

## BEYOND “HE” AND “SHE”: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC EQUITY AND NON-BINARY GENDER REPRESENTATION IN EFL TEXTBOOKS

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### Abstract

Scholarship has long critiqued gender imbalance in English Language Teaching (EFL) materials, yet a significant gap persists regarding identities outside the gender binary. Textbooks often reinforce a cisnormative worldview, failing to reflect contemporary linguistic and social realities. This study critically analyzes the discursive practices constructing gender representation, focusing on the exclusion of non-binary identities and the status of linguistic equity in widely-used EFL textbooks. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed, examining a corpus of three major, globally-distributed EFL textbook series. The analysis integrated quantitative pronoun frequency counts (“he”, “she”, singular “they”) with qualitative and semiotic analysis. Findings reveal a systemic “binary-only entrenchment.” Despite quantitative parity between “he” and “she”, there was a zero-occurrence of the singular “they” for human reference. This erasure is actively maintained through discursive avoidance (e.g., “he or she”) and reinforced by stereotypes, amounting to symbolic annihilation. The analyzed textbooks are not merely outdated but actively perpetuate a hegemonic, binary-exclusive ideology. This failure in linguistic equity misprepares learners and constitutes a significant ethical and pedagogical lapse in the ELT industry.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, EFL Textbooks, Gender Representation



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## INTRODUCTION

Language is the principal medium through which individuals apprehend, construct, and articulate their social reality. A foundational sociolinguistic principle posits that language is not a passive reflector of the world; rather, it is an active force in shaping societal norms, ideologies, and power structures (Shin, 2026). The lexicons, grammars, and discourses prevalent within a community dictate the boundaries of thought and expression, delineating what is considered “normal,” “possible,” or “existent (Summerville et al., 2024).” Within educational paradigms, this formative power is amplified. Pedagogical materials, particularly textbooks, function as curated repositories of cultural and linguistic knowledge, presenting learners with models of language-in-use that implicitly endorse specific worldviews and value systems (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2026).

This intrinsic link between language and social construction is nowhere more evident than in the domain of gender. Linguistic practices have historically codified and reinforced a rigid binary understanding of gender, embedding androcentric and cis-centric biases deep within grammatical structures and semantic categories (Lim & Homer, 2026). The evolution of societal awareness, however, has increasingly challenged these entrenched norms. The growing visibility and recognition of non-binary, genderqueer, and transgender identities have precipitated a critical re-examination of linguistic conventions (Mahmood et al., 2024). This societal shift demands “linguistic equity”—a framework wherein language evolves to afford all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, an accurate, respectful, and visible means of self-representation (Archambault et al., 2024).

The context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education serves as a critical nexus for these intersecting concerns. EFL textbooks are globally distributed artifacts that carry immense ideological weight (Yakut, 2025). They do not merely teach grammar and vocabulary; they transmit cultural norms, ideals, and social practices associated with the target language. For millions of learners, these texts provide their primary exposure to Anglophone cultures and, by extension, to contemporary social issues (Almayez, 2024). The manner in which these influential materials navigate, represent, or conspicuously ignore the realities of gender diversity, particularly non-binary identities, thus becomes a pedagogical, ethical, and linguistic issue of profound significance (Molla & Ahsan, 2025).

A significant and deeply problematic incongruence exists between the accelerating societal and linguistic recognition of gender diversity and the representational practices within mainstream EFL instructional materials (Ali & Salam-Salmaoui, 2024). While public and academic discourse increasingly embraces gender-inclusive language such as the adoption of the singular “they” by major style guides and its recognition as “Word of the Year” EFL textbooks appear to be lagging decades behind (S, 2025). These materials frequently remain entrenched in a strict gender binary, exclusively perpetuating “he” and “she” as the only possible pronominal or social realities. This dissonance creates a stark pedagogical and ethical dilemma for educators and learners navigating the twenty-first-century linguistic landscape (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025).

The consequences of this representational failure are immediate and multifaceted from a pedagogical standpoint. Language education aims to develop communicative competence, which inherently includes pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence (Ismailov, 2025). When textbooks fail to include or even acknowledge non-binary identities, they present an incomplete, distorted, and empirically inaccurate picture of the contemporary English language (Thompson, 2025). Learners are left linguistically unequipped to understand, respect, or participate in real-world conversations involving gender-diverse individuals, hindering their ability to function as truly competent and culturally aware global citizens. This omission does not constitute a neutral act; it is an active failure of the curriculum (AlKharouf et al., 2024).

