# Gender Representation in EFL Textbooks in Saudi Arabia: A Fair Deal?

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## Abstract

This study explores gender representation in an international English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook that has been specifically adapted for the Saudi Arabian context. It aims to investigate gender frequencies in conversations in three dimensions: gender relations, subject positions, and contents. The quantitative data were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a model. The results indicate that the textbook is biased in terms of gender. Women are underrepresented in the textbook. They have been totally excluded from half of the units in the textbook. Also, the equal relations between the two genders are limited to friendship. Although both genders are positioned in the same subjects and contents, women are less frequently characterised than men.

**Keywords:** gender representation, Saudi Arabia, EFL textbooks, critical discourse analysis (CDA), women's studies.

## 1. Introduction

Though steady steps have been taken to empower the position of women through the educational reform process in the educational system of Saudi Arabia, yet, gender stereotypes persist. Many scholars argue that gender stereotypes linger because of the discourse around women, especially in the educational setting (Eslami, Sonnenburg, Ko, Hasan, & Tong, 2015). The educational discourse is so effective that it can shape one's identity positively or negatively. Romera (2015) states that "educational institutions model gender identities construct the idea of what it means to be male or female" (p. 206). In fact, one of the main elements constituting the educational discourse is the textbook, which can manipulate social power and gender stereotypes (Kobia, 2009). In addition, textbooks play a very important role in EFL education since it is generally through textbooks that learners get acquainted with the culture and values of the target language. In a country like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the most powerful teaching technique is classroom lecturing (Bawazeer, 2015). As a result, this makes the teacher and the textbook the most influential source of information in the classroom. Thus, the place of EFL textbooks in Saudi Arabia should be emphasized, especially as textbooks are often viewed by Saudi learners as authoritative, and therefore have the potential to influence them. To this end, the intent of this study is to investigate EFL textbooks in the context of Saudi Arabia. It aims to address two research questions:

1)   How gender is represented in EFL textbooks used in Saudi Arabia?

2)   Is there any difference between the roles played by males and females in these textbooks?

## 2. Literature Review

In the past three decades, feminist scientists and scholars have researched the complex interaction of gender with diverse issues such as power, politics, work, and identity (Visser, 2002). Different studies have been conducted and led to the emergence of new understandings of gender and how it may be affected by societal and cultural factors. In the 1970s and 80s, extensive research into gender representation in foreign language textbooks was conducted (Pawelczyk, Pakuta, & Sunderland, 2014; Sunderland, 2000; Tahriri & Pouran, 2014). The analysis in these studies generated a number of consistent findings concerning the representation of men and women in the English language textbooks. The same types of behavioural stereotypes have been noted in the textbooks: women are typically depicted as passive, dependent, generally weak, and physically attractive, but men as active, independent and strong. It is assumed that students subconsciously learn behavioural practices from the stereotypical images presented in the selected educational materials. Despite the extensive research in the area, it

is evident that gender and language in education has under-researched sites in developing countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Islamic countries (Sunderland, 2000). Interestingly, in the past few years, some studies have emerged from the Middle East investigating gender representations in textbooks.

Al Taweel (2005) examined locally-designed EFL textbooks taught at Jordanian high schools. The textbooks are co-authored by the British and Jordanian. The study investigated the frequency of females in the textbooks, and the roles associated with males and females. Also, it tried to explore the role of the teacher in reinforcing or marginalizing the female images as presented in the textbooks. The results of the study indicated that male representation averages 70% and female at most 25%. More male figures are first narrators of their stories compared to no female first narrators. Most of the female references are presented in contexts that are specifically related to women, with partial dependence on men, while most male references are used as pseudo-masculine references. The results also show that more than half of the teachers who participated in the study were not aware of this fact, and did not notice sexism or sex role stereotypes in the books.

