

Gender Representation and Intercultural Competence in Iranian EFL Coursebooks from the 1960s to 2020s

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the representation of gender and intercultural competence in the images and texts of 15 Iranian secondary school English coursebooks, published over six decades. Gender representation was investigated using the framework proposed by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020), and the scale developed by Solhaug and Kristensen (2020) was used as the criteria for investigating intercultural competence. The data were coded and counted using manifest content analysis. The results showed that Iranian English coursebooks mentioned males and females unequally in their texts across different decades, with one gender being represented more in each decade. Regarding gender representation in the images, males were represented more than females in almost all decades. The representation of males and females in the books published in the 1970s was almost equal, followed by extreme and sudden changes in gender representation in the 1980s. However, the books published in and after the 2000s presented a balanced picture of males and females. The coursebooks dealt with intercultural competence in their texts and images very rarely, limiting this concept to religious issues and neglecting other aspects. In fact, the coursebooks addressed only one category out of the 11 categories. Finally, the study ends with implications for coursebook authors, materials designers, teachers, students, and teacher trainers.

Keywords: English language, coursebooks, gender representation, intercultural competence

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1. Introduction

Coursebooks play a crucial role in language learning and teaching, providing essential input, guidance, and structure for both learners and teachers. They offer a systematic approach to syllabus design, scaffold learning experiences, and ensure consistency across different teaching contexts (Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2011). As tools for instruction, coursebooks act as a foundation for lesson planning and offer both novice and experienced teachers support in content delivery (Graves, 2000; Mishan & Timmis, 2015). Additionally, coursebooks help to develop language skills through carefully sequenced activities and materials, thereby facilitating practice and production opportunities for students (Garton & Graves, 2014). Given their prominence, coursebooks must be carefully evaluated to ensure they meet the diverse needs of learners and contribute to effective language acquisition (Richards, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012).

Beyond their direct role in language learning and teaching, coursebooks also significantly impact learners' understanding of and familiarity with both their home and target cultures due to the interconnectedness of language and culture (Lee, 2014; Lee, 2018). In today's globalised world, effective communication across diverse cultural backgrounds requires a deep understanding of both language and cultural norms (Barrett, 2018). This emphasises the importance for language learners to expand their awareness of this interrelation for effective communication (Brown, 2019). As more recent studies argue, cultural knowledge is not a standalone 'fifth skill' in language learning but is deeply integrated into all language skills and components, influencing learners' ability to effectively communicate across cultural contexts (Byram, 2021; Dypedahl, 2018).

One of the major issues in any society is the role played by men and women, which is heavily influenced by how they are perceived within that culture. Unequal representation and treatment of men and women, often favouring patriarchy, persists in various societies, employment opportunities, and even coursebooks, hindering societal development and perpetuating gender inequality (Ben-Amar et al., 2021; IBR, 2020). Studies by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020), Dahmardeh et al. (2025), Demir and Yavuz (2017), and Kayed et al. (2020) demonstrate that a wide variety of English

teaching coursebooks depict patriarchal structures, potentially reinforcing gender inequality and hindering societal progress. This highlights the importance of researching and addressing gender representation in coursebooks to gain a deeper understanding of this crucial element in material development (Kazemi & Yarian, 2014; Ozkan, 2013).

Growing concerns about gender inequality among social activists have prompted researchers to analyse coursebooks with respect to gender representation (Qayyum, 2021). Literature reviews reveal that gender bias is present in various textbooks (McDonald, 2013), including Iranian English coursebooks, where females are often depicted differently and occupy less space compared to males (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020; Dahmardeh & Mahdikhani, 2025; Khurshid et al., 2010).

Furthermore, coursebooks act as successful cultural carriers, containing diverse concepts and information about various cultures. Byram et al. (2002) argue that they should also expand learners' intercultural communicative competence, enabling them to communicate effectively with individuals from different social and linguistic backgrounds. However, designing and using coursebooks with suitable cultural and intercultural aspects presents a challenge (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Designing and using coursebooks with appropriate cultural and intercultural components is a challenging task, as it requires a balance between pedagogical goals and cultural representation (Tomlinson, 2012). Moreover, coursebooks must cater to diverse learners while maintaining linguistic and cultural relevance (Frant & Wong, 2018).

To achieve gender parity and eliminate discrimination, Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2012) outline three key strategies: evaluating coursebooks for discrimination, considering gender equity standards, and modifying coursebook content accordingly. By assessing the cultural and intercultural aspects of coursebooks, we can determine if they provide adequate content for developing high intercultural competence in learners. This research aims to contribute to this understanding by examining both intercultural competence and gender representation in Iranian EFL coursebooks used in secondary schools, analysing both visual and textual aspects of coursebooks published from the 1960s to the 2020s.

2. Literature Review

Coursebooks serve as essential guides for instruction and instructors, integrating texts, activities, and explanations into classroom lessons. According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994), they benefit both teachers and students by providing a wealth of content and activities, fostering better learning environments. Coursebooks also aid in developing skills and planning class routines, allowing teachers to evaluate and review prior learning sessions (Mukundan, 2012). Overall, coursebooks are crucial tools in language teaching and learning. Coursebooks build a learner's point of view (Kobia, 2009). As suggested by Roohani and Molana (2013), and Soleimani and Dabbaghi (2012) coursebooks play an important role in helping learners to become aware of cultural differences between native English speakers and other learners because of the limited opportunities students have for real communication with English native speakers in English.

