

## **Gender Stereotypes in Selected EFL Course Books**

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### **Introduction**

Whether we are aware of it or not, whether we like it or not, gender is part of our lives. It is not biologically determined as sex, and we call it a social construct. It means that we are not born males or females but we become ones according to Simone de Beauvoir. Basically, the term social construct means that it is a socially created category in the context of social expectations, roles, prejudice, and stereotypes. Every individual is born into certain social background and s/he is influenced by parents, grandparents and other relatives, friends, enemies, complete strangers, and also different media (TV, radio, the Internet, print media – newspapers, books, etc.). It seems that our parents can control and influence us as much as they want, but the opposite is true. We accept not only our parents' prejudice and stereotypes (besides other things) but we get to know our environment's stereotypes as well. Moreover, we usually accept those stereotypes subconsciously.

There is nothing wrong with stereotypes as far as they are not prejudice, and this happens in the moment when they no longer reflect reality. Gender stereotype contains images of idealized (unreal) manhood (manliness) and womanhood (womanliness). It is about a way of perception and axiological aspect of “typically” man-like and “typically” woman-like behaviour, mistaken for biologically determined and that is why unchangeable, though, as above-mentioned it is about learned patterns and models of behaviour.

Certainly, gender and gender stereotype is something that western countries have been studying for years. Unfortunately, post-communist countries of Central Europe (Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland) have “discovered” gender topics only recently and there is still much to be done in this field.

### **Background**

I have been teaching English since I completed my university studies in my home country. One of the most important tools in the English classroom is definitely a textbook or course book. I used course books myself when learning English and I use it now when I teach my

adult students at university. I have used a couple of books but one of those my students did get used to is *New Headway*. It is quite interesting because there is a whole set of *New Headway* – there are several language levels from beginner up to advanced. I have decided to do research in five of them:

- Elementary [ 1 ],
- Beginner [ 2 ],
- Pre-Intermediate [ 3 ],
- Intermediate [ 4 ],
- Upper-intermediate [ 5 ].

I wanted to find out whether it is possible that English monolingual course books published after 2000 are gender biased. Certainly, I believed that soon after my research started, I would have been forced to change the object of my research and there would have been nothing to be found. However, my research proved that I was terribly wrong. There were so many examples of gender stereotypes in the course books that it was really surprising.

## **Research**

I did research in one of the most popular English course books, which means that majority of learners may come across one level of the book or another. *New Headway* is a monolingual book and that means that EFL learners from various countries come to contact with it, not only Slovak learners.

In this part I would like to present the results of quantitative-qualitative analyses of *New Headway* English course book sets, which have been analysed from three points of view: the gender balance of texts (language), the way females and males are presented in illustrations as well as the choice of topics in regard to the interests of both sexes.

Together I researched 751 pages of texts and illustrations in all five course books and my methodological approaches could be summarised briefly as follows:

- Defining of a particular phenomenon (I answered the question “What is a gender stereotype?”),
- Identification of a particular phenomenon (I answered the question “How can a gender stereotype be found/identified in course books?”),
- Data excerption (this was one of the most time-consuming things to do – to look up all items of information in texts and illustrations),
- Data collecting,
- Classification of collected data,
- Quantitative and qualitative analyses of research corpus,
- Conclusions and interpretation.

I proposed six hypotheses and two research questions. The research results revealed that one hypothesis proved to be completely true, another hypothesis was confirmed only partly, and four other hypotheses were not confirmed at all.

**Hypothesis No. 1**, that there would be a 1:1 ratio of the representation of females and males in a course book, was more or less confirmed in particular course books. The ratio of female and male proper names was 1:1. The course books used personal pronouns alternately (*he, she*) or used a slash (*she/he*, however, more often *he/she* was used). There was a neutral plural pronoun (*they, them*) used in later editions.

In the table 1 one can see that in case [2] the equal percentage of male and female names were used in a course book. However, in cases [1] and [4] more female names were used (by 8 % and 4 %). In [3] and [5] more male names were used (by 2 % and 8 %).

Table 1 Female and Male Names in % – Comparison

Year of issue	Type of course book	Female names in %	Male names in %
2002	[1]	54 %	46 %
2003	[2]	50 %	50 %
2003	[3]	49 %	51 %
2000	[4]	52 %	48 %
2000	[5]	46 %	54 %

Illustrations (pictures, photographs, and drawings) of all persons in all five *New Headway Course Books* set contained 1 849 females and males in total. There were 814 females and 1 035 males. It means that in course books there are 44 % illustrations depicting females and 56 % illustrations depicting males (12 % less females than males).

