



Promoting Gender Awareness Through Digital Storybook: A Case Study in Grade 10 Senior High School ELT

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Abstract

This study investigates how digital storybooks can help high school English classes in the tenth grade become more gender aware. Few research has looked at how secondary school students react critically to gender narratives, despite the fact that many earlier studies have looked at gender bias in children's novels and textbooks. Eight students engaged with the digital storybook *Too Young to Marry*. through focus groups, role-reversal exercises, and guided reading using a qualitative case study design. To find out how students felt about gender equality and representation, data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings showed that pupils could recognize both gender stereotypes—like girls being coerced into child marriage—and counter-stereotypes—like male characters who defy patriarchal expectations. Students' opinions on equality, especially with regard to education as a right for both sexes, were impacted by reading and debating the storybook. Additionally, by encouraging empathy and critical thinking, the role-reversal exercises helped students question cultural norms and envision more just alternatives. According to the study's findings, digital storybooks can be an effective means of fostering literacy development, advancing gender equality in secondary education, and fusing language acquisition with social consciousness.

Keywords: *Critical Literacy, Digital Storybook, ELT, Gender Awareness, Senior High School*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concerns about how textbooks storybooks shape students' understanding of gender roles have grown. Research on English language teaching (ELT) materials suggests that dominant characters are consistently male, while female characters are often portrayed as weak and lacking power. For example, a study of Indonesian ELT textbooks revealed that while the number of male and female characters may be numerically balanced, qualitative analysis revealed

persistent stereotypical depictions of female roles (Erlina et al., 2022) Similarly, in high school English textbooks, male characters are often associated with professional or leadership roles, while female characters tend to appear in social or supporting roles (A.R & Wahyuni, 2023).

According to an analysis of ELT materials in Nepal, male figures are more visible and portrayed as leaders, while female figures are presented in passive roles. These findings are in line with more extensive international research (Bhattarai, 2018). Despite some progress, gender bias still exists in the way that men and women are portrayed in textual and visual resources, according to a multimodal study of gender representation in Asian ELT materials (Tarrayo, V. N., 2021). Recent studies have underscored the significance of implementing gender-sensitive pedagogy and updating textbooks to eradicate this prejudice, emphasizing the critical role that gender awareness in instructional materials plays in advancing inclusivity and equality in education (Asare, 2023).

BACKGROUND

Complex gender representations can also be found in stories outside of textbooks, such as bilingual storybooks, children's anthologies, and collections of folktales. A 7:3 male to female protagonist ratio was discovered by Ahmad & Susanto, (2024) in their analysis of Indonesian children's literature; nonetheless, the female characters featured were presented in progressive and powerful roles. This illustrates a continuing disparity as well as a growing trend toward inclusivity. In a broader sense, fairy tale analysis exposes pervasive gender bias: women are depicted as authoritative, emotional, and lazy, and there are twice as many male protagonists as female characters. This highlights how narrative structures frequently reinforce gendered moral coding (Zhou, Z., Sun, J., Pei, J., Peng, N., & Xiong, 2022).

]These results highlight the value of using critical literacy to analyze literary texts in order to help students become more aware of entrenched power dynamics as well as to enhance their language proficiency. Students that possess critical literacy are more likely to challenge societal conventions and look for hidden meanings in texts (Wikipedia: Critical Literacy, 2025). Incorporating storybooks that reinforce or question gender norms can have a particularly significant effect on Grade 10 students, who are growing in social identity and critical thinking abilities.

Despite the fact that gender representation in storybooks and school textbooks has been the subject of many studies, the majority of these studies have either concentrated on materials used in elementary schools or carried out extensive content analyses without investigating how students themselves understand these representations. Recent studies conducted in Indonesia, for instance, have examined the imbalance of male and female characters in picture books and folktales (Zhou, Z., Sun, J., Pei, J., Peng, N., & Xiong, 2022), while other studies have focused on gender bias in ELT textbooks (A.R & Wahyuni, 2023)

On the other hand, very little is known about how Grade 10 students in particular interact critically with storybooks that feature gendered themes. Few studies have looked into how secondary school students' gender awareness and critical literacy could be developed through activities like role-reversal, guided reading, and group discussions. In-depth, classroom-based case studies are needed to fill the gap in the research by examining how teenagers understand gender roles in storybooks and how these interpretations might be used to advance equality in English language instruction.