Gender stereotypes are pervasive in English coursebooks, negatively impacting students' learning, behaviour, and societal perceptions of gender roles. This issue needs to be addressed to create inclusive and diverse learning environments (Mburu & Nyagah, 2012). Several factors contribute to this problem. One is the tendency of materials developers and educators to overlook gender disparities in coursebooks, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes and biases (Fahriany et al., 2018). Additionally, the diverse nature of English coursebooks, with varying content and levels of gender bias, makes it difficult for teachers to choose inclusive materials (Vidari, 2021).

To address this issue, teachers need to play a crucial role. They must critically evaluate coursebooks to identify potential gender bias and ensure they are effective in promoting inclusive learning (Mohammadi & Abdi, 2014; Richards, 2001). If materials are deemed biased, teachers should modify or replace them with more balanced and equitable representations. Additionally, teachers need to actively identify and address gender imbalances in their teaching practices, such as choosing male and female characters with diverse personalities and roles.

The relationship between gender representation and intercultural competence is critical yet often overlooked in educational materials development. Gender roles and identities are culturally constructed and embedded within a society's values,

traditions, and power structures. Coursebooks, as cultural artifacts, both reflect and shape these constructions, influencing how learners perceive gender norms and interact with others from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Derakhshan, 2021). A well-rounded approach to intercultural competence not only addresses cultural knowledge but also the ways in which gender is represented within different societies. When coursebooks fail to portray gender equitably, they limit learners' understanding of diverse gender roles across cultures, thereby narrowing their intercultural competence.

Integrating gender equality with intercultural competence requires materials to provide balanced and fair representations of both genders, offering learners a broader view of social roles in different cultural settings (Dabbagh, 2016). This is especially important in a globalised world, where learners encounter individuals from diverse social and cultural contexts. Understanding how gender roles vary across cultures is essential for effective intercultural communication and the development of open-minded, culturally aware individuals.

Extensive research has been conducted on gender representation in English coursebooks by scholars worldwide (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020; Demir & Yavuz, 2017; Kayed et al, 2020; Khurshid et al., 2010, McDonald, 2013; Rachmijati & Cahyati, 2018). This research highlights the need for further efforts in promoting more equitable and diverse learning environments. Key areas of focus include examining various aspects of gender representation, such as firstness, professions, and interactions, and developing strategies to address any existing biases.

In a multicultural world, students need to develop intercultural competence to navigate diverse environments and interact effectively with people from different backgrounds. This ability involves open-mindedness, respect, and tolerance for various beliefs, worldviews, and practices (Barrett, 2018). It is about understanding and being understood by others while fostering positive relationships—this refers to the ability to engage in respectful, empathetic, and open interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Positive relationships are built on mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication, which are essential for overcoming potential misunderstandings and biases that may arise from cultural differences

(Dypedahl, 2018).

Education plays a crucial role in equipping students with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in today's globalised society. Intercultural competence is particularly vital in language learning, not only for acquiring a foreign language but also for understanding different cultures (Barrett, 2011; Danielsen, 2020).

Given English's position as a lingua franca, it serves as a key tool for communication across cultures. Therefore, coursebooks play a significant role in promoting intercultural competence within language learning (Ahour et al., 2014). They act as a central and influential source of information, exposing students to various cultures, customs, and traditions, and helping them grasp the cultural context of the target language (Byram, 1997). Ultimately, coursebooks, as highlighted by Ahour et al. (2014), stand as a valuable resource for both linguistic and cultural knowledge, fostering intercultural competence in language learners of all ages and levels.

Several researchers have emphasised the influence of English language coursebooks and teachers on students' intercultural competence. Lund (2019) and Skjelbred (2019) argued coursebooks often present stereotypical and superficial representations of other cultures. Besides, Brown (2019) argued that coursebooks should include authentic materials that reflect the diversity of cultures and perspectives. Coursebooks should provide opportunities for learners to engage in critical thinking and reflection on their own cultural assumptions and biases. Skjelbred (2019) emphasised the importance of teachers being critical of the content of coursebooks and adapting them to suit the needs of their learners.

Several studies revealed limitations in current coursebooks. Bose and Gao (2022) found Indian ELT materials heavily favoured British and Irish culture, with minimal cultural engagement and gender bias. Dahmardeh and Kim (2021) analysed "Prospect" and "Vision" series, highlighting an overemphasis on source culture and underrepresentation of target, international, and universal cultures.

The teaching of English as a foreign language in Iran has undergone significant changes since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In the post-revolutionary era, English

education in Iran has been shaped by a strong sense of national identity and religious values. The government's policies towards foreign language education have reflected a careful balancing act between embracing English as a lingua franca necessary for global communication and safeguarding Islamic and cultural values.

Before the revolution, English was taught primarily through coursebooks that were largely imported from the West, often with little regard for Iranian cultural and ideological contexts. After the revolution, there was a noticeable shift. English instruction became more tightly controlled by the government, and coursebooks were developed locally to reflect Islamic values and national identity. ELT materials began to emphasise Islamic beliefs, cultural traditions, and the rejection of Western cultural dominance (Borjian, 2013).