A funded project supported by the Qatar National Research between 2009 and 2011 was conducted to investigate gender role stereotyping and linguistic sexism in a selection of textbooks (maths, science, and English) used at Qatari schools at different levels (Ismail, Hamid, & Othman, 2011; Yasin, Hamid, Yuen, Othman, & Jaludin, 2012). The project used quantitative and qualitative approaches. Wordsmith Tools 5.0 was used for the quantitative data analysis, and Fairclough CDA was used for the qualitative data analysis. The overall findings revealed that in all examined textbooks, males are more visible than females, and both males and females are depicted in their traditional roles. Occupations related to males are more diverse than those of females. In the public sphere, females are depicted in similar positions to males, but their positions are less varied.

Al Arabia newspaper reports that the photos of women had been banned at all public schools' textbooks used by boys and girls in Saudi Arabia since 1926. However, according to the article, photos of women have been added to locally designed EFL textbooks recently for the first time. The photos presented in the textbooks show veiled women, with only their eyes and foreheads apparent, working in the medical field. For example, one of the photos shows a nurse wearing a headscarf and a medical mask while preparing an injection. This recent female representation is a major step forward as "only drawings of women were permitted before". (Al Arabia, 2012, December 4)

Recently, Al Jumiah (2016) conducted a study investigating how social power and identity based on gender and race were discursively represented at two high school EFL textbooks in Saudi Arabia. He used Fairclough's (1989, 2013) dialectical-relational approach to CDA to analyse the texts in the two textbooks. The results indicate that the overt and hidden discourses in the EFL textbooks serve as a state apparatus to reproduce and perpetuate gendered ideologies and interests including males' supremacy and dominance, patriarchy, sexism, women's subordination and marginalization.

As stated above, language and gender in education has under-researched sites in Islamic countries. To this end, this study contributes to the field of language and gender by investigating EFL textbooks used in higher education in one of the main Islamic countries, Saudi Arabia.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 The Context of the Study

The context for the research is the English Language Institute (hereafter, ELI) at King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU), Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The ELI caters to the EFL needs of about 7000-8000 university students each year. The Mission of the ELI is "to provide intensive instruction of English as a foreign language, delivered by qualified instructors using an internationally-oriented curriculum, to Foundation-Year students in order to enhance their English language skills and facilitate their academic progress" (ELI Faculty Handbook, 2015/2016, p. 2). In achieving its mission, the ELI designed 'The Foundation Year English Language Program' that is correlated with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The program aims to help foundation year KAU students achieve an Intermediate Level of proficiency in the use of the English language, which equals B1 of the CEFR. Such an aim for an internationally-oriented curriculum with the consideration of the traditional culture of the Saudi society in mind required the ELI stakeholders to use adapted versions of international series for almost a decade. Thus, The ELI used the *North Star Middle Eastern Edition* series, published by Pearson Education, from 2010- 2013. Then, the *New Headway Plus Special Edition* series, published by Oxford University Press (OUP), from 2013-2015. Currently, the ELI is using *English Unlimited Special Edition* series, published by Cambridge University Press (CUP).

*3.2 Materials*

An ELT course book, namely, *English Unlimited Special Edition/ level 1* was selected as the material for this study. The study investigates the listening conversations in the course book. *The English Unlimited Special Edition* series includes four levels from beginner to intermediate level. This study analyses one book from the series which is the beginner level. *English Unlimited Special Edition* is an adapted version of the international *English Unlimited* series published by Cambridge University Press (CUP). The course book is authored by Adrian Doff, Leslie Anne Hendra, Theresa Clementson, Alex Tilbury, David Rea, Sabina Ostrowska, Johanna Stirling, Howard Smith, Mark Lloyd, Rachel Thake, and Cathy Brabben. The teacher's pack of the course book emphasizes that the book is specifically designed for Arab speakers "English unlimited special edition has been designed with Arabic speaker in mind" (Doff et al., 2014, p. 5). The course book also ensures EFL teachers and learners in the Arab world that their prayers have been answered by the publishers, and that this series addresses their request of including culturally related topics:

"…the authors have chosen topics and texts to appeal to learners from the Arabic -speaking world. learners and teachers have told us that they would like to see topics close to their interests focused on more prominently in English – teaching materials, but are also interested in learning about the world more generally. The choice of topics and texts in English Unlimited Special Edition reflects this feedback" (Doff et al., 2014, p. 5).

