

# IN THE SEARCH OF A LANGUAGE PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGM

edited by  
Michał Daszkiewicz  
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bilingualism

*baby talk*

textbooks

methodology

personality

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affect



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thinking

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translanguaging

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A LANGUAGE  
PEDAGOGICAL  
PARADIGM**



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Michał Daszkiewicz & Anna Dąbrowska

impuls

Kraków 2020

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Typographic work:  
*Alicja Kuźma*

Cover design:  
*Anna M. Damasiewicz*

Graphic used on the cover:  
*Amela Vorgic*

Publication financed by the University of Gdańsk  
and the University of Warsaw

ISBN 978-83-7850-779-6

Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”  
30-619 Kraków, ul. Turniejowa 59/5  
phone/fax: (12) 422 41 80, 422 59 47, 506 624 220  
[www.impulsoficyna.com.pl](http://www.impulsoficyna.com.pl), e-mail: [impuls@impulsoficyna.com.pl](mailto:impuls@impulsoficyna.com.pl)  
First edition, Kraków 2020

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# The Effect of Gender Inconsistencies in English on Construction of Student Identities

## Introduction

Extensive research has been done in the field of EFL identity and so many articles to date regarding EFL learning have been dedicated to the core issue of student identity; not only identity recognition and wholesome student acceptance in a certain community in which the English language is learned, but also sensitive factors affecting student identity and consequently their language learning. The focus has been placed on students' desire to achieve the proficiency of speakers from English-speaking countries, and even the notion of 'a perfect native speaker', vague as it is today, i.e. students' pathway to identify with such speakers. After much review of the current literature, there seems to be a gap in regards to how student identities are specifically affected by intralinguistic factors and what English offers language-wise. What this paper attempts to do is fill this dimensional gap precisely in the area of EFL student identity, yet from the affective perspective of construction of student identities resulting from certain linguistic (morphological) features, in this case: gender deviations in English nouns and pronouns.

## Identity as a Construct

Understanding identity in the grand scheme of things, how it is connected to society as a whole, and the effects it has on EFL students' learning process is not a straightforward and independent task. B. Norton (1995) argues that language learning theory needs to develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger social structures, which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. Thus, the role of language is foregrounded as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity. According to M. Heller (1987), it is through

language that a person negotiates a sense of self within, and it is through language that a person gains access to (or is denied access to) powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak. Thus language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication but is understood with reference to its social meaning. Yet neither Norton (1995) nor Heller (1987), whose focal points of student identities are driven rather by the complexities of society, make any mention of the inherent linguistic nature of English and its effect on identity.

A very poignant aspect of grammar in English closely linked to society is the grammatical category of gender, marked via morphological endings (suffixes) on nouns or newly derived lexemes as well as via 3 person singular pronouns (Baron, 1986). Certain societal changes might after a period of time lead to nominal changes, which then might have an effect on student identities, i.e. the lexical and even syntactic structure (pronoun agreement) of English might consequently influence their identity. In addition to language itself changing, peoples' use of language is also constantly changing for the purpose of accommodation and conveying a range of meanings, concepts and values. Hence students, even as early as elementary education, should be given guidelines as to how to use proper (non-gendered) language in a variety of contexts. L. Litosseliti (2006) claims that the simple removal of sexist terms from English does not automatically entail elimination of sexist sentiment and behaviour, concluding that in fact meaning cannot be inferred by words alone, but by inferential work that involves many situational and contextual parameters, like challenging sexist assumptions embodied in linguistic choices. Focusing on the clearly gendered aspects of the English language must be part of the focus on gender equality, viewed in the context of wider social and institutional change. It is at this point of challenging presuppositions on gender roles that students can grasp their identity. Language is shaped by discursive and socio-cultural practices, both reflecting and creating how people view the world (Gee, 2001). Therefore, from the lens of an elementary school student, their whole identity is constructed from how they use English.