In response to ideological shifts, the Iranian Ministry of Education introduced a series of localised ELT coursebooks to replace international ones. These coursebooks, such as the Right Path to English series in the 1980s and the more recent Prospect and Vision series, are designed to align with the socio-political context of post-revolutionary Iran. These books not only focus on language skills but also aim to promote religious and cultural values, often limiting the inclusion of diverse or international cultural content (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2021).

Since the revolution, Iranian coursebooks have been scrutinised for their portrayal of gender roles and intercultural competence. While early coursebooks often reinforced traditional gender roles, more recent reforms—especially in the Prospect and Vision series—have aimed to present a more balanced representation of gender, though critiques remain about the dominance of patriarchal narratives and the limited scope of intercultural competence (Goodarzi & Weisi, 2020). The content of these books is carefully curated to reflect Islamic cultural values, often at the expense of broader global perspectives on gender equality and diversity. Despite these constraints, the teaching of English in Iran continues to evolve. The increasing recognition of English as a global language, essential for academic and professional development, has led to ongoing debates about how to reconcile local values with the demands of a globalised world. This tension has shaped the curriculum, making ELT in Iran a complex interplay of linguistic education, cultural representation, and

ideological conformity (Borjian, 2013).

In the context of Iranian ELT materials, various studies have examined gender representation and intercultural competence, highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges. For instance, Babaii et al. (2019) critically analysed gender representation in Iranian coursebooks and found persistent gender imbalances, particularly in terms of power dynamics and professional roles. Their study emphasises the importance of moving beyond simple numerical analyses to consider how gender roles are constructed.

Similarly, Dabbagh (2016) provided a detailed critique of gender representation in Iranian ELT coursebooks, utilising a critical image analysis framework to reveal hidden gender biases. Dabbagh's findings suggest that while females are present in educational materials, they are often depicted in passive or secondary roles, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. More recently, Rajabi et al. (2024) examined the representation of social identities in Iranian English language coursebooks and further demonstrated the value of a critical approach to analysing coursebook discourse. This highlights the need for more nuanced approaches to evaluating gender in educational materials.

Derakhshan (2018) explored the representation of cultural elements in Iranian coursebooks and argued for the inclusion of more diverse cultural narratives. His later work, Derakhshan (2021), extended this analysis by examining the role of coursebook images in cultural representation, suggesting that many images serve a decorative rather than an informative or educational purpose. Similarly, Wang and Hemchua (2022) examined EFL coursebook images from a semiotic perspective, demonstrating the importance of analysing visual elements as meaningful representations of culture rather than treating them as merely supplementary to written texts. These studies highlight the limitations of current coursebooks in promoting intercultural competence.

Mofidi and Hashemi (2019) addressed the issue of intercultural competence in Iranian ELT materials, arguing that the coursebooks tend to prioritise local and religious cultural content at the expense of global perspectives. This limited scope hinders students' ability to engage with diverse cultural contexts in a globalised world.

More recently, Asghari (2024) examined intercultural competence in a language-learning coursebook through qualitative content analysis, highlighting the importance of examining the extent and nature of intercultural content embedded in language-learning materials.

Sadeghi and Sepahi (2017) also examined intercultural competence, finding that many Iranian coursebooks neglect critical aspects of global citizenship and cultural diversity. Their research points to the need for ELT materials that more effectively integrate intercultural communication skills, rather than focusing solely on linguistic competence.

Hosseinzadeh et al. (2021) compared "Touchstone" and "ILI" series, finding the latter presented a wider range of cultural content but still prioritised source culture. Mirzapour (2020) compared "ILI" and "Rise and Shine," concluding that the latter fostered better intercultural competence due to its richer cultural elements. Vahdat et al. (2020) analysed international coursebooks, finding satisfactory representations of globalisation and English hegemony. Goodarzi and Weisi (2020) studied the "Vision" series, revealing a dominance of white and male characters with limited intercultural communication scenarios.

Ahour et al. (2014) identified several limitations in coursebooks: a mono-perspective writing style leading to a narrow understanding of the target culture, lack of multicultural comparison hindering development of a comparative perspective, and presentation of cultural information disconnected from language learning goals. Esmaili et al. (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of incorporating intercultural tasks, showing significant improvement in learners' intercultural sensitivity. Nafissi et al. (2019) found that reading passages combining L1 and L2 cultures fostered positive perceptions of the learner's own culture.

Given that the Prospect and Vision series are relatively new to the landscape of ELT in Iran, recent research has begun to scrutinise how these coursebooks handle gender representation and intercultural competence. For example, Dahmardeh and Kim (2020) conducted an in-depth analysis of the "Prospect" and "Vision" series, highlighting that while these books attempt to present a balanced gender representation, they still exhibit some gender bias, especially in professional roles

and visual depictions. Similarly, Goodarzi and Weisi (2020) revealed a dominance of male characters and a limited portrayal of intercultural communication scenarios in the Vision series.

Moreover, studies have pointed out that the Vision series tends to focus more on local cultural elements rather than offering a broad intercultural perspective (Vahdat et al., 2020). This limits the development of intercultural competence in students, as the coursebooks rarely introduce learners to global or diverse cultural experiences. The heavy reliance on religious themes as the primary intercultural component further restricts students' understanding of the broader cultural landscape. These findings underscore the need for ongoing research and revision of these series to foster a more inclusive and globally aware educational experience.