*3.3 Model of Analysis*

Listening conversations in *English Unlimited Special Edition/ level1* were analysed based on a model of analysis adopted from (Tahriri & Pouran, 2014). The model was designed and adopted based on the principles of CDA and Fairclough's (2001) model. The model consists of three dimensions: dimension of gender relations, subject position, and contents. The following procedure was followed to investigate gender representation in the conversations of the course book.

- *Dimension of gender relations:* The course book was reviewed page by page and relations were counted any time two or more characters participate in a conversation. The conversations were coded by the type of the relation between the speakers e.g. teacher-student or friend-friend. The number of occurrences of male/female conversations was separately counted one by one and then these conversations were counted altogether throughout the course book. Then, all the identified relations in male/female were classified into equal, unequal, and unclear relations. The purpose of this classification was to identify the unequal positions in these relations and finally to recognize which gender has occupied superior position. Hence, repetitions were also counted in the relations. By that, if one person was present in two or more relations in the same position, all these relations were counted.

- *Dimension of subject positions:* An occurrence of a subject position was counted every time interlocutors in a conversation talked to each other. The subject positions which each gender possessed were grouped in four categories: friends, societal, occupational, and other subject positions.

- *Dimension of contents:* The topic of each conversation in the course book was coded. Then, the whole data obtained from all conversations were classified into seven categories containing various matters. Then content categories were selected to explore gender inequalities in these conversations. Thus, for each content category, the number of occurrences of females and males was counted. Finally, the overall number of their occurrences in the course book was presented.

## 4. Analysis

The purpose of this quantitative study was to find out the relations that exist in the conversations of *English Unlimited Special Edition/ level1* (by CUP) as well as to identify any unequal positions distributed between females and males. The study used statistical descriptive analysis to illustrate data findings.