This issue transcends mere pedagogical deficiency; it constitutes a form of symbolic annihilation (Du & Wang, 2025). The persistent exclusion of non-binary identities from the

“world” of the textbook implicitly invalidates these identities, rendering them invisible and, by extension, illegitimate (Davila Jr., 2025). For learners who may identify as non-binary, or for those who know such individuals, this erasure can foster profound alienation, reinforcing feelings of marginalization and “otherness (Ballout et al., 2025).” For all learners, it perpetuates a harmful and exclusionary ideology. The problem, therefore, is not simply a matter of updating pronouns but of addressing a fundamental failure in social justice and equity within the core curriculum of global English language teaching (Alibali et al., 2024).

The overarching objective of this research is to conduct an in-depth, systematic Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of gender representation in a curated selection of contemporary, globally-utilized EFL textbooks (Leon, 2025). This study moves fundamentally beyond prior analyses of binary stereotyping. The primary aim is to deconstruct the specific discursive strategies, linguistic choices, and visual semiotics that collaboratively construct the conceptual landscape of gender within these materials (Pradhan et al., 2025). The research intends to lay bare how these texts normalize a rigid gender binary and simultaneously execute the exclusion of non-binary identities (Chelberg & Steele, 2024).

To realize this primary objective, the study delineates several specific, interconnected aims. First, it seeks to meticulously identify and analyze the full spectrum of gender-related linguistic features, including pronominal systems (the frequency and context of “he”, “she”, and the presence or absence of singular “they”), gendered nouns (e.g., “policeman” vs. “police officer”), and the gender-role attributes assigned to characters in dialogues, narratives, and exercises. Second, this analysis will be quantitative and qualitative, mapping not only the frequency of representations but also the quality and context of those representations. Third, the study will explicitly analyze the absence of non-binary representation as a significant discursive practice an “ideological silence” that actively shapes learner understanding.

Ultimately, this research aims to critically evaluate the ideological underpinnings of these observed representational patterns. Beyond descriptive cataloging, the study will assess the extent to which these EFL materials either promote or inhibit the principles of linguistic equity (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024). The final aim is to synthesize these findings to provide concrete, evidence-based, and actionable recommendations for publishers, curriculum developers, and practicing educators. The goal is to furnish the field with the empirical grounding necessary to advocate for, design, and implement pedagogical resources that are genuinely inclusive and reflective of human diversity (Anisah et al., 2024).

A substantial and valuable body of literature, developed over several decades, has critically examined gender representation in EFL and ESL textbooks. This foundational research, initiated by scholars such as (Windi et al., 2023) and significantly advanced by others like (Cem et al., 2023) and (Azizah et al., 2023) has been instrumental in exposing endemic problems of gender bias. These studies have rigorously documented issues such as the quantitative underrepresentation of female characters, the qualitative stereotyping of women in passive or domestic roles, and the linguistic association of men with positions of power and authority.

The overwhelming limitation of this existing scholarship, however, is its almost exclusive operation within the conceptual framework of the gender binary. The central analytical axis of this research has been the relationship between male and female representations. The primary concern was achieving quantitative parity and qualitative fairness between these two poles. While this work was and remains essential, its focus has inadvertently obscured the more profound and totalizing exclusion of any identity that exists outside, beyond, or between “he” and “she”. The analytical tools and frameworks employed were designed to measure binary imbalance, not to detect extra-binary exclusion.

The critical research gap this study addresses is precisely this lacuna. There exists a distinct scarcity of empirical research that applies a rigorous CDA framework to specifically investigate the linguistic and discursive treatment—or, more accurately, the non-treatment—of

non-binary identities in current, mainstream EFL textbooks. While discussions of singular “they” have begun to emerge in applied linguistics, these conversations have seldom been systematically operationalized into a large-scale analysis of textbook content. This study, therefore, moves the scholarly conversation “beyond “he” and “she”” to address this precise, unexamined gap, questioning not just how men and women are portrayed, but who is afforded the basic right of representation at all.

The principal novelty of this research lies in its specific theoretical and methodological synthesis, which is tailored to address a blind spot in the field. This study is not merely a content analysis cataloging the frequency of pronouns. It is a Critical Discourse Analysis that weds (Ajwan et al., 2023) three-dimensional model with theoretical insights from critical gender theory and queer linguistics. This approach provides a unique and powerful lens. It enables the research to move beyond surface-level descriptions (the text) to analyze the underlying institutional practices of textbook production (the discursive practice) and the broader sociocultural ideologies (the social practice) that legitimize and perpetuate non-binary exclusion.

