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Social Semiotics Evaluation of *English One* by Gender

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Abstract

Textbooks receive focal attention in every educational setting. In 2013, the English text books used in Iranian schools were changed and new books, the Prospect series, were introduced. The older English text books are not used for teaching anymore. One of these was English One which was used for teaching the first grade at junior high school. As far as the researchers know, there was no previous research using this book in terms of gender from a semiotic point of view. Therefore, the researchers tried to investigate it in terms of social semiotics as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Their findings showed that males are more often present in the images, and both genders are seen as collaborating with the readers of this book. Their findings also showed that both genders are trying to encourage the readers toward establishing communication by more often showing gaze towards each other in the images. This study has implication for students of linguistics, for course designers and for English teachers as well.

Keywords: Social semiotics, text evaluation, gender, images, gaze.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many people from all over the world are striving to learn English and the numbers who learn it as a first or second language is increasing; it is now the most common language used in the world when first and second users are combined. Moreover, its use at work and its flexibility in general and also for special purposes is consistently expanding. In the process of learning this language, the reading materials used during the time spent learning are of cardinal importance (Long, 2005).

Text books facilitate learning and make teaching easier for students. Razmjoo (2007) has paid consideration to the role of reading materials for making learning less fearsome for the students. He affirms that utilizing printed reading materials gives

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students a conviction that all is good (all is safe) and that text books advance the course of learning.

Williams (1983) further say that “no reading material is perfect”, thus assessment of these writings is necessary. Assessment is one of the key terms which students and also instructors are acquainted with. Furthermore, assessment of content and of materials has its own definitions. For evaluation, one comprehensive definition is provided by Tomlinson (1998), he defines text evaluation as “the systematic appraisal of the value of materials in relation to their objectives and to the objectives of the learners using them” (Tomlinson, *ibid*, p. xi).

There are distinctive sorts of assessments like the preliminary, summative and formative assessments of Robinson (1991) who considers the time of assessment in assessing. Robinson (*ibid*) gives us more detail, via: preliminary that is before an English for Specific Purposes/English for Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP) course starts, summative which typically takes place at the end of the course, and formative which is done while the course is being created and proceeding onwards. Assessments can be done by both outsiders and insiders.

One of the tools which have been used for material analysis/assessment is semiotics. Semiotics is probably best known as an approach for textual analysis, and in this form it is characterized by a concern with structural analysis (Culler, 1988, as cited in Chandler, 2002).

Semiotic derives from the Greek *semesion*, meaning sign, *semainon* which means signifier and *semainomenon* meaning signified or indication. Generally, semiotic is the study of signs or an epistemology about the existence or the actuality of sign in societal life. (Yakin & Totu, 2014, p. 4)

With innovations in book structures creating new superior quality pictures, the examination of their semiotics has become a widely acknowledged field in itself. There is a movement from literary substance to visual presentation in ESL/EFL materials. In the 1970s the texts went Technicolor (see Prodromou, 1988), and as Giaschi (2000, p. 34) points out, “a revolution has taken place in the ESL industry”.

Utilizing pictures as part of the ESL/EFL teaching-learning materials is easily seen these days, innumerable books contain pictures and these pictures make learning easier. However, they can add to the advancement of sexist dispositions at an intuitive level (Low & Sherrard, 1999). Whilst some people may say that pictures are guiltless and are only charming aspects of reality, others aver that such pictures have power (Barthes, 1977).

In the current study, a semiological content analysis was carried out on an award-winning book for learning English. Relevant visual content analytic research was done using the image categories developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in *Reading Images*, aiming to compare how gender was shown and assigned function in this book.

Social semiotics provides researchers with practical tools for systematically studying visual texts. In academic terms, it is a branch (or even subset) of the field of semiotics that aims to explain the making of meaning as a social practice. Its origin goes back to the synthesis of structuralist semiotics and Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics (Aiello, 2006). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) consider the grammars of

written and visual communications throughout their book, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*.