As the following Figures 1 & 2 illustrate the frequency of male-male conversations, in which all speakers are male, is 32 that is 47.06% of the total conversations. While only 11 female-female conversations, in which all speakers are female, occurred throughout the course book. This is due to the fact that female-female conversations did not occur in almost half of the units, 4 units out of 10 units (Figure 2).
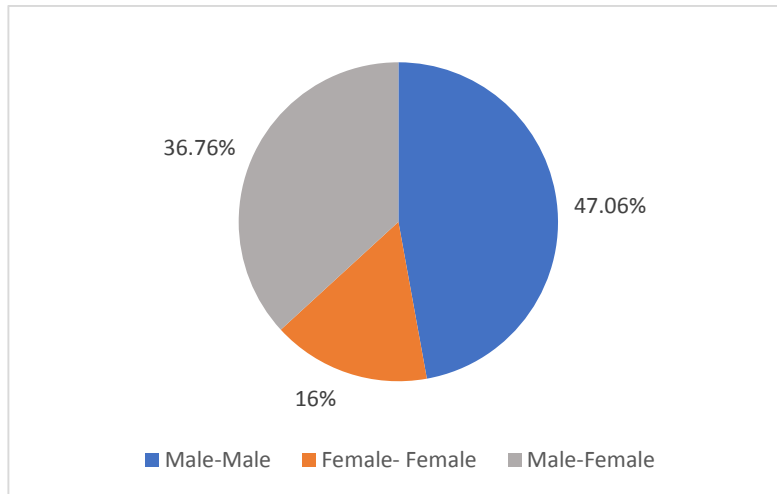
Figure 1. Percentage of conversations in English unlimited special edition/ level1
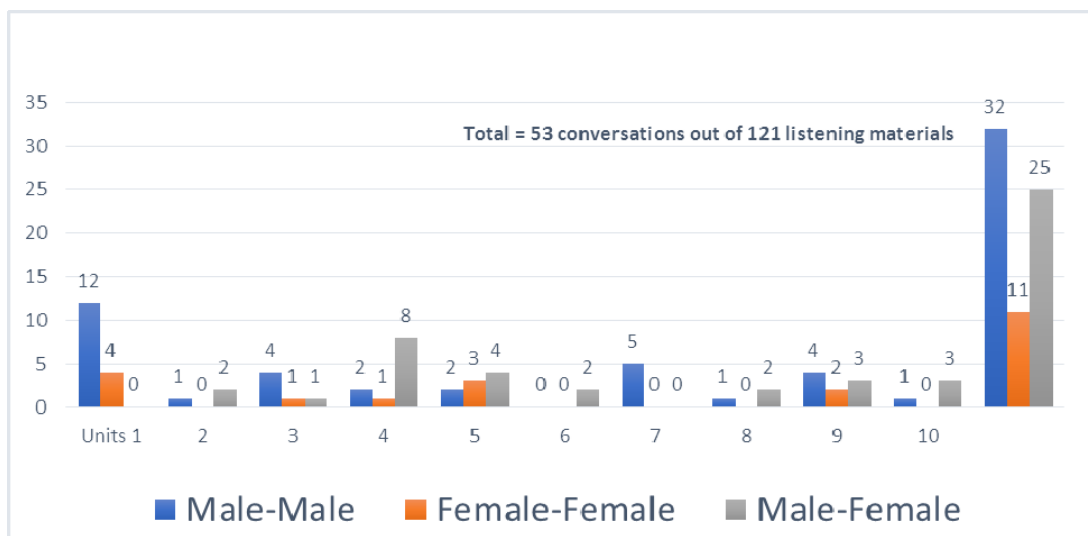


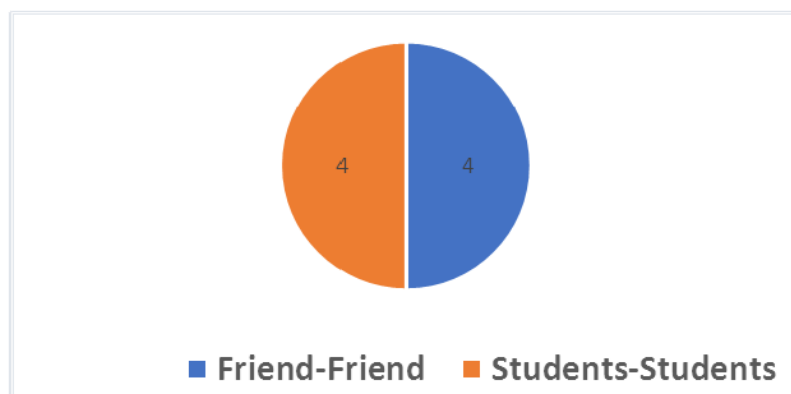Figure 2. Number of Conversations in English unlimited special edition/ level1



Figure 3. Frequency of equal relations between males and females in conversations

As for female-male conversations, the number of occurrences is 25 times, that is 36.76% of the total

conversations. Out of the 25 conversations, 8 conversations indicated equal relations between the two genders, 9 indicated unequal relations, and the relations between the two genders were not clear in 8 conversations. Figure 3 shows the eight conversations in which the male-female interlocutors were in equal positions. The relations between men and women in these conversations were mainly friendship: either two classmates are chatting in a class or two friends are talking together.