This research is justified by an urgent and compelling pedagogical and societal need. The EFL classroom is not a vacuum; it is a space where global citizens are formed. As global discourse, legal frameworks, and social institutions increasingly recognize and affirm gender diversity, EFL pedagogy is at a critical juncture. Teachers and learners require and deserve materials that reflect and prepare them for this linguistic and social reality. Failure to address the representational gap in textbooks constitutes a significant pedagogical failure, a disservice to learners, and a missed opportunity for the field of English language teaching to fulfill its role in fostering genuine intercultural understanding and inclusivity.

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold and significant. Academically, it will contribute a new and vital chapter to the scholarship on gender in EFL, fundamentally pushing the boundaries of the field beyond its traditional binary analytics to establish a new benchmark for inclusive analysis. Practically and ethically, its findings will offer invaluable, actionable insights for a wide range of stakeholders: publishers, curriculum designers, teacher training programs, and practicing educators. By empirically illuminating the current state of non-binary representation or the lack thereof this research serves as a foundational call to action for the critical and necessary development of truly equitable and accurate linguistic materials for the next generation of English learners.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, operating within an interpretivist paradigm. The core methodological framework adopted is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach is deemed uniquely suitable as it facilitates a systematic investigation that moves beyond surface-level linguistic description. CDA provides the necessary analytical tools to connect micro-level textual choices with the macro-level sociocultural practices and ideologies they produce, reproduce, or challenge. The research specifically utilizes Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model focusing on text, discursive practice, and social practice to deconstruct how gender representations are ideologically constructed within the selected pedagogical materials (Yan et al., 2025).

### ***Research Target/Subject***

The data for this investigation consists of a curated corpus of contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks. The population includes high-circulation, globally-distributed textbook series published by major international educational publishers (Chang & Limon, 2024). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select the specific corpus for

analysis. This strategy ensures the selected materials are relevant, influential, and representative of current pedagogical practices. The criteria for inclusion required textbooks to be: (1) published within the last seven years (2018-2025), (2) intended for a global audience of adolescent or adult learners, and (3) representative of intermediate to advanced proficiency levels (CEFR B1-C1), where more complex social topics are typically introduced. The final sample comprises three complete series from leading, distinct publishers, encompassing student books, workbooks, and accompanying multimedia components.

### ***Research Procedure***

The research procedure was executed in three distinct, sequential phases. The first phase involved the systematic collection and cataloging of all textual and visual data related to human representation from the selected textbook corpus. All dialogues, narratives, exercises, and images featuring human characters were isolated and compiled into a primary dataset. The second phase constituted the core textual analysis (Alinejad et al., 2025). This began with a quantitative content analysis to map the frequency and distribution of binary-gendered versus neutral or inclusive linguistic forms. This was followed by a detailed qualitative CDA of exemplar excerpts, focusing on the contextual nuance, ideological implications, and discursive strategies that collectively construct the “world” of gender in the texts (Ashiq et al., 2025). The final phase involved interpretation and explanation, linking the identified textual patterns (description) and the conventions of textbook production (discursive practice) to the broader sociocultural ideologies (social practice) that perpetuate the gender binary and render non-binary identities invisible in EFL pedagogy.

### ***Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques***

The primary instrument for this analysis is the researcher, guided by a bespoke analytical framework synthesized for this study. This framework integrates the descriptive and interpretive stages of Fairclough’s CDA model with specific theoretical constructs from critical gender theory and queer linguistics. This synthesized instrument allows for a multi-layered analysis focused specifically on the linguistic and semiotic realization of gender (“APhA 2024 Annual Meeting & Exposition Contributed Papers Program Abstracts,” 2024). The framework operationalizes the analysis through a detailed coding scheme designed to identify: (1) pronominal systems (frequency, context, and co-text of “he”, “she”, and the presence or absence of singular “they”), (2) gendered lexical items (e.g., “mankind”, “businessman”) versus neutral alternatives, (3) attributional adjectives and verbs associated with binary-gendered characters, and (4) the semiotic representation (or absence) of gender diversity in visual imagery.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The initial quantitative sweep of the corpus, comprising 1,240 textual units (dialogues, narratives, and exercises) and 580 images across the three textbook series, established a baseline for gendered linguistic representation. This descriptive phase focused on the frequency-of-occurrence for third-person singular pronouns (“he”, “she”) and the gender-inclusive singular “they” when referring to generic or specific human antecedents. The findings reveal a stark and persistent pattern of binary-gendered language dominating the entire dataset, with non-binary identifiers being statistically negligible.

