the books that contribute to the gender transmission process. In the last set of questions, the participants were questioned directly as to how they think about the gender ideologies given in the textbooks. Were such characters and roles inspirational to them? The answers were very clear and affirmative. They admitted that the characters given in their books actually exist around them in the same ways. They view the people around them in the same roles and observe no much difference.

“My mother is same like as given in many roles in our stories in the book. She is always loving and caring. She cooks delicious foods.” (Respondent #1)

“My English books have characters like real people. Men are powerful and women are weak.” (Respondent #9)

“I love stories in my English books. My favourite characters are strong men.” (Respondent #6)

The respondents in the present study were advised to think and relate their answers with their English text books materials. The responses make it obvious that students agree with whatever is shown to them in their books.

#### **4. Discussion**

Adjectives is one of the major categories used by the researchers to study the gender-stereotyping phenomenon as also suggested by Andersdotte (2005). Using the same perspective on semantic differential score list, the study aimed to explore students’ perspectives of each gender grouping. The findings on the score lists (presented above) clearly signify how the students perceive each gender group in line with stereotypical frames. The values of this section were further compared to the findings of Hameed (2012) regarding the gender depiction in the English textbooks produced by local and foreign textbook boards in Pakistan. It is important to mention that differences in the gender conceptions of the two selected groups (one government schools’ students studying ELT material published by the provisional textbook board and the other private schools’ students using material from OUP) vary almost in the same ratio the gender depiction in their textbooks did. This finding can be used to support the idea that textbooks help to build gender images in children, which is often purported by many researchers (Sovic & Hus, 2015; Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009; Elliker, 2005; etc.).

Further, the results of the interview are not different as well. The students come up with typical ideas about the male and female characters in the textbooks. They also agree with the idea that characters in their textbooks are quite real. Thus, it is not surprising that these characters impress them (whether textbooks or other pleasure reading materials) and ultimately they try to follow them. Interestingly, they find it acceptable by society that encourages them to pursue the lines. This never gives them a chance to realize that they lose their potential as human beings and become more like gender beings. Thus, it is obvious that textbooks play their part in the gender-construction process, and in order to bring change, one needs to revise the textual contents as well as also suggested by Brugeilles and Cromer (2009).

## 5. Conclusions

The present study intended to explore the gender ideologies of the students reading two varied types of ELT materials in the Pakistani schooling system; one produced by the local publishers (PTB) and the other published by a foreign publishing company (namely OUP). The purpose was to compare the gender ideologies of the respective readers in order to observe any differences (as their textbooks display varied ratios of gender biases according to the findings of Hameed, 2012). The findings on the semantic differential score list reveal that two sets of students also have minor differences in their attitudes towards each gender group. The students reading textbooks produced by OUP have better gender conceptions (to some extent) as compared to the readers of locally produced English textbooks. This to some extent helps us to signify that textbooks play an important role in imparting gender ideologies to young minds (though this impact cannot be fully quantified as an unobservable phenomenon of cognition (where many other factors also taking their part). The study recommends that gender ideas carried by young children often correspond with the gender ideologies presented in the reading materials; however, it is further needed to be explored through supplementary researches as well.

## 6. Ethics Committee Approval

The researchers confirm that the present research does not need any ethics committee approval.

## Acknowledgement

The researchers are grateful to Deanship of Scientific Research, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al Kharj, Saudi Arabia for the motivation and support.

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