Furthermore, in the last few decades many scholars in the field of language learning have shown growing interest towards the concept of identity, expanding by breadth and width, as can be witnessed through its being featured in encyclopedias and handbooks. R. J. Johnson (2019) points to a branching out in the terminology, mentioning Norton's proposal of a new model of motivation for learning languages, integrating power, investment and ownership, which asserts that language learners cannot claim they should be called legitimate speakers of English if they cannot assume ownership of the language. Moreover, it seems as if the sociological construct of investment complements the psychological construct of motivation. However, most psychological

theories of language learning motivation do not do justice to the complex identities of language learners, and the often inequitable relations of power (Dörnyei, 2009; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

In Orwellian words, some languages are more equal than others, so students are faced with the dilemma of who owns English in an ever more contested society. The construct of investment seeks to make a meaningful connection between a student's desire and commitment to learn a language, the language practices of the classroom or community, and student identity. One could even add that the issue of belonging is linked to gendered identities; an interesting example given in A. Pavlenko and B. Norton (2007): in 1998, according to the Japanese Ministry of Education, 67% of foreign language majors among the university students were female, with English being the most popular choice. This trend was not surprising, since young women even today are marginalized in mainstream Japanese society, and English teaching and translation offer them a socially sanctioned occupational choice, a profession that is 'ladylike', although not well paid. So, many young Japanese women consider English to be intrinsically linked to feminism and thus are motivated to learn it as a language of empowerment.

Seeking and thus grasping ownership is equated with legitimacy and power relations (empowerment), hence students become more aware of their identity as linked to the power they hold by being able to utter their thoughts in a language. P. Bourdieu (1991) goes as far as to use the term 'victorious language', while all the others are 'subordinated'. The power of the visibly gendered language in English (masculine vs. feminine) might be reflected in students' identity and the power (or lack of power) they might possess in comparison to the other sex. The example in the previous paragraph demonstrates how English is viewed, on the one hand, as being intrinsically feminine, while on the other hand, the existing androcentric bias in English makes it an intrinsically masculine language. The male sex being treated as the norm or unmarked term (especially in generics), and women being hidden behind such terms is unacceptable in this day and age. Sex specification, gratuitous modifiers to diminish a person's prestige, lexical gaps, semantic derogation, and asymmetrically gendered language items (for trivialization) are evident examples of male bias in English (Litosseliti, 2006: 14–15). In regards to education, the CEFR mentions 'gender' only twice, and both in the context of a learner's grammatical competence, while 'identity' (mentioned 9 times) occurs in separate connotations of culture and diversity (Council of Europe, 2001). Needless to say, if such language items are omitted from the elementary school English curriculum on a national level and simply not paid attention to, there could be consequences not only in how students are viewed by their peers, but also in how they view themselves and thus construct their identities.

Humpty Dumpty's seemingly nonsensical philosophy of language, which comes down to whether people are masters of a language or if it is the language that is a master to them, controlling their thoughts, can equally be applied to student identity (Carroll, 1994: 100):

"When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less".

"The question is", said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things".

"The question is", said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all".

## Analysis of Textbooks: Results and Discussion

All the textbooks used in the teaching of the mandatory subject English Language in the nine-year elementary education on the territory of North Macedonia were analyzed from the aspect of how the grammatical category of gender was covered in them (quantitatively and qualitatively) in conjunction with the national curriculum for that subject. It should be noted that the Ministry of Education of North Macedonia, which is a separate body from the Bureau of Education of North Macedonia, imposes the textbooks that EFL teachers in elementary schools must use. In some cases (Grades 2 and 3) the teachers are given a choice between two textbooks, but they do not have the liberty of choosing any textbook to their liking from the wide array published in English-speaking countries. In fact, the textbooks in Table 1 have been in use in the country for over 10 years.

The North Macedonian elementary education system is divided into three cycles (starting from age 6): Cycle 1 (Grades 1–3), Cycle 2 (Grades 4–6) and Cycle 3 (Grades 7–9), and each has its own specificities in regards to the developmental processes of the children. In the first cycle (CEFR pre-A1), children are at a pre-operational thought level, which slowly transforms into more concrete thought processes, and at a preparatory phase, which allows them to find meaning and make meaningful connections to the real world through pictures, not to a great extent through words. They make slow steps towards language progression, seeking answers in every single detail. In the second cycle (CEFR A1), students strengthen their ability for making comparisons, and the teacher, with the help of the textbook, instigates them to come to logical conclusions on their own, no matter how small the conclusion might seem. It is at this mid-stage that students have developed their thought processes and find making word-picture matches no difficulty. Teachers need to use all the opportunities within their reach and instill certain values in students,