However, the results of these studies are not inclusive. Most of these studies showed that coursebooks contain a degree of gender bias, as highlighted by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020)' study on newly published school English coursebooks. On the contrary, some studies have found equal attention to both genders (Keshavarz & Malek, 2009), and few studies suggest that coursebooks represent females more than males (Jannati, 2015). Besides not being inclusive, most of the previous studies have analysed a specific book series, comparing an Iranian English book with an international one, or different books at a certain point of time. Quite different from these studies, this study aims to examine 13 coursebooks from two aspects of gender representation and intercultural competence, both before and after the Islamic Revolution. The samples used in the present study are fifteen coursebooks published by Ministry of Education for 12 to 13-year-old pupils in Iran from 1960s to 2020s. The first coursebook was published in 1974. The rest were published in 1978, 1981, 1984, 1987, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023. To reach these aims, the following research questions were posed.

- How is gender represented in the texts of Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks from the 1970s to 2020s?
- How is gender represented in the images of Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks from the 1970s to 2020s?

- How is intercultural competence represented in the texts of Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks from the 1970s to 2020s?
- How is intercultural competence represented in the images of Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks from the 1970s to 2020s?

3. Methodology

The researchers employed content analysis, a qualitative technique that examines the presence of specific concepts within texts. This method is commonly used to analyse written, spoken, or visual content. In this study, the researchers applied quantitative content analysis to Iranian EFL coursebooks, meticulously examining the texts and images for the presence of intercultural competence based on chosen frameworks and the extent of gender representation. They analysed both the frequency and percentage of these elements within the coursebooks.

Three analytical frameworks were used to examine gender representation and intercultural competence in Iranian ELT coursebooks: the framework for gender representation proposed by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020), the model for intercultural competence developed by Solhaug and Kristensen (2020), and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model for analysing images. These frameworks were selected for their relevance to the study's focus on language education and cultural representation in the Iranian context.

Dahmardeh and Kim's (2020) Framework for Gender Representation: This framework was chosen because it offers a comprehensive tool for analysing the portrayal of gender in both texts and images within educational materials. It focuses on how gender roles are distributed across various aspects of the coursebooks, such as the frequency of male and female characters, their roles, professions, and the types of interactions they engage in. This model has been applied to ELT materials worldwide and provides a detailed and relevant lens for examining gender dynamics in Iranian coursebooks.

Solhaug and Kristensen's (2020) Intercultural Competence Model: The decision to use this framework was driven by the model's specificity in analysing intercultural

competence, which is particularly relevant in educational settings. The framework evaluates intercultural competence across four dimensions—empathy, knowledge of diversity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural relations—which align closely with the study's focus on how coursebooks foster or hinder cross-cultural understanding. This model was chosen over others for its comprehensive scope and its proven utility in educational research on ELT materials.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Model for Image Analysis: This framework for visual content analysis focuses on the semiotics of images and how they communicate social and cultural values. Given that visual elements in coursebooks play a crucial role in shaping learners' understanding of gender and culture, this model offers a robust method for analysing the role of images in reinforcing or challenging traditional gender roles and cultural narratives. Kress and van Leeuwen's model was selected due to its widespread use in the analysis of educational materials and its detailed approach to visual semiotics.

3.1. Data Sources

The study analysed 15 Iranian English language coursebooks used in secondary schools from the 1970s to the 2020s. These coursebooks were reviewed systematically for their representation of gender and intercultural competence, focusing on both texts and images. The content analysis was conducted by carefully examining each book's contents based on the frameworks described earlier. Each page was reviewed multiple times to ensure that no relevant data on gender or intercultural competence was overlooked.

The most recent series, "English for Schools: Prospects 1" (2013-2023), marks a significant change. These books, all named "Prospects 1" despite spanning multiple editions, are highly consistent in structure and content. They focus on specific language functions, vocabulary, and pronunciation, with each lesson being shorter than previous series. This indicates a shift in emphasis from grammar-heavy instruction to developing communication skills and practical language use.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Gender Representation Framework

Quantitative content analysis, based on systematic code classification and theme identification, aims for an objective interpretation of data. In this study, the researchers employed manifest content analysis, focusing on visible and countable elements like photos and names, to assess the extent of male and female representation in the coursebooks. They meticulously examined photos, images, names, roles, and their frequency in conversations, reading passages, and pictures. This analysis relied on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model, where individuals are the units of analysis, and Cunningsworth's (1995) model for examining gender roles and occupations. Ultimately, they identified all instances of gender representation based on the frameworks established by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020).

3.2.2. Intercultural Competence Framework

This study also investigated intercultural competence, the ability to effectively communicate and interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Solhaug and Kristensen (2020) proposed a framework consisting of four key factors:

- Empathy, Emotion, and Perspective (EEP): This factor measures a person's understanding of various concepts like injustice, prejudice, empathy, and emotional involvement. It includes eight items assessing one's understanding of these concepts.
- Knowledge of Diversity (KD): This factor is a self-assessment of an individual's knowledge of diverse groups, including three items measuring self-perceived cognitive competence. It assesses knowledge about other people's religion, sexual orientation, and gender inequality.
- Intercultural Awareness (IA): This factor measures an individual's attitude towards cultural sensitivity, including two items assessing their stance on potentially offensive language, jokes, and statements.
- Intercultural Relations (IR): This factor focuses on an individual's understanding of others and their experiences in building relationships with people from different backgrounds.