The elements of social semiotics are set out below:

1. *Gaze* shows the eye contact of the participants in the image, i.e. in which direction or at what goal are the participants looking. In terms of gaze, images are divided into two parts. A demand image is where we can look into the eyes of the presented participant(s) directly. Where we are unable to do so, this is termed an offer image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).
2. *Size of Frame and Social Distance* can be shown as a long shot, a medium shot or a close shot, where the medium of photography or drawing is concerned. The manipulation of social distance in images illustrates one of the ways in which Halliday's interpersonal multifunction is realized. Interestingly, the relationship that develops between participants as represented in relation to the viewers is the one based on spatial distance. Participants represented may be depicted at varying distances in relation to the viewers, depending on the desired effect that the image producer seeks to create (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).
3. *Detachment/Involvement* as realized by the horizontal angle. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that where participants are represented from the front there is a greater sense of involvement than where they are shown from an oblique angle.
4. *Relations of Power* as realized by the vertical angle. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), if a participant is seen from a high vertical angle then the relationship between the viewer and the viewed participant(s) is one in which the viewer has power over the viewed participant(s). Machin (2007, p. 76) in his introduction to multimodal analysis claims that, we "associate size with power and status". He suggests that looking up at someone has the metaphorical association of them having higher status than you. Furthermore, "salience may also be achieved through tone, size, foregrounding, overlap and repetition of elements within an image" (Machin, *ibid*, p. 88).

English One is the book which was used for teaching up to 2012 for the First Grade of Iranian high schools. With revision in the school textbooks, these books are not used now, and books with the name *Prospect* are now being used. As far as the researchers know, no research has been done before on these books using social semiotics, and for that reason the researchers tried to analyze the *English One* books in terms of gender from a semiotics point of view.

Amini and Birjandi (2012) have examined the extent and types of gender bias in two of the most used EFL textbooks at the high school level in Iran. Sexism was investigated in five categories - including visibility, generic masculine constructions, occupations linked by gender and activities. In every category, there was evidence that gender bias was still clearly practiced in Iranian EFL materials. Since textbooks reflect the social, cultural and religious ideologies and perceptions of their writers, there is no doubt that there is much room for raising the visibility of women in Iranian EFL textbooks at the high school level.

Kordjazi (2012) investigated the EFL learning software in terms of semiotics. A semiological content analysis of gender positioning in two English-learning software programs (Tell Me More and English at Home) demonstrated the usefulness of this approach for investigating semiotic resources which could show gender unfairly in their visual discourse. Their results showed that males were shown

as active, competent, dominant, and powerful, whilst females were shown as reactive, objects of the male gaze, intimate, subordinate, and powerless even in modern technology-based media.

As far as the researchers know, up till now, analysis of books used in educational settings in Iran has only been done with tools other than semiotics, therefore in this research an attempt is made to investigate the differences between how males and females are portrayed in the *English One* books. The research questions which arise from this research are as follows:

- 1) Where is the gaze of males and of females directed to?
- 2) Which gender is included most in this book?
- 3) What kinds of shots of the two genders, male and female, have been used?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Corpus

The English text book previously used in the first grade of junior high school was *English One*. This book is the main corpus of this study, the main tool for evaluating the book in this study is social semiotics, and, as has been mentioned earlier, social semiotics is concerned with images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and thus, the images in this book were studied.

The corpus of this study consists of 226 images. It must be noted that all of the images are either animated or non-animated, and only the animated images were the focal attention of this study.

2.2 Instruments

The main tool for conducting this research is social semiotics that refers to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Social semiotics nowadays is used for analyzing visual images, and in this study, it was used for analyzing and comparing the images. The model of Saussure (Yakin & Totu, 2014) was used for analyzing and comparing the words and sentence structures.

2.3 Design

The present study was designed within the framework of quantitative research methodology. The text analysis was done using social semiotics for showing differences in portraying gender. To analyze the images, social semiotics was used to evaluate the images, and then the frequency of cases was shown using frequency graphs. Moreover, the analysis by social semiotics used key elements such as gaze, framework, modality, distance and saliency.

2.4 Procedure

In this study, there were several steps taken. First, we selected units for measuring. Thus, they selected the book titled *English One* which was formerly used

for teaching English in the first grade of junior high schools in Iran. Then we decided the parts to analyze, which were the images.

The next step was identifying the model for evaluation. With the growth of technology and development of image technology, one of the key tools for analyzing images is social semiotics. So we selected the social semiotics model from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

The next step was analyzing and evaluating the parts using the chosen social semiotics model. The images were analyzed for the key social semiotics elements: gaze, modality, framework, distance and saliency. Finally, after analyzing the images in the *English One* book, we summarized their findings using social semiotics.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the findings of the research are shown in tables and the interpretations are given.