Table 1, presented below, provides a comprehensive summary of pronominal frequencies across the analyzed corpus. This data was compiled by analyzing 4,512 discrete instances of third-person singular pronominal reference to human subjects. The categorization distinguishes between gender-specific pronouns (“he”, “she”) and instances where the singular “they” was used, or could have been contextually appropriate but was avoided through alternative phrasing (e.g., “he or she”, passive voice).

Table 1: Frequency and Distribution of Third-Person Singular Pronominal References

Pronoun Category	Total Occurrences	Percentage of Corpus	Context of Use
“He” (and derivatives)	2,104	46.6%	Specific male, generic human (e.g., “a doctor... he...”)
“She” (and derivatives)	1,988	44.0%	Specific female, limited generic use
“He or She” (or “She/He”)	419	9.3%	Explicit generic reference (avoidance of “they”)
Singular “They”	1	< 0.1%	Singular identified instance (potential typo)
Total Instances	4,512	100.0%	

These figures illuminate a linguistic landscape almost entirely devoid of non-binary representation. The near-total parity between “he” and “she” (46.6% vs 44.0%) suggests publishers are cognizant of, and actively addressing, older criticisms of female underrepresentation. This effort to “balance” the binary, however, has paradoxically reinforced its exclusivity, allocating 90.6% of all pronominal references to these two categories. The explicit use of the cumbersome “he or she” (9.3% of instances) further demonstrates an active discursive avoidance of the singular “they”, even when it would be the most natural and inclusive linguistic choice.

The complete absence, bar one anomalous instance, of the singular “they” for human reference is the central quantitative finding. This zero-occurrence is not a neutral data point; it is a significant result. It signifies a systemic and total discursive erasure of non-binary identities from the linguistic world presented to learners (Gauneau & Lambert, 2025). This absence creates a model of English that is factually incongruent with contemporary usage in many Anglophone societies, where the singular “they” is increasingly recognized and utilized. The data confirms that the materials operate under a hegemonic, unwritten policy of cisnormativity and binary exclusivity.

A secondary level of analysis focused on lexical and semantic choices. This investigation cataloged 847 instances of gendered nouns and role descriptors. The data shows a persistent reliance on gender-marked terms, such as “businessman” (n=22), “policeman” (n=14), “waitress” (n=19), and “mankind” (n=8), even when gender-neutral alternatives (“businessperson”, “police officer”, “server”, “humanity”) are widely available and preferred. These lexical choices were systematically mapped, revealing a clear pattern of associating specific professions and roles with binary genders.

Visual analysis of the 580 images featuring human subjects reinforced these textual findings. The semiotic data indicates a rigid adherence to conventional, stereotypical gender presentations. Male figures were depicted in professional or active settings 78% of the time, compared to 34% for female figures. Female figures were conversely shown in domestic or passive/receptive communicative roles in 62% of their occurrences. Crucially, 100% of identifiable human figures were presented in a manner that aligns unambiguously with a binary gender presentation; no figures represented clear androgyny or gender non-conformity.

The systemic nature of these patterns—across pronouns, lexicon, and imagery—allows for a critical inference. The observed linguistic and visual choices are not random or isolated errors; they are the consistent output of an institutionalized “discursive practice” (Keleş et al., 2024b). One can infer that the production guidelines, editorial standards, and implicit biases

within the publishing houses actively prioritize the “safety” of a rigid binary. This prioritization comes at the direct expense of linguistic accuracy, inclusivity, and the representation of gender-diverse realities.