3.2.3. ELT Coursebooks

In this study, the researchers examined two primary series of Iranian secondary

school English coursebooks: Prospect and Vision. The Prospect series, introduced in 2013, is used in junior high schools, while the Vision series, introduced in 2017, serves senior high school students. These coursebooks were published by the Ministry of Education and cover English language instruction for grades 7 through 12. Both series aim to incorporate modern teaching methodologies and include updated content to align with educational standards and globalisation. The focus of this study was to assess the representation of gender and intercultural competence within the texts and images of these coursebooks.

The data collection involved analysing all books in the Prospect and Vision series, particularly focusing on visual content, textual passages, and dialogues. Using content analysis, the researchers applied the frameworks of gender representation proposed by Dahmardeh and Kim (2020) and the intercultural competence framework developed by Solhaug and Kristensen (2020) to systematically assess the degree to which these elements are present in the coursebooks. By focusing on both visual and textual elements, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender roles and intercultural elements are portrayed across both series.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The first step in analysing the coursebooks was to find them, since there was no electronic or hard copy available on the market or online. It was really time-taking to access the books, but the researcher managed to access all the books and work on the related files. Some of which in the form of images, and each book had many images, half the number of pages since each image had two pages. The more recent ones were in the form of PDF files, which made the data collection and analysis easier. The researcher analysed each and every page, focusing on the texts and images for the representation of gender and intercultural competence.

However, in order to be sure of the results, one of the books was checked by a PhD student of Applied Linguistics. Then the PhD student and the researcher went through the controversial areas in which they did not agree on the categories, coming up with a fixed answer. Checking the reliability between the two raters revealed a Cronbach alpha of 0.84, which was satisfactory. The researchers carefully read

through each book several times to ensure that they did not miss any important information. The frequencies of gender representation in images and texts of each book was recorded separately. This was also done for the cases where coursebooks incorporated intercultural competence.

4. Results

The present study aimed to investigate the representation of gender and intercultural competence in 15 Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks which were published from 1970s to 2020s. It further aimed to see if these two variables have been represented differently in these decades.

4.1. The First Research Question

The first research question aimed to check the representation of gender in the texts of Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks from the 1970s to 2020s. In order to answer this question, the frequency of gender representation in four aspects are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of Gender Representation the Texts of Iranian Secondary School English Coursebooks

Frequency	Gender	Welcome / Intro	Name	Role & Occupation	Conversations and Reading Passages
1974-1978	Male		50	63	
	Female		51	68	
	Male-Male				2
	Female-Female				1
	Male-Female				5
1981	Male		50	63	
	Female		43	62	
	Male-Male				2
	Female-Female				1
	Male-Female				3
1984	Male		50	63	
	Female		43	62	
	Male-Male				2
	Female-Female				2

Frequency	Gender	Welcome / Intro	Name	Role & Occupation	Conversations and Reading Passages
1987	Male-Female				2
	Male		31	22	
	Female		18	13	
	Male-Male				5
	Female-Female				1
	Male-Female				
2008-2010	Male		15	19	
	Female		43	29	
	Male-Male				4
	Female-Female				8
2013-2014-	Male	2	42	73	
	Female		30	43	
2015-	Male-Male				8
2017-	Female-Female				7
2020-	Male-Female				
2021-					1
2022-2023					

The representation of males and females in Iranian English coursebooks has undergone significant changes over time. In the early series (1974-1978), the number of males and females was nearly equal, both in names and roles. However, a gradual decrease in female representation started after the Islamic revolution in 1981, with a significant drop by 1987. This coincided with a change in authorship, suggesting a potential influence on content. The 2008 and 2010 editions saw a noticeable increase in female representation, even with the same male authors. This suggests that the gender of the author may not be the sole factor determining female representation. The Prospect 1 series (2013-2017), while showing a slight increase in male names compared to females, expanded the roles and occupations for both genders. Although male-female interactions remain limited, this series presented a more balanced and inclusive representation compared to earlier ones. However, it is important to note that the Vision series, introduced in 2017 and currently being taught in Iranian schools, was not included in this analysis and should be examined in future studies for a more up-to-date evaluation of gender representation.

4.2. The Second Research Question

The second research question dealt with the gender represented in the images of these coursebooks. To this end, the researchers analysed the frequency and percentage of gender representation within these coursebooks, the statistics of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Gender Representation in the Images of Coursebooks from 1970s to 2020s

Gender Coursebooks	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1974-1978	299	65%	159	35%
1981-1984	299	67%	145	33%
1987	119	80%	28	20%
2008	104	62%	62	38%
2010-2013-2014-2015-2017-2020-2021-2022-2023	110	60%	71	40%

The analysis of images in the coursebooks revealed a persistent gender bias, favouring male representation. In the 1970s, males dominated the images with a 2:1 ratio compared to females. This disparity remained relatively consistent in the 1980s. However, a significant shift occurred in 1987, with a drastic decrease in the overall number of images and a dramatic drop in female representation to just 20%. A more balanced portrayal emerged in 2008, with the number of male and female images nearly equal. This trend continued in 2010, with a slight male majority. While the post-Islamic-Revolution period saw a slight increase in the proportion of female images, it's crucial to note the significant overall decrease in the number of images. Notably, the number of female images dropped by half compared to the pre-revolution period.