The first issue considered is the gaze of participants; the gaze was categorized in one of three directions:

- 1) Towards the viewers
- 2) Between participants in the book
- 3) Neither towards the viewers nor between the participants

When talking about the gaze of participants being toward the viewers, we mean towards the readers, i.e. those who are reading that book. When the gaze of participants is toward each other, we mean the eye contact which is emitted between the participants which are shown in the image. Finally, when we talk about neither toward the participant nor towards the viewers, we mean that the gaze is in another direction, for example, toward the blackboard as in Figure 1.

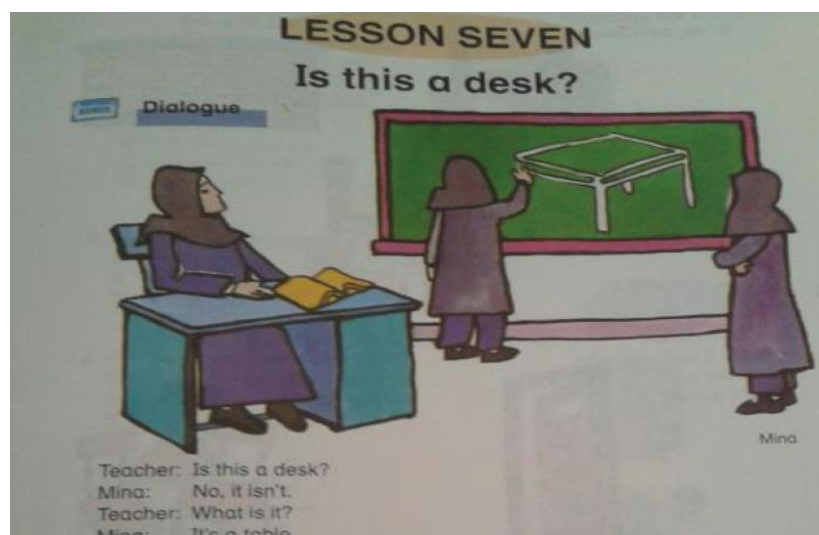


Figure 1. The gaze of female participants in another direction.

The first research question asked the direction of gaze of males and females in the *English One* book. Regarding visual structures of the images, the gaze of males and females was very different. In Table 1, the frequency of gaze of females in the images in the book is shown.

Table 1. The gaze of female participants in *English One*.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cummulative Percent</i>
Toward the viewer	15	44	44
Towards each other	11	32	76
Neither to the viewer nor to each other	8	23	100

Table 1 shows that the gaze of females was mostly towards the viewers and this shows that they have a closer relationship with the audience and they encourage the students to study the textbook because when the gaze is towards the readers, it shows that the participants in the images are creating a sense of talking with the readers and encouraging them to study the material.

The second important gaze is the gaze, that is directed towards each other and this shows that they are doing a collaborative activity. This is known as one of the objects of learning English that is for learning how to communicate. So this kind of gaze (towards each other) encourages the students to have conversations with each other, because when the gaze is towards each other it shows that the participants are talking. An example is in Figure 1 where the gaze of both figures is towards each other.

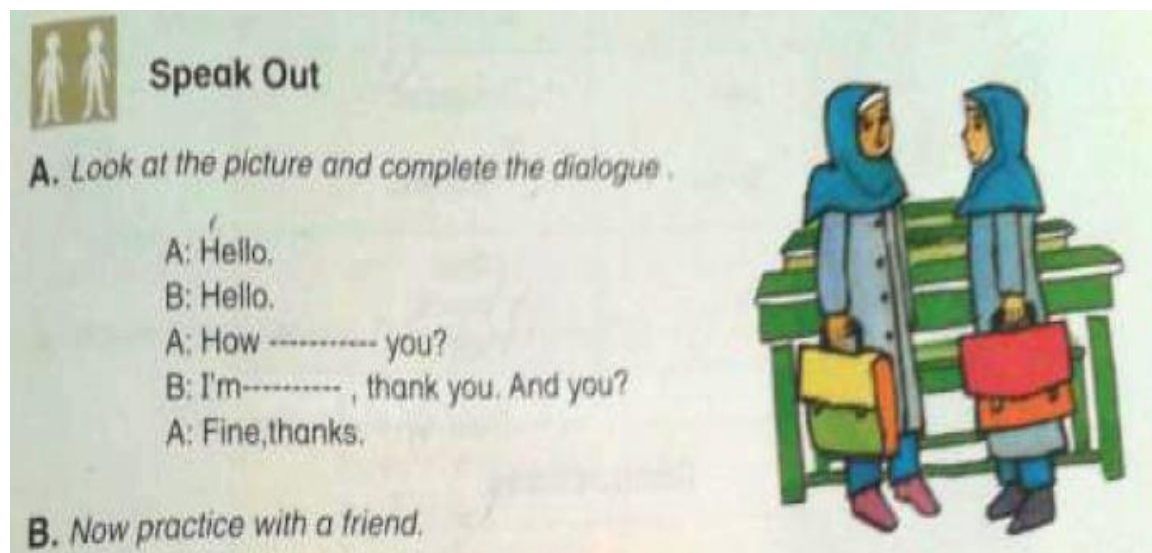
**Figure 2.** The gaze of these two students is towards each other.