Table 2 shows us that hypothesis No. 1 did not prove to be true in illustrations. We can see that there are more males presented in each course book, although differences in percentage are high, they are not too high: there are more males than females in cases [1] and [2] by 12 %, in case [3] by 16 %, in case [4] only by 4 %, and in case [5] by 14 %.

Table 2 Number and Percentage of Females and Males in Illustrations – Comparison

Year of issue	Type of course book	Number/percentage of females in illustrations	Number/percentage of males in illustrations
2002	[1]	204 / 44 %	258 / 56 %
2003	[2]	167 / 44 %	213 / 56 %
2003	[3]	161 / 42 %	226 / 58 %
2000	[4]	142 / 48 %	152 / 52 %
2000	[5]	140 / 43 %	186 / 57 %

**Hypothesis No. 2**, that gender neutral names of professions, activities, and positions would prevail in all course books, was confirmed, and we can see this in tables 3 and 4. We found that the course books tried to use gender neutral names of males and females (*teacher, doctor, architect, partner, friend, student, farmer, nurse, assistant*); however, in some cases of neutral

names they referred to traditional roles in society (*nurse* and *secretary* were attributed to females, while names such as *farmer*, *millionaire*, *football player* etc. were traditionally attributed to males).

Table 3 Gender Neutral Names of Professions, Positions, and Activities

Year of issue	Type of course book	Gender neutral names of professions, positions and activities (in numbers)
2002	[1]	10
2003	[2]	70
2003	[3]	84
2000	[4]	114
2000	[5]	159

Table 4 proves the fact that gender neutral names are used more often than gender marked ones.

Table 4 Gender Marked Names of Persons Compared to Gender Neutral Names

Year of issue	Type of course book	Gender marked names of persons	Gender neutral names of persons	Comparison in percentage (%)
2002	[1]	27	10	73 > 27
2003	[2]	23	70	25 < 75
2003	[3]	12	84	13 < 87
2000	[4]	46	114	29 < 71
2000	[5]	67	159	30 < 70

Our table 5 clearly demonstrates that females are dominant in private sphere while males prevail in public sphere in all cases without any exception.

Table 5 Number of Females and Males in Private and Public Spheres – Comparison

Year of issue	Type of course book	Number of females in a) private sphere, b) public sphere	Number of males in a) private sphere, b) public sphere
2002	[1]	a) 12, b) 0	a) 8, b) 7
2003	[2]	a) 9, b) 2	a) 8, b) 4
2003	[3]	a) 5, b) 1	a) 4, b) 2
2000	[4]	a) 14, b) 7	a) 12, b) 13
2000	[5]	a) 23, b) 10	a) 18, b) 16

**Hypothesis No. 3**, that there would be no gender-stereotypical illustrations, in which males and females are presented in accordance with traditional social expectations (the “right” female acts like this, the “right”/“ideal” male looks like this, etc.), did not prove to be true – the illustrations “preserve” social expectations by means of depicted roles dependent on sex

(females and males were depicted in traditional roles, alternative behaviour in pictures was rather rare).

**Hypothesis No. 4**, that pink would not be the female colour predominantly, and that blue/dark colours would not be the male colours predominantly, did not prove true either. Pink was used more often with females in comparison to males as table 6 shows. We also found out an interesting phenomenon: blue and white were the colours common for both sexes, and as such were among the most frequently used colours as table 8 demonstrates.

Table 6 Pink Used by Females and Males – Comparison

Year of issue	Type of course book	Females in %	Males in %
2002	[1]	10 %	1 %
2003	[2]	7 %	1 %
2003	[3]	11 %	2 %
2000	[4]	10 %	4 %
2000	[5]	14 %	6 %

As we can see in table 6 pink remains typical of females in comparison to males, however, males recorded increase by 5 % in case [1] compared to the case [5].

Table 7 Blue Colour Used by Females and Males – Comparison

Year of issue	Type of course book	Females in %	Males in %
2002	[1]	18 %	26 %
2003	[2]	18 %	19 %
2003	[3]	20 %	25 %
2000	[4]	18 %	29 %
2000	[5]	26 %	27 %

Our research results proved that blue (see table 7) remains the male colour, because still more males are presented in blue in comparison to females. However, we noticed one exception in the course book [5] in which there was only 1 % difference between females and males wearing blue.