Table 1 below displays the unequal relations between the two genders in male-female conversations. It's important to highlight here that these unequal relations are not suggesting superiority of one position over the other. For example, the table shows a relation of interviewer-interviewee, such a relation doesn't indicate superiority between the interlocutors. The table details the number of occurrences of the conversations, and the occurrences of males and females in different positions. The waiter-customer relation was the most frequent between the two genders, 5 out of 9 conversations. In these conversations females were positioned three times as waitresses, while males were positioned twice as waiters. One the other hand, the secretary-client and the passenger-assistant relations were the least frequent among all.

Table 1. Frequency of unequal relations between males and females in conversations

| No. of Conversations | | Female | | Male | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *secretary- client* | | Client | Secretary | Secretary | Client |
| | 1 | 1 | | | 1 |
| *waiter- customer* | | Waitress | Customer | Waiter | Customer |
| | 5 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| *passenger- assistant* | | Passenger assistant | | Passenger assistant | |
| | 1 | 1 | | 1 | |
| *interviewer- interviewee* | | Interviewer | Interviewee | Interviewer | Interviewee |
| | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |

Figure 4 demonstrates the unclear relation between the two genders. In some incidents, it was not clear what the relation is between the two interlocutors whether the relation was based on friendship or profession. Such a confusion was a result of the lack of context sometimes. These conversations were mostly in the grammar section of the course book. The aim of the conversation is mostly to highlight the grammar form for students. To address this issue, I managed to highlight the topic of each conversation, then group the conversations accordingly. Mostly, the speakers conversed about likes and dislikes, three occurrences.
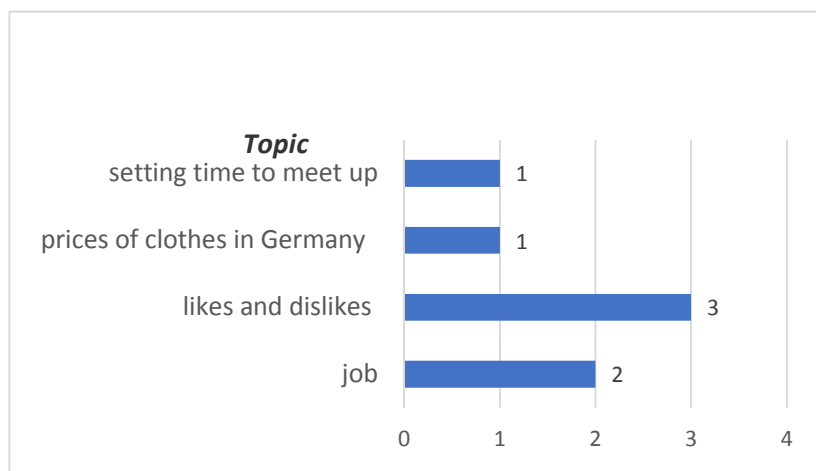


Figure 4. Frequency of unclear relations between males and females in conversations