simultaneously conjoining the English language and socio-cultural elements. During this timeframe in a student's life (ages 9–11) should teachers encourage questions about what students notice in their daily life and in English in regards to gender, and in that way indirectly help shape students' identity. The third cycle (CEFR A2) is characterized by students using their full logical potential, coming to deductive conclusions, explaining, giving their views and interpretations, and even hypothesizing. Illustrations in textbooks are not important only for the first cycle, but as the students progress from one to another cycle they manage to grasp the messages presented in the hidden layer of the text. Being fully aware of the world around them, regardless of the fact that they are still young, they are very perceptive to hidden cultural differences, as well as gender differences in the real world and in English, hence teachers need to be skillful in portraying gender in English so students can even further shape their identity.

The criteria for the analysis of textbooks included the following:

- **Quantitative (visual and textual representation):** percentage of men/women and boys/girls; professions (vocabulary and men/women portrayed in a given profession).
- **Qualitative:** (switching of) gender roles; problem-solvers; decision-makers; character traits and behaviour; relations in a family/society; dominance.

Table 1. Quantitative criteria (textbooks used in each grade and percentage of males/females)

			Males	Females
Grade 1	Cookie and Friends	OUP, 2005	/	/
Grade 2	Let's Go Set Sail 1	OUP, 2007 Express Publishing, 2001	50.1% (average for both textbooks)	49.9% (average for both textbooks)
Grade 3	Let's Go 1 Set Sail 2	OUP, 2006 Express Publishing, 2001	45.6% (average for both textbooks)	54.4% (average for both textbooks)
Grade 4	Welcome 1	Express Publishing, 1999	62.3%	37.7%
Grade 5	Welcome 2	Express Publishing, 2000	48.5%	51.5%
Grade 6	Welcome 3	Express Publishing, 2001	47.3%	52.7%
Grade 7	Blockbuster 2	Express Publishing, 2005	52.5%	47.5%
Grade 8	Blockbuster 3	Express Publishing, 2005	47.1%	52.9%
Grade 9	When this analysis was underway, Grade 9 had not yet started. The nine-year elementary education system has started recently, while before that elementary education ended with Grade 8.			

Source: own study.

Table 2. Quantitative criteria (professions); the number in brackets is the total number of occurrences both visually and textually

	Males	Females
Grade 1	/	/
Grade 2	bus driver (7), magician (4), shop assistant (3), <b>waiter</b> (2), teacher (1)	nanny (114), teacher (23)
Grade 4 Grade 5 Grade 6	scientist (15), firefighter (14), Science teacher (12), shopkeeper (10), English teacher (9), car mechanic (8), baker (6), <b>postman</b> (6), farmer (5), bungee jumping crew (5), basketball player (4), pilot (4), <b>policeman</b> (4), bus driver (3), DJ (3), reporter (3), restaurant owner (2), engineer (2), hair dresser (2), <b>actor</b> (2), chef (1), <b>cowboy</b> (1), lawyer (1), vet (1) – famous people: Albert Einstein, Batman, Charlie Chaplin, Elton John, Elvis Presley, Frankenstein, James Bond, King Arthur, King Charles, Leonardo da Vinci, Mr. Bean, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes, The Beatles	teacher (69), doctor (12), <b>policewoman</b> (11), nurse (8), singer (5), TV host (4), vet (2), shopkeeper (2), museum tour guide (1), bus driver (1), farmer (1) – famous people: Catwoman, Cruella de Ville, Guinevere, Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Elizabeth II
Grade 7 Grade 8	cyclist (6), <b>businessman</b> (6), baseball player (5), bank teller (2), paramedic (2), dentist (2), <b>waiter</b> (2), firefighter (1), architect (1), athlete (1), bus driver (1), chemist (1), <b>delivery boy</b> (1), golfer (1), mechanic (1), musician (1), police officer (1), race car driver (1) – famous people – Albert Einstein, Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Daniel Defoe, Harry Houdini, Hugh Grant, Isaac Newton, J.F.Kennedy, Keanu Reeves, Ludwig van Bethoven, Mozart, Neil Armstrong, Steven Spielberg, The Beatles, Tom Cruise, Vincent van Gogh – movie characters – Batman, Shrek, Smeagol (Gollum), Spiderman, Superman, Yoda	<b>businesswoman</b> (8), secretary (3), librarian (2), nurse (2), <b>cleaning lady</b> (1), doctor (1), newsreader (1), <b>papergirl</b> (1), police officer (1), <b>waitress</b> (1) – famous people – Helen Keller, Marilyn Monroe, Neve Campbell, Nicole Kidman

Source: own study.