In this study, a critical image analysis framework was adopted, following the models used by Dabbagh (2016) and Tajeddin and Enayat (2010), to provide a more comprehensive analysis of gender representation in the coursebook images. Rather

than simply counting the number of male and female characters, the analysis focused on several key dimensions. First, the roles that characters occupied in the images were examined, such as whether they were shown in active or passive roles, and whether they were depicted in professional or domestic settings. This allowed for an exploration of whether traditional gender roles were reinforced or challenged.

Next, the camera angles used in the images were analysed. The angle at which a character was shown conveyed implicit messages about their power or status. For example, characters depicted from a low angle appeared dominant or authoritative, while those shown from a high angle could be perceived as submissive or inferior. Additionally, the setting and context of the images were considered. The study examined whether male and female characters were portrayed in different social or professional environments, such as workplaces, homes, or public spaces, and what these settings implied about gender roles in the coursebooks.

Finally, the analysis looked at interaction and proximity between male and female characters. This involved examining whether characters were shown collaborating in shared activities or if they were segregated into gender-specific roles and spaces. By focusing on these aspects—roles, camera angles, settings, and interactions—the study provided a deeper understanding of how gender was visually constructed in Iranian ELT coursebooks, moving beyond a simple comparison of male and female presence.

4.3. The Third Research Question

The third question was about the representation of intercultural competence in the texts of the coursebooks. Table 3 below provides a summary of the cases where intercultural competence was mentioned or observed in the said coursebooks. It is necessary to point out that since some of the years such as 1978, 2014, and 2015 did not have any change when compared with the previous book, these years were not included in the table.

Table 3*Frequency of Intercultural Competence Instances in the Texts of the Coursebooks*

No.	Years	Intercultural Competence Instances	Frequency
1	1974-1981	None	0
2	1984	Religious Practice	15
3	1987	Religious Practice	4
4	2008, 2010	None	0
5	2013, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	Religious Practice for Females	3
6	2013, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	"Getting on well with people from different backgrounds" (2 male, 3 female cases)	5
7	2013, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	Knowledge about individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (1 male case)	1

The statistics show considerable fluctuations in the consideration of intercultural competence components across time. Notably, there was a distinct lack of explicit intercultural competence features in the studied coursebooks from 1974 to 1981. During this time, the emphasis seems to be solely on language characteristics, with little attention paid to increasing learners' intercultural awareness and understanding. However, a significant shift happened in 1984, when intercultural competence components were added, though it was limited to religious practices, with 15 examples of such practices. This indicates an appreciation for the importance of cultural and religious variety in the Iranian setting after the Islamic revolution. The number of incidents involving religious practices suddenly dropped to 4 cases in 1987. Surprisingly, no explicit intercultural competency components were found in the coursebooks from 2008 to 2010. Nonetheless, a slight comeback of intercultural competence was noticed in 2013, when three instances of religious activities customised to females were found. The coursebooks placed little focus on multicultural connections. The study found two males and three females' examples of *"getting along well with people from different backgrounds."* Furthermore, only one male example showed understanding about people from various cultural origins. This continuous pattern across coursebooks from 2013, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 demonstrated a sustained but relatively little focus on multicultural relations, indicating a need for future growth in this area.

4.4. The Fourth Research Question

The fourth question investigated the degree to which intercultural competence was represented in the images of the English language coursebooks from 1970s to 2020s. Table 4 provides an overview of the presence and frequency of intercultural competence instances in the images of English language coursebooks. The years which are not mentioned in the table are like the previous versions of the books.

Table 4

Intercultural Competence Instances in the Images of the Coursebooks

Years	Intercultural Competence Instances in Images	Frequency
1974-1978	None	0
1981		
1984	Woman saying prayers; Removal of ties from men's clothes; Sentence changed to "they are praying"; Introduction of the word "mosque"; Maryam in manteau saying prayers; Picture of clock replacing couple going	6
1987-2008-2010-2013- 2014-2015-2017-2020- 2021-2022-2023	None	0

As previously stated, there was no explicit inclusion of intercultural competence components in the coursebooks published between 1974 and 1981. In the same vein, the images in these coursebooks did not depict intercultural competence. Following the use of religious practice in 1984's version, there are five cases where intercultural competence is shown on pages 77, 78, 82, 92, and 93. In 1987, the book was largely identical to the 1978 version, with the only notable difference being the alteration of females' pictures to align with the country's updated dress code. Subsequent editions in 2008 up to 2023 lacked visual references that could be construed as representing intercultural competence.