The subject positions for all the interactants in all conversations (male-male, female-female, and male-female) in *English Unlimited Special Edition/ level1* were investigated in four categories of friends, societal, occupational and other. By societal I mean a person who is positioned in everyday conversations such as introducing him/herself, ordering from a restaurant, booking a hotel, etc. As it shows in Figure 5, the most prominent category among both male and female is societal with a percentage of 60.71% for males and 55% for females. Whereas, the least prominent category is occupational for both genders. Hence, the subject positions are almost equally distributed between both genders. However, despite the fair distribution of subject positions between the two genders, the percentage of male frequencies in these positions is higher compared to females.
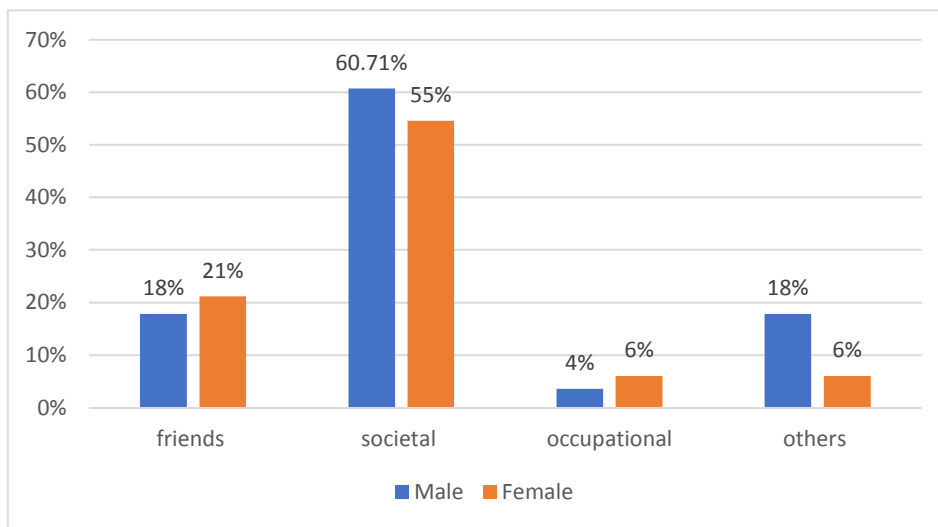
Figure 5. Female and male subject position in english unlimited special edition/ level1

Generally, the frequency of male occurrences is more than females throughout the course book, and this is reflected in the number of male characters in the conversations. Figure 6 presents the number of male and female characters in all the conversation in the course book and the topics of the conversations. A number of 53 conversations were identified in the course book. These conversations were grouped to seven topics as presented in Figure 6.
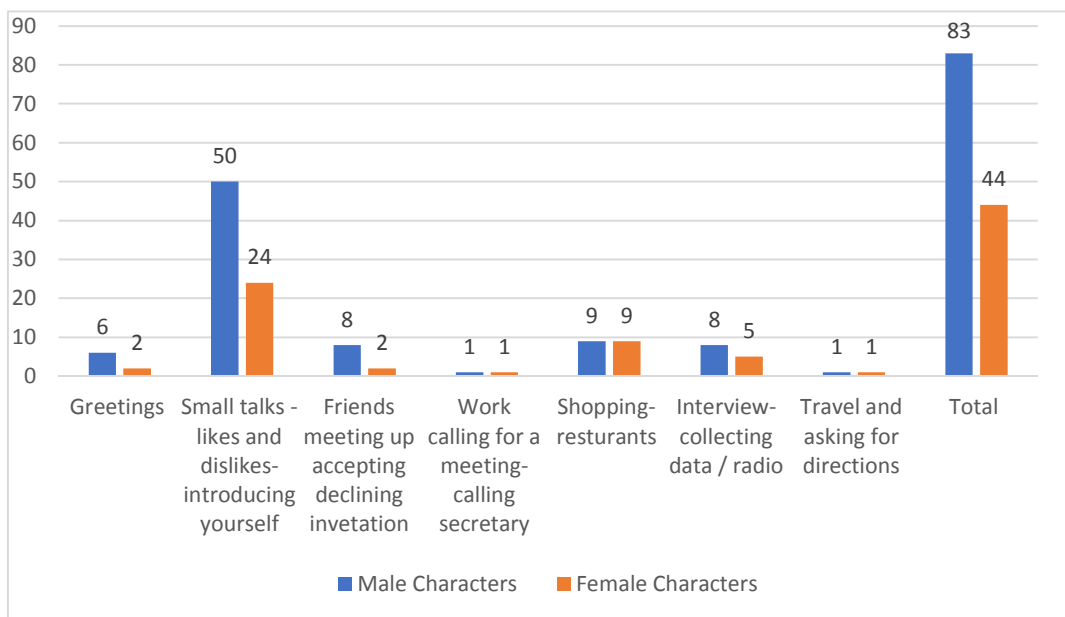
Figure 6. Content categories in English unlimited special edition/ level1