In order to close this gap, this study uses discussion-based in-class activities to examine how high school students in the tenth grade react to gender portrayal in storybooks. The project intends to document students' perceptions of gender roles, their identification of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes, and how guided discussions and reflective tasks promote gender awareness through a qualitative case study design with small groups of eight students. The following are the research questions: First, which impacts do storybook reading and discussion have on students' perspectives on gender equality? Second, how might storybooks help kids develop their critical thinking and empathy on gender equality?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Awareness

Understanding how gender interacts with other social categories to create particular inequities is a prerequisite for gender awareness. This viewpoint emphasizes the need to examine gender in light of larger power structures rather than in a vacuum (Kim, 2020). It is believed that gender is a socially constructed concept that is shaped by communication patterns, society, and conventions. According to Volkmann, (2019), this paradigm focuses on how people acquire, carry out, and negotiate gender roles in daily life. Recent research emphasizes the importance of promoting gender equality and awareness in educational and social contexts.

A study on gender equality in education highlighted that increasing gender awareness in schools significantly contributes to eliminating stereotypes and fostering inclusive learning environments. This suggests that equitable classroom practices can reduce gender-based disparities (Asare, 2023). Similarly, research on nurses' awareness of gender roles revealed that healthcare professionals' sensitivity to gender issues improves equity and quality of care, suggesting that gender awareness has implications beyond education and into professional practice (Akin-Akintayo, 2023). Furthermore, in her research, she noted the development of feminism and women's rights in higher education. Studies have revealed that feminist perspectives in academic spaces empower students to critically engage with issues of inequality and drive transformative change in institutional policies and practices (Leal, 2016).

Digital Storybook.

Numerous researches have examined the usage of digital storybooks in educational activities. One tool for teaching English is an electronic book, sometimes known as a digital book (Ma'arif, I. B., & Sunniyah, 2021). According to recent studies, incorporating digital storybooks into instructional activities can boost students' enthusiasm for reading. Among the elements that boost students' interest in literacy are the use of user-friendly font styles and sizes, a range of captivating characters, and a diversity of themes and captivating graphics found in digital storybooks (Tahta, M, A, F., & Pusparini, 2022) Particularly when they incorporate interactive multimedia components, digital storybooks enhance language and reading abilities (Prasetya, D., & Hirashima, 2018).

According to recent research, digital storybooks boost learning engagement and motivation in online preschool instruction, particularly during pandemics (Yusli, N., & Zainal, 2023). Digital

storybooks are a useful tool for literacy instruction since they help improve pre-service teachers' pedagogical and technological expertise, according to research on teacher preparation (Oakley, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative case study design to investigate how Grade 10 students use storybooks in English lessons to understand gender roles and consider gender equality. Because it enables a thorough examination of a small system—a single student class—in a real-world educational setting, this case study is suitable (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018). Eight Grade 10 students (two boys and six girls) who were enrolled in an English language course and had utilized the digital storybook *Too Young to Marry* (UNICEF, 2020) for their narrative text learning were among the participants. They were chosen using purposive sampling. The data was collected through open questions in focus group discussion. Students were divided into two groups and read a storybook entitled “Too Young Too Mary” from UNESCO on the Let's Read Asia platform.

FINDINGS

Students' Perception of Female Characters

From the storybook entitled *Too Young Too Mary*, there are 3 female characters, namely Meena, Rita and Grandma. Students characterized Grandma as wise in a fair manner shaped by hardship, Rita as ambitious and driven and Meena as supporting her sister in continuing her education. They pointed out that despite frequently encountering obstacles, the ladies in the stories exhibit perseverance. These findings align with Ahmad & Susanto (2024) who argue that although female characters in Indonesian storybooks are often undervalued, they are increasingly portrayed with empowering qualities. Students' recognition of these qualities demonstrates the emergence of critical literacy skills, as they are able to interpret surface depictions to reveal deeper meanings of strength and resistance.

Students Perception of Male Characters

The students highlighted Rita's father as someone who wanted to exploit his daughter for money and didn't care about her future. Raju was humble and caring but lacked power, and Babu was open-minded and mature because he refused to marry a girl under 18. All students said the shop owner was evil and instilled patriarchal culture by exploiting his future daughter-in-law as an unpaid slave. These varied portrayals of males show that students do not view them as dictators but rather respect the variety of male roles that are not exclusively patriarchal. Students can be influenced to see males as possible collaborators in the advancement of gender equality by being exposed to both traditional and progressive male characters, as suggested by Dentith et al., (2016).

Recognition of Gender Stereotype and Gender Unstereotype.

Students also demonstrated the ability to identify gender stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in the narrative. They pointed out that Rita was pressured to marry young while her brother was not, which they described as a stark inequality. At the same time, they highlighted counter-stereotypes such as Babu's rejection of early marriage. This dual recognition reflects Luke's (2012) critical literacy framework, in which readers interrogate the text by questioning dominant and alternative narratives. In particular, the role reversal activity had a powerful impact on students' perspectives. When asked to rewrite the scene where Raju is forced to marry instead of Rita, students described the situation as grotesque, which helped them empathize with the unequal burden placed on female. Similar to the findings of Tarrayo, V. N., (2021), this activity demonstrates that gender-sensitive literature, when paired with interactive strategies, can foster empathy and social awareness in students in the classroom.