5. Discussion

The findings showed that the books written by the female author presented a fair picture of males and females, with males being presented more than females in all three books. However, the books written by male authors did not follow a fixed

pattern, with biased representation of males in 2008 and more representation of females in 2010. The last series published by a team of authors consisting of five males and one female presented a more balanced picture of males and females. The analysis using Solhaug and Kristensen's (2020) intercultural competence model reveals that while some elements of intercultural competence are present, they are overwhelmingly focused on religious practices. The lack of diversity in the representation of gender, ethnicity, and broader cultural elements suggests that the coursebooks may not adequately prepare students for interacting in global or multicultural environments. Future revisions of the Vision and Prospect series should aim to incorporate more balanced representations of different cultural perspectives, including a wider range of intercultural relations and sensitivity to diverse social contexts.

While the surface-level analysis of gender representation in Iranian ELT coursebooks may suggest an attempt to balance male and female representation, it is important to recognise that this study does not account for the deeper, more nuanced layers of gender portrayal. Factors such as the roles assigned to male and female characters, the power dynamics suggested by their interactions, the contexts in which they appear, and the underlying cultural messages conveyed through visual and textual elements were not fully explored. These hidden layers may reinforce traditional gender norms, even if the number of male and female characters appears relatively balanced.

The limitations of this study lie in its focus on frequency rather than the qualitative aspects of gender representation. Critical aspects such as character agency, the portrayal of professional versus domestic roles, and the visual prominence of male versus female characters remain underexamined. As previous studies by Dabbagh (2016) and Tajeddin and Enayat (2010) have shown, a critical image and discourse analysis can reveal deeper gender biases that are not immediately visible through simple numerical comparisons.

The findings of this study align with previous research that has highlighted both gender imbalances and limited intercultural competence in Iranian ELT coursebooks. As noted by Babaii et al. (2019) and Dabbagh (2016), numerical representation alone

does not fully capture the depth of gender bias present in these materials. While the surface-level balance of male and female characters may suggest fairness, a deeper analysis reveals that traditional gender roles often persist, with males depicted in dominant and active roles, while females are relegated to passive or secondary positions.

Furthermore, as Derakhshan (2018, 2021) and Mofidi and Hashemi (2019) pointed out, the treatment of intercultural competence in Iranian ELT coursebooks is often narrow, focusing predominantly on local or religious aspects rather than fostering a broader global understanding. This is consistent with the present study's findings, where references to intercultural elements were sparse and largely centred on religious practices. As Sadeghi and Sepahi (2017) argue, effective ELT materials should go beyond language instruction and actively promote intercultural competence to prepare students for communication in a globalised world.

These results are in line with the few studies investigating gender representation in literature. To the best of our knowledge, only two researchers, Yang (2014), who investigated the Primary Longman Express book series taught in primary schools in Hong Kong, and Healy (2009), who investigated Touchstone Book 2, found that the books they studied represented females and males equally in their texts. Yang (2014) argued that Hong Kong's shift towards a more westernised society has led to equal opportunities for males and females in education and employment, which is reflected in the books. Similarly, the study suggests that recent changes in Iranian society, including increased opportunities for females in education and employment, may have contributed to a more equal representation of genders in coursebooks. On the other hand, these results are in stark contrast to previous literature (Baghdadi & Rezaei, 2015; Brahimi, 2017; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Shallaita et al., 2021), concluding that males were represented more than females in the texts of English coursebooks. It must be pointed out that all these studies were conducted in Iran, except for Brahimi (Austria) and Shallaita et al. (Indonesia). Thus, it seems Iranian authors of English books seem to be fair enough in their attention to males and females. One explanation for this finding might be that previous studies mostly analysed one or two books written by a fixed team of authors in a specific point of time, while this study focused on fifteen books written by three different teams of

authors in six different decades and in different situations. Another explanation might be that since these books were published in two different social contexts, thus changes in society and social norms might have affected the behaviour of the authors. Traditional societies were mostly under the control of males, and females were seen as the weak gender and not paid enough attention (Gallagher, 2001).

Unlike the results related to gender representation in the texts, the images of the studied books told a story with a different ending. The story started similar to the texts, where the books written by a female author presented males in the images more than females. However, when the authors were three males, there was a radical shift, presenting males in 80% of the cases. Then, this gender representation became moderate and fair, with males appearing in 60% of the images. The number of males reduced as the time went on, but it was always males who were in majority. Therefore, the next main finding of the study was that males dominated the images.

Two of the very few studies in literature which oppose the results of this study is that of Yang (2014), and Keshavarz and Malek (2009). Yang (2014) found that the books, “Step Up” and “Primary Longman Express”, which were used in Hong Kong primary schools represented males and females equally in their pictures. The main reason for this balanced picture of males and females, Yang argues, is that the Committee on Coursebook Quality of the Education Bureau stated that there must not be any bias in the content of the books, and overgeneralisation, discrimination, and stereotyping are forbidden. The second reason is that males and females in Hong Kong nowadays enjoy equal chances in education and employment because of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO). Keshavarz and Malek (2009) also found that the conversation sections of English books taught in Iran language Institute and “True to life” series did not discriminate between males and females in social status. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that from among several studies found on gender representation, there was not even one single study concluding that there were more females in the pictures than males.

This finding, that males are represented more in pictures, corroborates the findings of several previous studies (Azad, 2020; Baghdadi & Rezaei, 2015; Brahimi, 2017; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Rezai et al., 2021; Shallaita et al., 2021; Tajeddin

& Enayat, 2010). These studies found that most of the images, photos, and drawings of the books were devoted to males. In fact, almost all the studies, as far as the researcher knows, concluded that these were the males who were more represented in pictures and images of the books.