The number of male characters in the course book is double than the number of females. The overall number of characters in the course book is 127; 83 of these characters are males and 44 are females. The findings revealed that small talks are the most frequent category of the content covered in conversations by the two genders. 50 male characters interacted in small talks, while 24 female characters participated in small talks. On the other hand, work and travel are the least frequent content among the two genders, one male character and one female character have interacted with each other in these two content categories. Despite the fair distribution of content between the two genders, the number of male characters participated in these conversations is higher compared to the number of females.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated gender representation in *English Unlimited Special Edition/ level1* textbook used in a Saudi university. The study used quantitative approach in which descriptive statistical analysis was utilised to investigate male and female frequencies.

The examination of gender representation in the Arab user friendly EFL textbook revealed that the material does, in fact, underrepresent females. As it was mentioned before, men are represented more frequently in the textbook than women. The number of male characters outnumbers female characters (Figure 4). Almost half of the conversations in the course book are male-male conversations (Figure 1). Although men and women are presented in one conversation, however, the overall number of male-female conversations is very low compared to single gender conversations (i.e. male-male and female-female) (Figure 2, 3). Regarding subject positions, both men and women were more frequent in societal positions. However, the number of men occurrences in this position outnumbers women (Figure 5). This underrepresentation of women has caused the textbook to be male oriented. Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) speculate that such a gendered bias textbooks would cause disturbing feelings for female students including feelings of exclusion, devaluation, alienation and lowered-expectations.

Being accredited by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation CEA since 2013, the ELI acknowledges meeting the international standards of English language teaching and administration. To achieve its ultimate aim for an international curriculum, the ELI has been using adapted versions of EFL series by international publishers since 2010. The aim of using adapted series is to avoid the clash of civilizations between the local culture and Western culture. For the fact that the international version may present ideologies and images which could oppose the Saudi local context. One may argue that the conservative Saudi society may reject the representation of women in textbooks, however, Saudi women are [emphasis by the author] the loyal customers to these textbooks. The number of Saudi women enrolling in universities has been more than men since 2010. In 2009-2010, the Ministry of Education announced that there were 757,770 students enrolled in Saudi universities, 414,420 (54.69%) of the students were females (as cited in Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). Five years later (2015-2016), the percentage of women enrolling in universities was still higher compared to men. According to the Ministry of Education 2015-2016 statistics, a total number of 150.311 female students enrolled in undergraduate programs in state universities in Saudi Arabia, that is 51% of the total number of undergraduates (Education Statistic Center, 2016). This implies that the educational reform policy succeeded in empowering women through higher education. More than that, the high number of female enrolment implies that Saudi female youth are vital consumers of the adapted versions EFL textbooks. Thus, biased gender representation in textbooks would promote the ideology of female marginalism among female students. Moore (2007) argues that biased representation of men and women in EFL textbooks could contribute to an inaccurate understanding of social and cultural reality and norms of a society. If such representation of men and women in textbooks is, in fact a reality in that society, reinforcing the gender biasness through learning materials could contribute to slowing down or setting back the process of establishing equalities among people. In the case of Saudi Arabia, one must admit that the education sector gives more privilege to men over women based on the number of various majors opened for male students. Also, the fact that the education is segregated by gender. However, women are not totally excluded from neither the education sector nor the social reality nowadays. In fact, the status of women is developing rapidly in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, biased representation of gender in textbooks would hinder the process of women empowerment.

## 6. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

The present study selected only one textbook from the *English Unlimited Special Edition* series (CUP) which serves the aim of the study. Due to this limitation, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole series. The study investigated gender representation in listening conversations only that could also limit the findings. Besides, the small quantitative database restricted some CDA analyses such as, topics commonly associated to men and women in monologues, gender representation in reading texts, and roles associated to men and women

in images in the textbooks. A large-scale study including more than one adapted series of EFL books used in a Saudi higher education would broaden our understanding of gender representation in these textbooks and the gaps that need to be filled.

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