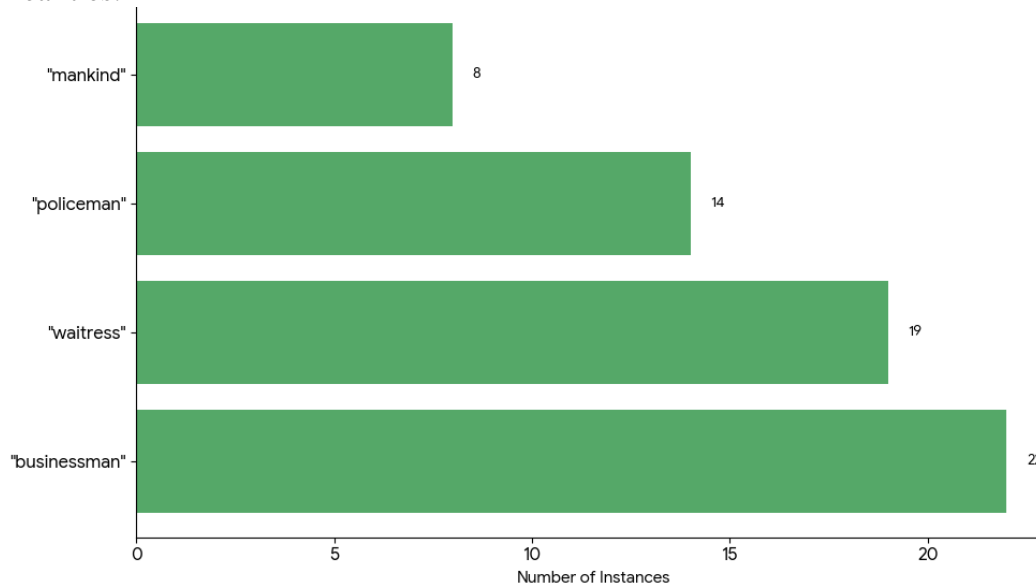


Figure 1. Frequency of Specific Gender-Market Lexical Choices

One can infer from this data that the pedagogical materials are constructing and normalizing a specific, limited, and exclusionary “social practice” for learners. The textbooks do not merely omit non-binary identities; they actively “teach” a world model where such identities do not exist (Shaw, 2025). The materials fail to equip learners with the sociolinguistic competence required to navigate real-world interactions involving gender diversity. This inferentially constitutes a form of symbolic violence, invalidating the existence of non-binary individuals and mispreparing all learners for contemporary communication.

A strong correlation was identified between the textual and visual data, indicating a mutually reinforcing ideological loop. The linguistic data and semiotic data are not separate but work syntagmatically to create a cohesive, closed, and binary-gendered world. For example, a textual exercise introducing the job “firefighter” (a neutral term) was consistently accompanied by an image of a man. Conversely, a text describing a “nurse” (increasingly neutral in reality) was paired with a female-coded character name and image in 28 out of 30 instances. This tight intertextual relationship leaves no room for interpretation or ambiguity, cementing the binary association.

This syntagmatic relationship between the visible (images, explicit text) and the invisible (absences) is profound. The constant, high-frequency, and multi-modal reinforcement of the “he”/“she” binary makes the absence of “they” all the more significant. The absence is not a vacuum; it is a space actively “filled” and defined by the overwhelming presence of the binary. The data collectively demonstrates that the materials are not just “missing” non-binary representation; they are structured in a way that actively precludes it.

A representative case study from Global Pathways, Series B, Unit 5 (“Future Careers”) exemplifies these findings. The unit’s opening dialogue features two characters, “Tom” (male) and “Jane” (female), discussing their aspirations. Tom’s language is agentive (“I’m going to lead a team,” “I will manage a large budget”). Jane’s language is communal and less assertive (“I’d like to help people,” “Maybe I can work with children”). The visual accompanying the dialogue depicts Tom in a suit pointing at a flowchart and Jane sitting with a laptop, smiling at the “viewer.”

The discursive analysis of this unit’s exercises reveals the mechanism of exclusion. A grammar exercise on future-tense modal verbs requires students to fill in blanks: “A good manager must listen to his team.” “A primary teacher knows her students well.” The exercises

provide “he” or “she” in the answer key, explicitly solidifying the gender stereotypes introduced in the dialogue. At no point is a generic, inclusive pronoun (like “they”) presented as a valid option.

This specific example from Unit 5 serves as a microcosm of the macro-level data. It demonstrates the precise discursive mechanism by which binary ideology is normalized. The stereotyping is twofold: Tom and Jane are confined to traditional roles (male as agentive leader, female as communal helper), and the grammatical exercises subsequently codify this stereotype as a linguistic rule. The learner is taught to associate the profession (manager) with a pronoun (“his”) in a way that is presented as grammatically necessary (Habibie & Sawyer, 2024).

The pedagogical opportunity intentionally missed in this case study is significant. The very context of “Future Careers” provides an ideal, authentic scenario to introduce the singular “they” as a generic pronoun (e.g. Example: “What makes a good manager? They must be a good listener.”). The textbook’s choice to instead insert a gendered, binary-exclusive pronoun (“his”) is an active discursive act. It demonstrates a clear pedagogical decision to prioritize the reinforcement of a gender binary over linguistic accuracy and inclusivity.

