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Operationalising Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis in EFL Textbook Research: Locating Interpretive Authority Between Description and Interpretation

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Abstract

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) requires a transparent movement from textual description to feminist interpretation and pedagogical recontextualisation. Using two purposively contrasted episodes from the 2019 People's Education Press senior-high EFL Compulsory Book 3, this paper examines a limit of selected social actor descriptors. Both female characters are activated, individualised, and voiced, yet the narratives differ in who authoritatively evaluates their actions. In a moral tale, a king publicly validates a girl's conduct; in a first-person travel journal, Li Lan interprets her own experience. A bounded feminist reading identifies externally authorised recognition of female public action in the first case, while treating the moral-tale genre and sovereign role as rival explanations and gender and age as inseparable. The paper proposes descriptive, interpretive, and recontextualisation warrants, with a dedicated checkpoint for locating represented interpretive authority. The contribution is a case-based methodological demonstration, not evidence of a corpus-wide gender pattern or classroom effectiveness.

Keywords: feminist critical discourse analysis; social actor representation; EFL textbooks; interpretive authority; methodological warrant

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1. Background and Methodological Problem

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) examines gendered power in seemingly ordinary discourse (Lazar, 2007). In textbook research, movement from textual description to feminist interpretation and pedagogical implications raises questions of evidence and inference. Zhang et al. (2022) move beyond counting appearances to examine gendered roles and activities in Chinese middle-school English textbooks; this paper addresses a further question that role-and-activity descriptors leave open: who can authoritatively frame the significance of an actor's conduct.

Debates around critical discourse analysis (CDA) have concerned not only political commitment but also the warrant connecting textual observations, contextual interpretation, and broader claims (Breeze, 2011). A recurring charge is that analysis moves too quickly from textual data to explanation. Macgilchrist (2021) examines analysts' own storytelling; here the question concerns authority distributed within a textbook narrative. Two cases from the 2019 People's Education Press (PEP) senior-high EFL Compulsory Book 3 provide a methodological demonstration, not a corpus-wide gender claim. This paper asks: How can FCDA be operationalised so that textual description, feminist interpretation, and pedagogical recontextualisation remain connected but analytically distinct?

2. Methodological Positioning

Three resources perform different functions. Lazar's (2007) FCDA supplies the critical orientation by directing attention towards the normalisation of gendered power and by making the researcher's feminist standpoint explicit; it is not treated as a closed coding scheme.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor framework provides a restricted descriptive layer. Categories such as activation and passivation, individualisation, functionalisation, and identification specify how participants are represented before an explanation of why that representation matters politically. Voice is recorded alongside these categories because a participant who speaks is not necessarily a participant whose account is treated as authoritative. This creates an evidential checkpoint: an interpretation should be traceable to describable representational choices rather than introduced as if already contained in the linguistic form. A selected actor-coding profile alone does not always locate who authoritatively evaluates another actor's conduct. The same framework treats legitimation as a separate system (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 105–123), including authority vested in institutional role and the moral

tale as a narrative form. Those categories classify what legitimates a represented practice; they are not organised around which represented actor is positioned to evaluate another's conduct.

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) enters only later. Fairclough (1992) treats language awareness as capable of addressing the social conditions and consequences of language use. Here, pedagogy is a new context in which selected distinctions may be reformulated, not additional evidence for the discourse analysis. This matters because classroom meanings cannot be predicted from the printed text alone (Sunderland et al., 2000).

3. Two Cases and the Distribution of Interpretive Authority

Before the examples were selected, all three 2019 PEP senior-high compulsory volumes had been screened for represented actors and pedagogical tasks. The wider study examines self-regulation, care/relationality, and public or professional agency. Two Book 3 passages were then chosen purposively because both foreground active, voiced, individual female actors but differ in narrative evaluation. The selection tests the limits of selected actor descriptors; it is neither genre-matched nor representative. No corpus-wide count or prevalence claim is made.

"The Stone in the Road" in Compulsory Book 3 provides a concise illustration. A young girl identifies a stone as dangerous, moves it "with all her might," and, after discovering gold underneath, insists that its owner should be found (People's Education Press, 2019, pp. 20–21). Descriptively, she is strongly activated: she diagnoses a public problem, acts, speaks, protects other road users, and refuses an unexpected reward.

Interpretation begins when the narrative organisation of those actions is considered. The girl succeeds in a test constructed by the king, who identifies her as the person who learned its lesson. Her agency is embedded in a moral economy of responsibility, effort, honesty, and public-mindedness. The girl makes her own ethical judgement, but the king, an adult male sovereign, authoritatively frames its public moral significance. A bounded feminist reading is that female public action is recognised while an adult male ruler controls its final moral framing. Yet gender is not separable here from age (Esposito, 2024): the actor is a girl, not a woman. The moral-tale genre and the king's sovereign role remain rival explanations. This reading is therefore case-level, not proof of a gendered pattern.