Connecting Storybook Lessons into Real Life

Both of the two groups have the same answers. In their community, females and male are equal. They have the same opportunities to continue their education as well. This point of view clarifies how storybook lessons can be successfully applied to actual situations, enhancing students' comprehension and perspective of gender equality as a social standard. According to research, including gender-sensitive information in instructional materials aids students in internalizing the principles of inclusivity and equality outside of the classroom (Tarrayo, V. N., 2021)

DISCUSSION

To answer the first research questions, according to focus groups, reading "Too Young to Marry" had a big impact on how students perceived gender inequity, especially in relation to early marriage and high school. Students called Rita's forced marriage "unfair" and contrasted it with her brother's, who was not under the same restrictions. Some students claimed that girls should receive the same education as boys and expressed dissatisfaction with their father's choice. By means of facilitated dialogues, students underscored that education signifies "freedom" and a "better future," thereby augmenting their comprehension of the correlation between gender and opportunity.

This implies that storybooks are more than just a source of pleasure; they are also important literacy resources that encourage students to consider the unfair standards weaving throughout the stories. Their answers support those of Ahmad & Susanto (2022), who found that when students read gendered storybooks, they were able to recognize bias and empowerment. Additionally, students showed that they could question cultural norms by stating that "tradition should not control one's future," confirming Luke's (2012) assertion that literary debates can promote critical understanding of power dynamics. As a result, storybook reading and discussion helped kids understand the obvious gender equality concepts in regard to education and decision-making.

While to answer the second research question, students' empathy and critical thinking were significantly impacted by this switching roles exercise. Students characterized the situation as ridiculous when asked to adapt a scene in which gender roles were reversed, such as Raju's early

marriage. Their empathy for the lived experiences of girls was strengthened by this exercise, which prompted them to consider what it could be like for boys to encounter the same circumstance. A number of kids also mentioned that "it's rare to happen in reality," which sparked more in-depth conversations about why society pushes girls to such disparate standards.

Reading and discussing stories in class helps students develop empathy as well as critical thinking skills by allowing them to recognize stereotypes and counter-stereotypes. They point out that Babu, the doctor, is a supportive male character who opposes early marriage and supports Rita to continue her education, despite the fact that Rita is forced into marriage. Students must compare people, assess their deeds, and consider their underlying messages in order to recognize this disparity. This supports the findings of Tarrayo et al. (2021), who contend that interactive classroom assignments and gender-sensitive literature help teenagers develop empathy and social justice ideals. In this sense, *Too Young to Marry* helps students form an emotional bond with the effects of inequality while challenging them to think critically about gender stereotypes.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The potential of digital storybooks is demonstrated in this case study, particularly when paired with reflective classroom interventions like role-playing games and facilitated discussions. In an English classroom for 10th graders, this can increase gender awareness. Students discussed the storybook "*Too Young to Marry*," pointing out differences in gender norms, empathizing with Rita's hardships, and expressing morally sound opinions about equality and the right to an education. Their thoughtful answers demonstrate how literature may inspire social reflection and empathy in teenagers by going beyond its narrative form.

One of this study's main conclusions is that students can deconstruct traditional, one-dimensional gender norms by being exposed to gender-sensitive storybooks. Storytelling can be a transformational teaching technique that encourages students to question societal norms and create alternative forms of conduct, much like the implications of including feminist narratives into early childhood education, as illustrated by Martínez, et.al (2023)

Additionally, narratives work well because they are interesting, pertinent, and support students' real-world experiences. This is consistent with a recent study conducted in Indonesia by Pangabea, et. al (2023), which demonstrated that narratives may help people understand and create worldviews. As a result, they are especially well-suited to tackling societal concerns like gender equality. These results highlight the potential of storytelling as a means of encouraging critical and equitable thinking in young children, even while the study's small sample size cautions against making broad generalizations.

According to the study's findings, high school teachers should incorporate digital storybooks with intricate themes like gender into their English language instruction. This would help students develop critical literacy and empathy in addition to providing reading material. Students can investigate stereotypes and share their opinions on gender equality with the aid of classroom techniques like role-playing exercises, guided discussions, and reflective projects. To guarantee that students experience balanced portrayals of male and female characters, curriculum developers are also urged to include inclusive and diverse storylines in ELT materials. Future

studies could also broaden this study by evaluating the efficacy of various storybooks, examining the long-term effects of using digital storybooks on students' gender awareness, or involving bigger and more varied groups of students.

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