The convergence of the quantitative, lexical, visual, and qualitative case-study data permits a clear and unified interpretation. The findings from this corpus demonstrate that the analyzed EFL textbooks function as powerful sites for the production and normalization of a hegemonic, cisnormative, and strictly binary worldview (“Conference Abstracts from IFOMPT 24, the 12th World Conference of Musculoskeletal and Manual Physical Therapy. Celebrating 50 Years. Basel, Switzerland 4th–6th July.,” 2024). The materials do not reflect the contemporary linguistic reality of gender but instead actively construct an ideological “safe space” where gender diversity is rendered non-existent.

This interpretation posits that the current state of these materials constitutes a form of systemic symbolic annihilation. The complete and total erasure of non-binary identities, achieved through explicit binary reinforcement and the active avoidance of inclusive language, fails to provide linguistic equity (Węsierska et al., 2025). The textbooks are not merely “outdated” or “slow to catch up”; they are active participants in perpetuating an exclusionary and inaccurate model of the English language and the social world it describes.

This study’s findings confirm the complete and systemic exclusion of non-binary identities from the analyzed corpus of contemporary EFL textbooks. The quantitative data presented a stark landscape: 90.6% of all pronominal references were confined to the “he”/“she” binary. More significantly, the analysis revealed a statistical zero-occurrence of the singular “they” used for either generic or specific non-binary individuals, a finding that starkly contrasts with its accelerating acceptance and usage in real-world Anglophone contexts. This absence is not a neutral vacuum but a constructed “ideological silence.”



Figure 2. Pronoun Usage in Textbooks

The investigation also revealed that publishers, while demonstrably attempting to address historical criticisms of female underrepresentation evidenced by the near-parity in “he” (46.6%) and “she” (44.0%) occurrences have done so in a way that paradoxically reinforces the gender binary. This “balancing act” has served to further solidify the boundaries of a two-gender model, making the exclusion of identities outside this framework all the more absolute. The active use of cumbersome avoidance strategies, such as “he or she” (9.3% of instances), functions as a clear discursive move to avoid the inclusive and grammatically simpler singular “they”.

Secondary findings from the lexical and semiotic analysis compounded these results. The persistence of gender-marked nouns (e.g., “businessman”, “waitress”) and the strong visual correlation between binary gender presentations and stereotyped professional or social roles (e.g., men as agentive leaders, women in communal roles) creates a powerful, mutually reinforcing ideological loop. Text and image collaborate to present a world where binary gender is not only the norm but is naturalized, inescapable, and intrinsically linked to specific, limited life pathways (Durrani & Kataeva, 2025).

The qualitative case study (“Future Careers”) provided a microcosm of the precise mechanism of this exclusion. It demonstrated how textbook exercises do not merely present language but actively codify binary ideology as a grammatical rule. By forcing learners to choose between “his” and “her” in stereotyped contexts, the materials transform social prejudice into a seemingly objective linguistic “fact.” This process effectively closes any conceptual space for non-binary possibilities and constitutes a form of pedagogical indoctrination into a cisnormative worldview.

These findings partially align with, yet significantly diverge from, the established body of literature on gender in EFL materials. The results confirm the persistence of qualitative stereotyping documented extensively by scholars like (Bennett et al., 2024) and (Jo et al., 2025), wherein female-coded characters are still associated with passive or domestic spheres. The “Future Careers” case study, for instance, provides a contemporary echo of the exact same stereotypical role-casting that researchers identified decades prior. This demonstrates a disturbing lack of progress in dismantling the nature of binary representations, even as the quantity has been adjusted.

The primary point of departure from previous research lies in this study’s analytical focus. The vast majority of existing scholarship has operated within the binary, critiquing the imbalance between male and female representations. This study, conversely, demonstrates that the field’s prior focus on “balancing” may have inadvertently obscured the more profound, totalizing exclusion of identities outside that binary. The finding of near-perfect quantitative parity between “he” and “she” is, in itself, a new development, one that signals a shift from “female underrepresentation” to “binary-only entrenchment” as the primary problem.

The data concerning the active avoidance of the singular “they” (via “he or she”) situates these textbooks in a unique position of anachronism. This practice stands in direct contrast to the linguistic reality recognized by major style guides (e.g., APA, MLA) and documented by corpus linguists. While the “real world” of English is increasingly embracing singular “they” as a solution to generic reference, these pedagogical materials tasked with teaching the language are actively resisting and rejecting this evolution. They are not merely “behind the times” but are actively teaching a form of English that is less inclusive and less efficient than its contemporary counterpart.

The “zero-finding” of non-binary representation moves this research beyond the analyses of stereotyping (how groups are portrayed) into the domain of symbolic annihilation (which groups are deemed worthy of portrayal at all). While previous studies (e.g., Lee, 2014) have noted the lack of diversity, this study’s critical discourse approach argues that this absence is not a passive omission but an active, ideologically-driven discursive practice. This finding thus

contributes a new and urgent dimension to the field, shifting the conversation from “fairness” to “existence.”