The next main finding of the study was that the fifteen English coursebooks published in these six decades did not incorporate most of the intercultural components. They represented intercultural competence in very few cases both in texts and images. Representing intercultural aspects just in 28 cases in more than 1500 pages is a very limited picture of the concept of intercultural competence in today's world. The next point worth mentioning is that 22 cases of these 28 mentions was related to religion and religious practices. This finding is echoed in many Iranian studies conducted on the representation of culture and intercultural competence in the coursebooks (Ghasedi & Azizi, 2020; Hosseinzadeh et al., 2021; Jorfi et al., 2022; Maghsoudi, 2020; Morady Moghaddam & Tirnaz, 2022; Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019; Tajeddin & Bahrebar, 2017). Presenting information about the student's culture and the target culture is a necessity these days. According to Siddiqie (2011), the intercultural contents of the coursebooks offer new opportunities for learners and make the aware of the world around them, thus familiarising them with target language in the real-life situations and developing their sense of global citizenship. It seems that Iranian materials designers and policy makers in this regard, intentionally or unintentionally, turn blind eyes to the cultural information and inclusion of intercultural competence elements. The amount of information offered in this regard is very limited, and this is mainly because of the political and social limitations in the Iranian society (Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019; Sharif & Yarmohammadi, 2013).

6. Conclusion

This study found that the author's gender plays a limited role in gender representation within coursebooks. While the female author presented a more balanced portrayal, the male-only team initially favoured males significantly. However, their later revisions heavily favoured females, suggesting other factors beyond author gender are at play. Historical context also influences gender representation. The study

observed a decrease in female representation between 1974 and 1984, likely reflecting societal shifts. The 1979 Islamic revolution further impacted content, with the peak in female representation occurring in 1987. Finally, the significant reduction in the number of pages across the years might explain the decrease in the number of pictures, but not the percentage of males and females depicted. Therefore, analysing gender representation in coursebooks requires considering the author's gender, historical context, and the number of pages alongside other potentially influential factors.

The findings of this study suggest that while there has been some progress in balancing the numerical representation of males and females in Iranian ELT coursebooks, deeper issues related to gender portrayal remain unaddressed. It would be inaccurate to conclude that Iranian authors have been fully equitable in their attention to gender representation. A more critical, multi-dimensional analysis is required to uncover the hidden layers of gender bias that may persist in the coursebooks, including the roles and power dynamics of male and female characters, the social contexts in which they are portrayed, and the implicit messages conveyed through both texts and images.

The results suggested that although Iranian secondary school English language coursebooks failed to notice intercultural competence at the beginning, they reached the peak in the first experience, but this peak was followed by a limited attention over the next years. Suddenly dropping to zero seemed to be the end of journey, but the books continued to incorporate it to a smaller degree. While religious practices have occasionally been included, the overall focus on intercultural competence has remained relatively modest in the recent years. Like the first research question, the materials designers went through radical changes, extremes of zero and peak, and finally coming up with a moderate decision.

This gender bias towards the female and more attention to males can be attributed to cultural roots of the Iranian society, in which the supremacy has traditionally been given to the male gender. males are expected to be stronger, to be the main person for making the important decisions in the family, and are the bread winners (Rezai et al., 2021). Females have recently stood up against an-all-male dominant society, in which

most of the positions have been granted to males, trying to have their voice and to achieve an equal and fair share in civil rights, (Mlambo et al., 2019). But it seems the society has not still accepted these movements. Since English language teaching and learning in Iran is based on “a rigidly anti-imperialist ideology alongside indigenisation and localisation” (Borjian, 2013, p.13), most of the English teaching programs are forced to meet the country’s cultural and religious ideologies.

Both teachers and students may overlook gender issues in classroom setting, depending on their lack of familiarity with the gender biased language in coursebooks. In order to raise awareness of gender issues among teachers, students, and authorities, it is essential that Iranian secondary school English teachers explicitly teach these concepts. This can be done by reducing sexist language and reversing the roles in dialogue. Moreover, teacher educators can use the results of this study to help them create non-sexist coursebooks and raise teacher trainees' awareness of gender issues. If teachers do not challenge gender roles critically, traditional gender roles and gender biases will remain in place. Teacher trainees should be trained to recognise gender bias and stereotyping and should learn strategies for dealing with gender representation in coursebooks. The results of this study can also be used by materials developers, designers, and illustrators to ensure that the content and illustrations of English coursebooks for children and teenagers accurately reflect realities of the society or a better picture of the situation, without distortion or being unfair to either gender. Finally, to avoid using masculine or feminine pronouns, use nouns or plurals, and the phrase he/she.

This study suffered from some limitations and delimitations, and future researchers are encouraged to conduct research on books taught in other grades. Furthermore, the level of language proficiency was basic, and there were not long passages and extended conversations. Thus, future research can focus on more advanced coursebooks, where the texts and dialogues include longer discourse. Moreover, the teachers' behaviour and teaching performance can be the next focus of research. Sunderland (2000) argued that studying coursebooks alone may not be helpful, and that lesson observations should be conducted to examine teacher representations of gender in coursebooks. Therefore, interviewing coursebook authors may provide insights that cannot be gained from analysing only coursebooks alone.

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