Li Lan's first-person travel journal in the same volume represents her walking through San Francisco, selecting destinations, learning about migra-

tion histories, interpreting cultural spaces, and planning subsequent movement (People's Education Press, 2019, pp. 28–29). Activation is combined with first-person authorship and temporal control of the narrative, although the travel-journal genre itself licenses observation, mobility, and evaluation. No comparable external character authoritatively frames her experience.

Under social actor analysis, the cases share a similar profile: both actors are activated, individualised, voiced, and publicly active (see Table 1). What separates them is represented interpretive authority, defined here as the standing, within the narrated world, to authoritatively frame the significance of an actor's conduct. The king frames the public significance of the girl's action; Li Lan narrates and evaluates her experience on her own behalf. Social actor categories can describe action and evaluation, but a selected actor-coding profile does not by itself locate this distribution of authoritative framing, and the legitimation categories noted above do not ask whether the standing to evaluate is itself allocated by gender. Attending to narrative organisation therefore supplies an interpretive checkpoint, not a new actor category.

Table 1. Two Cases That Coincide Descriptively and Diverge in Represented Interpretive Authority

Analytical question	"The Stone in the Road"	Li Lan	Function
Description	Activated, individualised, voiced, publicly active	Activated, individualised, voiced, publicly active	Establish observable representation
Represented interpretive authority	Assigned by the king	Retained by the narrator	Locate authoritative framing
Interpretive reading	Female action framed by male sovereign	Female actor frames her own experience	Generate contrasting readings
Rival explanation	Moral-tale genre; adult ruler/child status	Travel-journal genre; first-person perspective	Restrict gender inference

4. A Layered Analytical Procedure

The resulting procedure contains three checkpoints.

Checkpoint 1: Descriptive Warrant. Analysis records what can be supported from the represented event or actor: who performs or receives an

action; whether a participant is named, categorised, or functionalised; whether the actor speaks; and whether the representation grants decision-making, knowledge, mobility, or public action. The aim is analytical traceability rather than interpretive neutrality.

Checkpoint 2: Interpretive Warrant. Feminist interpretation is introduced only after descriptive features have been recorded and the analyst has located represented interpretive authority. Interpretive dimensions from the wider study include self-regulation, care or relationality, and public or professional agency, but none is treated as intrinsically oppressive or emancipatory. Rival explanations remain active. Where genre, professional setting, narrative role, or institutional status can plausibly account for a contrast, these factors must be considered before it is treated as gendered patterning. Counter-cases test whether an interpretation travels beyond the case that generated it.

Checkpoint 3: Recontextualisation Warrant. If an analytical distinction moves into pedagogy, the question changes from whether the discourse interpretation is warranted to whether the distinction can be reformulated without predetermining learners' conclusions. The transformation is a pedagogical design decision, not further confirmation of the original interpretation.

5. Pedagogical Recontextualisation

Pedagogical recontextualisation can therefore be demonstrated without treating a lesson as evidence for the analysis. For "The Stone in the Road," the distinction between action and evaluation can become three questions: What does the girl do? Who decides what her action means? What would change if the source of evaluation changed? These prompts preserve the analytical distinction while leaving interpretation open.

The wider study has experimented with sequencing such prompts from initial encounter to comparison and redesign, but that pedagogical framework is not developed or evaluated here. A task may be informed by CDA without demonstrating that learners will read the text differently or that attitudinal change will follow.

6. Discussion

The two cases show why methodological transitions matter. Similar social actor profiles can coexist with different distributions of interpretive authority; descriptive evidence of female activity therefore does not exhaust the question of how agency is organised. Where a narrative allocates that standing between

characters, neither a social actor profile nor a classification of legitimation types is organised to record the allocation, and neither asks whether it is gendered.

Operationalising FCDA requires explicit checkpoints between description, interpretation, and recontextualisation. Descriptive categories provide traceability; locating represented interpretive authority constrains what may be inferred from them; rival explanations and counter-cases limit feminist inference; and pedagogical redesign remains a separate problem requiring separate evidence. These distinctions do not depoliticise critical research. They make its commitments more accountable by showing where description ends, where interpretation begins, and where a new pedagogical claim requires a new form of inquiry. Establishing a gendered pattern requires further within-genre, cross-gender comparison.

Use of Generative AI

ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) assisted with language editing, structural revision, and formatting checks during manuscript preparation. The author reviewed the case analysis, interpretive claims, and references, and takes responsibility for the submitted text.

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