Table 8 Colours Used in All Course Books – Comparison in %

Type of course book	[1] in %	[2] in %	[3] in %	[4] in %	[5] in %	Total %
<b>Colour</b>						
<b>Pink</b>	11	8	13	14	20	66
<b>Blue</b>	44	37	45	47	53	226
<b>White</b>	39	47	52	46	51	235
<b>Bright</b>	24	38	19	17	13	111

<b>Other</b>	30	21	36	38	40	165
<b>Dark</b>	52	49	35	38	23	197

Table 8 presents usage of colours regardless of gender: that is why we can see the most common colours and the least used colours. The highest frequency of usage has white, then blue, dark, and other follow. The lowest frequency of usage is typical of pink in all five course books. White and blue are two colours characteristic for free time and sport activities and they were used in those cases. White is also usual for male shirts and female blouses.

**Hypothesis No. 5**, that there would be a 1:1 ratio of the binary opposition of active – passive, did not prove true. On the contrary, males were typically more active and live more interesting lives than females, who were much more passive. Females’ domain was the private sphere, while males’ domain was their work, which is a public sphere.

Table 9 Active/Passive Females and Active/Passive Males – Comparison

<b>Type of course book</b>	<b>Active females</b>	<b>Passive females</b>	<b>Active males</b>	<b>Passive males</b>
[1]	79	77	129	74
[2]	104	60	147	44
[3]	99	54	134	74
[4]	59	76	84	46
[5]	73	62	120	70
Total	414	329	614	308
%	<b>56 %</b>	<b>44 %</b>	<b>67 %</b>	<b>33 %</b>

Explanations: numbers of active and passive females were counted together and percentage was determined in the female category. We applied the same approach when calculating active and passive males.

Table 9 shows that differences between active and passive females are lower than between active and passive males. In case of females the difference represents 12 % while in case of males it is 34 %. Females presented in *New Headway* illustrations are less active than males and they passivity is much higher. This is true not only for every single course book, but also for the whole set of five course books.

**Hypothesis No. 6**, that the binary opposition of content – discontent would not correlate sex did not prove true either. Females expressed their happiness and contentment more often and with higher intensity than males did. A higher percentage of males expressed unhappiness and discomfort, but when they did so, their negative emotions were expressed more intensively compared to females.

Table 10 Content/Discontent Females and Content/Discontent Males – Comparison

<b>Type of course book</b>	<b>Content females</b>	<b>Discontent females</b>	<b>Content males</b>	<b>Discontent males</b>
[1]	158	16	133	32
[2]	103	15	99	22
[3]	85	45	93	55
[4]	90	29	74	37

[5]	84	38	103	49
Total	520	143	502	195
%	<b>78 %</b>	<b>22 %</b>	<b>72 %</b>	<b>28 %</b>

Explanations: numbers of content and discontent females were counted together and percentage was determined in the female category. We applied the same approach when calculating content and discontent males.

Table 10 shows that ratio of content females compared to discontent is higher when compared to males. In case of females the difference between content and discontent makes 56 %, while in case of males it makes 44 %. All in all, we came to the conclusion that in general there are more content (nice, smiling, happy, and satisfied) females than content males in the *New Headway Course Books Set* illustrations. And so, logically, on the contrary, there are less discontent females in illustrations than discontent males – females express their unhappiness in fewer cases than males. The reasons for this may be different but I think that there are at least two arguments: society expects females to be nice, smiling and satisfied –females are here to make our lives nicer and more comfortable. They are supposed to be friendly, gentle, and happy with their lives. If they show discomfort they might be considered quarrelsome, misbehaved, etc. Put it simply, it is seen in a negative way. However, when males show their bad mood, they are viewed as strong, decisive, that is positive.

Moreover, taking expressing negative feelings into consideration, saying “boys don’t cry” is absolutely valid in the *New Headway* course books. Crying and weeping is a privilege that only females can “enjoy”. Males can show anger or fury (females are never furious in the researched course books) but they never cry in photographs. If they accidentally do, they are not real – crying males are “drawn” and the drawing is funny – its purpose is to make us (and/or learners) laugh. Message of such a picture is that a weeping male is to be laughed at. Weeping females are never mocked – they cry is viewed seriously.