Macedonian is a Slavic language that has grammatical gender, while English has natural gender, and this is one comparative aspect of teaching gender in EFL classes in the country that confuses students. When tasked with identifying the gender of certain abstract nouns in English, students turn to the suitable Macedonian translation equivalent to find the answer. However, this should not be the case. In fact, EFL teachers need to be fully aware that when introducing gender in English they are actually introducing a new element of students' wider understanding of language and an enrichment to their existing identities. When students are further introduced to gendered nouns (bold in Table 2) and their gender-neutral equivalents nowadays, as well as dual

gender nouns (the rest of the nouns in Table 2), the imminent implications of gendering in the real world (e.g. male-dominated professions, equality, roles, stereotypes, biases, androcentricity, feminism, sexism) should be discussed with them, especially with those in the third cycle. How English is used and the seemingly minor details (like noun gender inconsistencies) mirrors on students' identities, opening them up to expansive viewpoints.

Such gender inconsistencies in English are not a fertile ground only in regards to the category of nouns, but also pronouns, especially the 3 person singular **he/she/it**, which raise a red flag when in correlation with dual gender nouns and in some cases, inanimate nouns (Mignot, 2012). Language solutions have existed in the past (e.g. epicene pronouns to replace the devoid 'it', see Baron, 1986) and do exist nowadays (e.g. singular 'they' to fill the gap of a singular gender-neutral pronoun, see Perlman, 2017), with semantics overriding morphology, but the question of what solution comes first to students' minds and how they understand and conceptualize their choice is linked to how they view their identity and further construct it. It appears that with inanimate nouns it is only the concept of gender that students need to understand. Students are introduced to inanimate nouns and their variable gender in the third cycle of elementary education in North Macedonia, so they then become aware of the general tendency of the marked gender (feminine), leading them to re-categorize the world around them due to the linguistic mapping of gender, in turn correspondingly modifying their identities. In M. Almeida's (2019) words:

When we debate language we're almost always debating more than language. And in fact, discussing grammatical gender is really the perfect storm as it combines our language anxieties with our social gender anxieties, which probably explains why this topic draws so much attention.

The issue of degenderizing (or neutralizing) the English language cannot be discussed solely on the surface level of the language, i.e. the morphological elements and their distinctive outward features, like suffixes. In fact, it is the deeply entrenched and shared values in society ('hidden gender') that one must observe in order to find the most appropriate solution to the issue of gendering in the English language. J. Rosenthal (in Goshgarian, 1995: 392) exemplifies this: "Chicken soup and beef soup. Which is masculine and which is feminine? In English, neither chicken nor beef nor soup has formal gender. Yet most people find the question easy to answer: chicken soup is feminine and beef soup is masculine". In the following section of this paper (with further suggestions), examples similar to this one can be given to students in the form of a questionnaire for the purpose of feeling the pulse of the EFL classroom and suitably adapting textbook activities in the direction of gender awareness and student identity construction.



The notion of identity has played a pivotal role in ELT, yet mainly in the context of being an analytic tool for understanding schools. According to J. P. Gee (2001), there are four ways to view identity: nature-identity (a state), institution-identity (a position), discourse-identity (an individual trait), and affinity-identity (experiences). In practice they interrelate in such complex ways, however, there seems to be a gap in the affective understanding of student identity in a particular society. The intralinguistic workings of a language help in the development of a new perspective on student identity, built around their recognition as 'a certain kind of person learning a foreign language in the specific society they live in'. This is intrinsically linked in particular to the institutional (political) and socio-cultural workings in North Macedonia, as well as the nature of the current knowledge-based global economy, which have implications for student identity. It is true that gender is a grammatical category in English, and there is no denying it has its inconsistencies, but how it is presented in elementary education, both via the textbook in a visual or textual manner and via the teacher as a formative link, is a matter of no less importance.