Figure 1 is a picture of two girls who are talking to each other. This picture is a long shot picture and a total view is shown. Both of them wear head scarves and this shows that the religion of their country is Islam. In this image, the gaze of the two girls towards each other indicates that they are doing a collaborative task with each other. Usually when people are speaking together they look at each other and this is depicted in this picture.

There were some pictures in which the gaze of females was not towards the readers or towards each other. An example is in Figure 3 where the gaze of participants is not towards the readers, but they are looking at the window.



Figure 3. The gaze of females is towards the window.

Figure 3 is a picture of a class from a long shot. One female, the teacher, is seen pointing to the window and two girls are also looking at it. All of their gazes are towards the window. This shows that they have one common goal and focal attention. In addition, the teacher is sitting on a chair and nobody accompanies her at her desk. She seems to have more power compared to her students. This can be seen from her appearance where she is taller than them. She is further shown wearing a black scarf, and black in Iran is associated with leadership. So her attire also indicates her power over the others.

As for the males, the frequency of their gaze is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The gaze of males in *English One*.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulative percentage</i>
To the viewer	22	40	40
To each other	20	37	77
Neither to the viewer nor to each other	10	22	100

Table 2 shows that the gaze of males is shown in three ways, but most commonly they look at the readers/viewers, such as illustrated in Figure 4 where a doctor is shown looking at the readers.

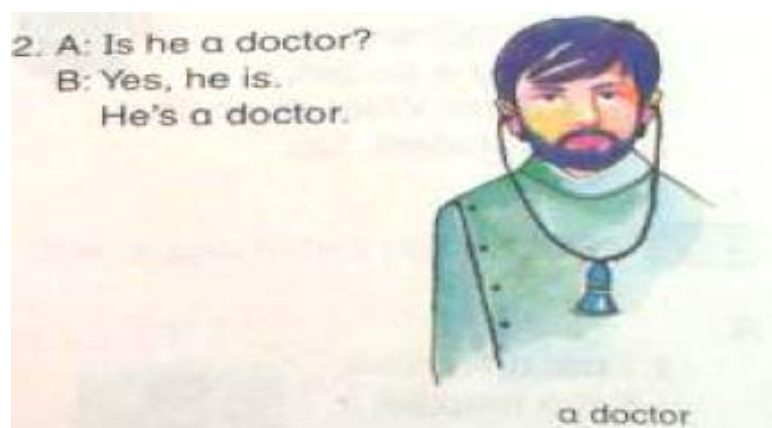


Figure 4. The gaze of the male doctor is towards the readers.

The picture in Figure 4 is a medium close shot. The gaze of the man is towards the readers which show that he is connecting with them and wants to impress them. He is

wearing a green doctor's gown and a stethoscope. The reason for showing a doctor is that most Iranian students from the first day of school want to become a doctor. This is one of the favorite jobs in Iranian society. There is no background or foreground to give further information on the picture.

The images of males sometimes show them gazing towards each other, such as shown in Figure 5, where three doctors are talking to each other and their gaze towards each other shows that they are also doing collaborative work.

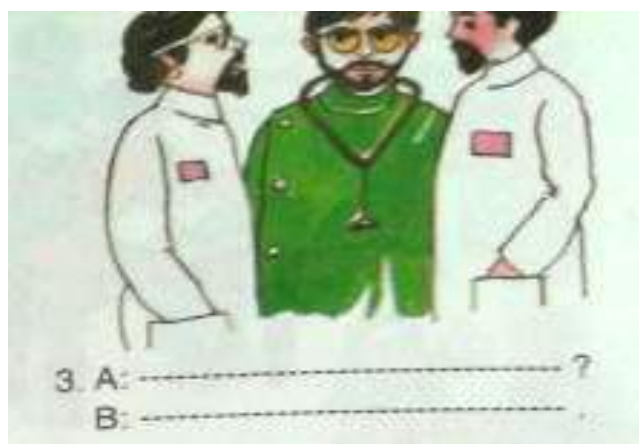


Figure 5. The gaze of these male participants is towards each other.