On the contrary, when expressing fear and worries, it is male who has a “good” reason to be scared – he is afraid of climbing high mountains, bungee jumping, meeting a bear or some other wild and dangerous animal. Gender stereotype is completed when a scared female is mocked – her fears are underestimated – she is scared of dark, spiders, or some other “banalities”. It seems that there are many things to be over- and underestimated in case of both genders.

We found answers to the research **question No. 1**: In what cases does a female play a “traditional” female role and in what cases does a male play a “traditional” male role? The traditional female in the course books most of all plays the roles of a friend, mother, partner, writer, secretary, nurse, and doctor. She usually has a part-time job or stays at home playing “her” role of housewife. She does some sports to keep her body in good shape. She loves cooking, baking, doing shopping, reading romantic love stories and talking to her friends. The traditional male in the course books expresses and “lives” his dreams in his work, which brings him success and happiness. He is a perfect breadwinner. He works in a bank, financing or as a salesman. The male plays various sports, more for fun than for his body or looks. He has no problem admitting that he loves alcohol, smoking cigarettes or other “bad habits”. Discussing sports, watching sports on TV, and actively playing sports have all become an ordinary part of his lifestyle. Fishing is also an integral part of his “male temperament”.

**Question No. 2** was the following: Does/Can a female play a “traditional” male role? Does/Can a male play a “traditional” female role? When? The female is traditionally viewed

as a bad driver; however, in one instance a male is presented in the text and picture in this role. Playing football is “a male matter”, but in about two cases we noticed female football or ice-hockey players. Any sign of genius is attributed to males, with only one exception. There are more male geniuses compared to female ones in the course books. Almost all famous, powerful, and influential males are considered geniuses. Famous females are no geniuses at all – they may be very talented, wise and intelligent, hard-working, skilful, determined, industrious, esteemed, but it is always a male who can boast about being labelled a genius.

Females are described as well-known (famous), nice, and charming. Females are depicted in “traditional” male roles such as a traveller, driver, architect, doctor, manager, accountant, etc.

## Conclusions

How can results of this research influence our approach towards learners? And what can I do as an EFL teacher?

It is important to become aware of gender stereotypes around us – this article proved that English monolingual course books are full of gender stereotypes and that they still present a lot of prejudices against both genders.

Therefore I recommend the following in the English classroom:

- Altering both personal pronouns – *she and he, he and she*,
- When using personal pronouns writing a slash *s/he, he/she*
- If possible using plural pronouns because they are gender neutral – *they, them, theirs*,
- Avoiding gender marked names of persons – *business people/person* (not *businessman, businesswoman*),
- Supporting attitudes expressing gender equity in sharing work and leisure at home and/or at work,
- Asking our learners to notice whether males and females are described in a positive or negative way and whether they think it has relation to their gender – for example to notice how an old female is presented and how a young male,
- Discussing topics such as “ideal female”, “ideal male”, “womanhood”, “manhood”, social expectations depending on gender, etc.
- Asking learners to speak their mind when watching female and male clothes presented in their course books – for example choice of colour and reasons – existence of “female” and “male” colours, pink and blue,
- Asking learners to compare the number of depicted males and females in their course books and finding the reason of preferring one gender at the expense of the other,
- Asking learners to comment the way appearance of females and males is presented in the pictures and drawings,
- Pointing out activities the both genders are involved in,
- Pointing out ways of females and males’ passivity and their possible reasons,
- Asking learners to compare who is more active in illustrations – females or males,
- Supporting attitudes expressing understanding for activities typical of other gender done by the opposite gender,
- Preventing mockery of otherness in or alternatives to attitudes, behaviour, or clothing of other gender,
- Getting feedback from learners about course book and about the way it presents various topics, genres, texts, illustrations, grammar and grammatical examples, etc.



Unfortunately, the limited scale of my paper does not allow me to discuss gender discrimination as deeply as I wanted to. However, it can be asserted that I did my best to fulfil my expectations when studying materials about the topic and conducting the research. However, I can see a lot of future potential for more research in comparing other course book sets (e.g. *Project* or *Cutting Edge*), or I may perform a gender analysis of English course books written by Slovak pedagogic authors and published in Slovakia for Slovak secondary school learners. I also sincerely hope that this work will be a source of criticism and/or inspiration for even more extended analyses of any other textbooks/course books, not only English Course books for adult learners.

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