The analysis of selected textbooks demonstrates that thought has been put into how gender is presented in them, yet the fact that they were published approximately 15 years ago makes them dated in regards to gender to be used in schools today. There have been so many advancements in the realm of gender that the choice of textbook should not be based merely on how grammar and vocabulary are presented but also on the hidden complexities of society, visible in textbooks even from such an early age. In addition, the fact that they were published in the UK must also not be neglected since these textbooks touch upon gender-sensitive topics in an age-appropriate manner. North Macedonia, though, is a country slightly lagging behind in this precise aspect in regards to elementary education, which views grammatical gender as insignificant, thus not considering gender as much of a worthy aspect of the English language.

The backbone of such views is rooted in the national curriculum of English as a Foreign Language in North Macedonia (specifically the Ministry of Education as creators of this national document), which should do more to help teachers project their focus on student identities and leave some breathing space for teachers to be their creative selves, less burdened with time-consuming administrative tasks and unnecessary paperwork. The new and updated national curriculum of EFL in the country is to be published in 2020, and fortunately there is going to be more mention of the importance of gender on student identity (as up to now there was nothing of that type). In the section on pedagogical implications and didactic suggestions it is stated that teachers need to do their best to integrate intralinguistic and extralinguistic

factors and attempt to make correlations between aspects in the English language and the outer world for students to grow and their identity be shaped. They need to use the chosen textbook as their primary teaching aid, but not depend fully on its content, rather use it in combination with students' background knowledge of the world. Among other things, the teachers' focus needs to be put on portraying grammatical gender from a communicative, referential and specifying aspect. It is stated that the students' identity can be shaped accordingly, given the society they live in, but teachers need to be the driving force behind this. Open-mindedness must first be rooted in the EFL teacher, who should then open up a multitude of opportunities for student identity construction, for viewing different perceptions of gender in English, even for redefining certain stereotypes they might possess as a clash to the more traditional North Macedonian society. It is true that 21<sup>st</sup>-century North Macedonia has evolved so much in the past 15 years, but it is also true that institutions have to do more work to keep up and to prioritize slightly differently, and the beacon of light is that they are starting to do exactly that.

## Suggestions for Questionnaires

What follows are proposed directions/questions for a structured questionnaire on gender in English, targeted towards elementary school students, preferably in Grades 7–9. These questions, which can be adapted or expanded, aim to observe students' critical thinking about gender and reasoning behind each of the students' answers, hence creating a picture about their identity and even discussing it afterwards with the students themselves.

1. Group each word/phrase into MASCULINE or FEMININE. Explain your reasons: agile movements, athlete, bartender, beef soup, blue, bombshell, bossy, bridezilla, chair, chicken soup, clown, courage, curvy, cutie pie, doctor, Earth, graceful movements, handsome, mind, nature, nurse, pink, police officer, politician, soul, sturdy bridge, teacher, time, truth, weak bridge.
2. Explain what the word in bold refers to and why these are correct sentences:
  - **She** can reach 100 in 3.5 seconds.
  - The Titanic sank in 1912, didn't **she**?
  - **She's** off \$ 2 today.
  - France has increased **her** exports.
  - "I passed a dog in the street and **it** barked at me. But **it** certainly wasn't yours – **she's** kind and doesn't bark at all!"
  - I got **him** out of the attic, cleaned **him** up and put a new handle on **him**.

3. Fill in the blanks with an appropriate pronoun/determiner. Why did you choose those?
- A writer can become so involved in \_\_\_\_\_ work.
  - I think someone left \_\_\_\_\_ laptop behind.
  - I spoke to the marketing director and \_\_\_\_\_ told me that the company would get back to me.
  - Who is in charge of the campaign? I'll email \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Each person in this classroom should reach the best of \_\_\_\_\_ ability.

## Conclusion

Identity is inextricably linked to language and only in their interconnectedness can EFL teachers help shape the construction of student identities. Students come into the classroom equipped with previous background knowledge that they have been constantly collecting and preconceived notions about gender, yet it is the teacher who needs to point them in the right direction and further structure their identities. Identity as a formed construct is not only a social structure but an educational one as well, relying on affective factors too. It's high time North Macedonia recognizes the potential of giving more space in the educational framework to gender inconsistencies in English for the purpose of further structuring the comprehensive student identity.