The picture in Figure 5 is a medium close shot that shows three male doctors standing together. The gaze of two of them is towards each other as if they are talking. One doctor at the center of the picture is wearing a green medical gown; green gowns are worn by surgeons. The other two doctors wear white medical coats. All three have goatee beards. A goatee beard is associated with high prestige of high level persons in Iran, such as doctors, engineers and professors. Accordingly, the green gown here is associated with the higher rank of the doctor in the center, and it is worth noting that centrality also indicates higher importance. Therefore, this doctor holds a higher level than the other two doctors.

Sometimes, the gaze of males is shown looking in another direction, such as illustrated in Figure 6, where a teacher is looking in another direction, i.e. looking at the book.



Figure 6. The gaze is to something else (the book) than to the viewers or to each other.

In Figure 6, the gaze of the teacher is to the book that he is holding and this indicates that he is teaching in a classroom.

The second research question looks at the ratio of males and females shown in the book. This is shown in Table 3. It is worth noting that the number of participants per image was also the concern in this part. For example, Figure 7 shows one dentist and his patient, thus showing two male participants.

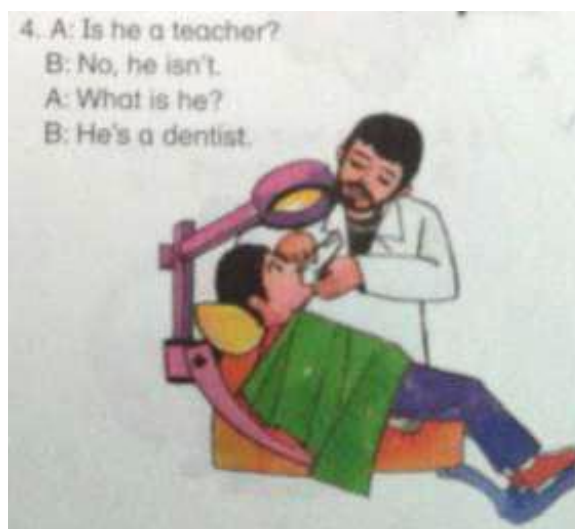


Figure 7. Example of a dentist with his patient.

Figure 7 above shows two male participants, one is a dentist and the other is his patient.

Table 3. The ratio of males in comparison to females in *English One*.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage</i>
Male	101	58	58
Female	72	42	100
Total	173	100	

Table 3 shows that females are displayed lesser than males, in which 72 participants shown are females and 101 are males. This reveals that males are the majority in this book, where 58% of the pictures are devoted to them.

The answers to the last research question are depicted in Table 4 and Table 5 as follows.

Table 4. Distance of males in images.

<i>Distance</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Long	30	56
Medium	22	41
Close	2	4
Total	54	100

Table 4 shows that close up shots are of little importance and impersonality is of focal attention. Long distance shots are the most common, where thirty of them indicate the impersonality of the males. For example, in Figure 8, a picture of one teenage boy is shown in a long shot, and a picture of teachers shown in a medium distance shot is in Figure 9.



Figure 8. Long shot of a boy student.

Figure 8 above shows a boy looking at the readers at a long distance shot.

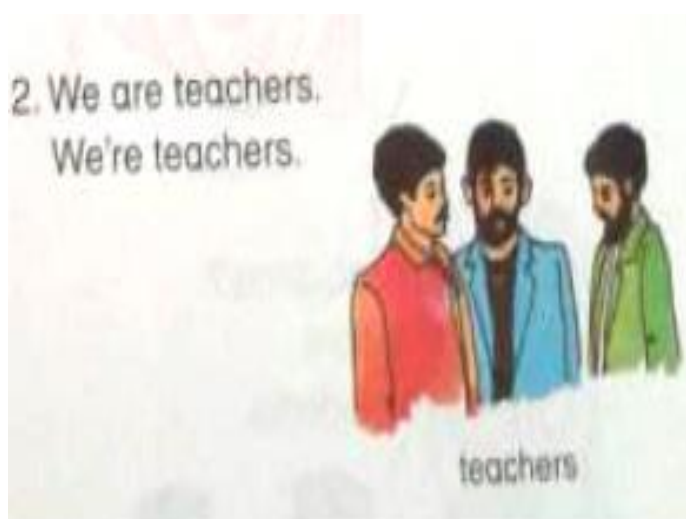


Figure 8. A medium distance shot of teachers.