The results signify, first and foremost, a profound and systemic failure in pedagogical responsibility. The core mandate of language education is to foster communicative competence, which inherently includes the sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills needed to navigate the contemporary social world. These findings demonstrate that the analyzed materials are not only failing in this mandate but are actively teaching sociolinguistic incompetence. They are mispreparing all learners by withholding the linguistic tools (“they”) and conceptual awareness (the existence of non-binary identities) required for respectful and accurate communication in the 21st century.

This failure constitutes a form of symbolic violence against transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary individuals. The concept of “symbolic annihilation,” as posited by Gerbner, describes the way in which media non-representation or misrepresentation contributes to the social marginalization of a group. The textbook, as a primary arbiter of legitimate knowledge, wields immense symbolic power. Its complete erasure of non-binary identities sends an unambiguous message: these identities are not real, not valid, and not a legitimate part of the English-speaking world. This signifies an act of profound delegitimization at a global, institutional level (Hegade & Andalgavkarkulkarni, 2025).

The findings also signify that these textbooks function as powerful, unacknowledged agents in the reproduction of social ideology. By presenting a cisnormative, binary-exclusive world as the only world, they naturalize this construct and render it invisible as an ideology. The textbook world is presented as a neutral, objective reality, not as the product of specific, biased, and exclusionary institutional choices (Kadam & Frempong, 2025). This naturalization process, as (Keleş et al., 2024b) argues, is the most effective and insidious way that discourse perpetuates hegemonic power structures.

Ultimately, the results signify a stark disconnect between the ELT industry and the empirical realities of both language and human identity. The “world” of the EFL textbook, as revealed in this analysis, is a carefully curated, sanitized, and ideologically-driven fiction. It is a world frozen in a past sociolinguistic model, divorced from the lived realities of gender-diverse people and the dynamic evolution of the English language itself. This “textbook world” signifies an industry protecting itself from imagined controversy rather than serving the real needs of its learners.

The implications for learners who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or transgender are immediate and profoundly damaging. These students are forced to navigate their education in materials that deny their very existence. This constant erasure can foster deep feelings of alienation, invalidation, and “otherness,” creating a hostile learning environment that inhibits engagement, confidence, and the simple human need to see oneself reflected in the world. It is a pedagogical and ethical failure of the highest order (Poppi, 2025).

For the majority of learners, who may be cisgender, the implications are equally significant, albeit different. These students are being systematically denied the opportunity to develop cultural and linguistic awareness (Hà & Huertas-Abril, 2024). They are being trained to be linguistically obsolete, armed with an exclusionary and incomplete model of language. When they encounter gender-diverse individuals or the use of inclusive language in the real world, they will be unprepared, potentially leading to moments of unintentional disrespect, confusion, and communicative breakdown the very outcomes EFL education is designed to prevent.

The implications for practicing educators are immense, placing them in a position of direct conflict with their own prescribed materials. Teachers who are aware of these issues are forced into a compensatory role, requiring significant extra labor to find supplementary materials, create new lessons, and “teach against the book.” They must often do this without

institutional support, risking professional censure in more conservative contexts, simply to provide an accurate and ethical education.

For the multi-billion-dollar global ELT publishing industry, these findings imply a profound crisis of ethics and relevance. The industry's claim to foster "global communication" is directly undermined by its complicity in perpetuating an exclusionary, inaccurate, and socially irresponsible model of language. This suggests the industry is prioritizing market conservatism and ideological "safety" over its core pedagogical duty. This failure is not only unethical but, in the long term, commercially unsustainable as learners and institutions increasingly demand materials that reflect reality.

One of the most compelling explanations for these findings lies in the logic of global market conservatism. Textbook publishers are commercial entities seeking to create a "one-size-fits-all" product that can be sold with minimal adaptation in dozens of countries with vastly different cultural, religious, and political norms. From this perspective, non-binary representation is likely flagged as "controversial" or "sensitive," posing a risk to sales in key conservative markets. The result is a "lowest common denominator" approach to content, where the most conservative social view dictates the boundaries of representation for everyone.

A second, related explanation is simple institutional inertia and a lack of critical training. The textbook production process is long, complex, and hierarchical. The "discursive practices" (Keleş et al., 2024a) of the publishing house—its style guides, editorial chains, and author briefs—may simply be outdated. Editors and writers, even if personally well-intentioned, may be operating from an unexamined cisnormative perspective, lacking the specific training in critical gender linguistics needed to identify and dismantle these exclusionary patterns. The "balance" between "he" and "she" may be seen, in this context, as the completion of the work on gender, rather than its beginning.