Figure 9 shows three teachers standing together indicating that they are talking to each other; this picture uses a medium distance shot.

In Table 5, the kind of distance of shots used in the pictures for females is set out and an analysis follows.

Table 5. Distance of females in images.

<i>Distance</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Long	17	46
Medium	11	30
Close	9	24
Total	37	100

Table 5 shows that most of the shots, 17 of them or 46%, are long distance shots. The next is medium distance shots with 11 pictures or 30%. Many long distance shots show the impersonality of the participants to the viewers. The other reason for long distance shots is the fact that they show much information in the background of the images, and this can become rich sources of visual information.

The low ratio of close- distance shots indicates that the impersonality is pervasive and it endorses the impersonality of the participants with the viewers which has been mentioned earlier.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of *English One* was conducted based on the elements of social semiotics like frequency, gaze, modality, and distance. The findings show that males are more present in the images compared to females. Berger (1972) points out that traditionally, men and women have different types of social presence. Men are measured by the degree of power they offer. The power may be in any number of forms, for example, moral, physical, economic, etc. Iran is a paternalistic country where males are considered more powerful than females. Thus, the population of females which is now more than males indicates that perhaps time is changing. Females are now being shown more in this society, despite not as much as males. With feminist movements developing the need for applying its consequences in society, the presence of females are hopefully going to be displayed more equally as one of the two fundamental elements in society.

The findings also revealed that the gaze of females is more towards the viewers, and this shows that they are creating a closer relation with the readers – a sense of talking with the audience. The second most common is the gaze towards viewers, followed by the gaze towards another female but never to a male. When the gaze of females is toward each other, it shows that they are communicating and encouraging the readers to communicate.

Similarly, most of the gaze of males is directed to the viewers and this shows that they are seeking to project a close relationship with the readers – communicating with the readers. This encourages the readers to be more involved in the course of learning the materials in the book. The second most common gaze of males is also towards each other, and this shows that they are collaborating with each other and want to encourage the readers to collaborate, too.

The analysis of the shots indicates that most of the shots are long distance shots, whilst the least frequent are the close distance shots. This shows the impersonality of the participants with the readers. Long shots have another justification. It is the fact that in long shots, the background details are of more significance and much information can be obtained from them.

The result of this study creates an awareness of gender positioning in the English text book, *English One*. Learners must approach the task of learning English with an open mind while being aware of the undeniable truth that these tools (i.e. text books) can suffer from biases of different kinds in which the result will be the expansion of critical visual awareness. They, exposed to and made aware of sexist themes, will learn some new ways of viewing the world (Filak, 2002). More importantly, students can be equipped with a resource for reconstructing discursive practices and power relations on a larger scale (Fairclough, 1995).

Seng (2003) writes that the gender factor has been glossed over or clouded in selecting materials for ELT classrooms. This study might be able to serve language instructors in their choice of teaching materials. Book designers need to be aware of sexuality in their books; they must pay more attention to the norms of their society and

the changing movements which are to be seen in their society. Therefore, they need to try to include these elements in the design of their books, since textbooks reflect the social, cultural and religious ideologies and perceptions of their writers (Amini & Birjandi, 2012). Furthermore, book designers and developers must develop materials in such a way that these learning tools “engage students in a ‘gender critique’ by encouraging critical questioning of biases in the facts and theories presented” (Hayibor & Peterat, 1995, p. 103).

Educational materials should be designed to provide not only students but also instructors with the tools for critical meta-evaluation of their ideological contents rather than setting gender neutrality as the prime goal (Laakkonen, 2007). Felten (2004) states that the teaching and learning of visual literacy should not be divorced from the teaching and learning of different academic disciplines.

The use of semiotics for analyzing images in books is very helpful (Kumral, 2013). By understanding the use of semiotics in text book images, it can give the learners more benefit of appreciating and acquiring the sort of wisdom lying behind the moral lessons of the story, to understand life better and in turn to appreciate the unalienable human rights that guarantee freedom of mankind in this world.

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