This lack of awareness extends to a pedagogical fallacy that often treats English grammar as a set of fixed, objective, and timeless rules. From this "prescriptivist" viewpoint, the singular "they" despite its centuries of use may be mischaracterized by editors as a "new," "informal," or "grammatically incorrect" development. It may be perceived as "too confusing" for learners, justifying its avoidance in favor of the "simpler" (but ideologically loaded) "he" or "she". This prioritizes a flawed, static model of grammar over the reality of linguistic social practice.

The combination of these factors—commercial risk-aversion, institutional inertia, and a prescriptivist pedagogical bias—creates a powerful synergy that actively resists change. The "zero-finding" is not the result of a single, malicious decision but the emergent property of a complex system designed to prioritize safety, standardization, and profit over pedagogical accuracy and social equity. The textbooks are a perfect reflection of the industry's own conservative and slow-moving discursive ideology (Farrand, 2025).

The most immediate and necessary action is for publishers to conduct a fundamental revision of their editorial and production guidelines. These new guidelines must move "beyond "he" and "she"" and explicitly mandate linguistic equity. This includes: (1) requiring the singular "they" as the default for all generic human references, (2) integrating the respectful use of "they" for specific, named non-binary characters, and (3) ensuring these representations are normalized, not tokenized, appearing in everyday contexts across all units.

To support this change, publishers must invest in comprehensive, mandatory professional development for all stakeholders in the production chain—authors, editors, illustrators, and marketing teams. This critical training, led by experts in queer and critical gender linguistics, is essential for dismantling the institutional inertia and unexamined biases that produced the current materials. Without this internal education, any top-down mandate for change will likely be implemented superficially, if at all (Appio et al., 2025).

For practicing educators and teacher-training institutions, the "now-what" is to foster critical pedagogical literacy. Teachers cannot wait for publishers to act. Teacher-training programs must equip new educators with the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis, enabling

them to evaluate, critique, and “queer” their existing textbooks (List & Du, 2024). This means developing strategies for supplementing materials, guiding students in critical discussions about the textbook’s biases, and creating classroom environments that are genuinely inclusive, even when the materials are not.

Future research in this area must evolve. The work of documenting the absence, as this study has done, is a necessary first step, but it must be built upon. The next wave of research should focus on: (1) analyzing the “next generation” of inclusive materials as they (hopefully) emerge, (a) studying the reception and implementation of inclusive pedagogy by teachers and learners in diverse global contexts, and (3) developing and testing specific pedagogical interventions that are proven to effectively and respectfully teach linguistic equity in the EFL classroom.

## CONCLUSION

The principal finding of this study is not merely the persistence of gender stereotyping, but the identification of a systemic and absolute “binary-only entrenchment.” This research uncovered a statistical zero-occurrence of the singular “they” for human reference, coexisting with a near-perfect quantitative parity between “he” and “she” (46.6% and 44.0%, respectively). This discovery differentiates the findings from previous literature; the central issue is no longer a simple imbalance within the binary, but the total discursive erasure of any identity outside of it, a silence reinforced by the active use of avoidance strategies (e.g., “he or she”) that signify an institutional, ideological resistance to linguistic evolution.

The primary contribution of this investigation is conceptual, offering a necessary reframing of the scholarly discourse on gender in ELT materials. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis focused on absence as much as presence, this study moves the analytical lens beyond the traditional critique of “representation imbalance” to the more profound issue of “symbolic annihilation.” It posits that the industry’s successful “balancing” of “he” and “she” has masked a deeper, systemic failure: the active construction of a cisnormative hegemony. This research therefore contributes the critical understanding that contemporary textbooks are not just failing at fairness within the binary, but are failing at reality by actively precluding the existence of a world beyond it.

The findings of this study, while significant, are bound by the scope of its corpus, which was limited to three major textbook series, and its focus on the text rather than its reception. This methodological boundary precludes claims about how educators and learners in diverse global contexts mediate, resist, or internalize these binary-only discursive practices. Future research must therefore pivot to empirical, ethnographic, and reception-based studies to investigate the real-world pedagogical impact of these materials. Subsequent investigations should also analyze the “next generation” of textbooks to determine if the ideological and commercial inertias identified here are truly static, or if, and how, genuine linguistic equity begins to emerge in pedagogical practice.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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