

Sexual Bias in an EFL Textbook: A Case Study

Hideto D. Harashima
Maebashi Institute of
Technology

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One college-level English textbook published by a major publishing company in Japan was analyzed for gender and cultural bias. The quantitative analysis of one representative chapter implied that in the textbook, male referents outnumbered their female counterparts, male characters generally precede the females in a sentence, and male characters are more often associated with higher social status than females. It was also found that the textbook contained a number of illustrations and expressions insensitive to women. Some exercise questions and the way in which they had been set up were also scrutinized for possible bias against women, as well as ignorance about the feelings of people from different cultures, people with culturally non-valued physical features, and people with less money than others. Detailed discussion on what could be the problems with such expressions will follow each analysis.

日本の大手出版社から出版されている或る大学生用の英語教科書についてそこに含まれる性別的・文化的偏見に焦点を当てたテキスト分析を試みた。特に代表的な章を定量的に分析した結果、女性(代)名詞の数が男性(代)名詞に比べて著しく少ないこと、文中で男性(代)名詞が女性(代)名詞に先行する場面が多いこと、女性よりも男性に対してより高い社会的地位が関連付けられていること等が判った。また教科書全体を通してその文章、イラスト、エクササイズの設定やその状況設定の中に女性蔑視や無視と採れる表現が多いことも判明した。更に異国・異文化の人達、容姿が他人より劣る人達、経済的に恵まれない人達に対して配慮を欠いた偏見的な表現が多数見つけた。本稿はこのような表現のどこが問題なのかを細かに議論すると共に、教材開発に当たる人々に警鐘を鳴らすことを主眼としている。

The socio-linguistic issue of sexism, or sexual stereotyping, first surfaced in the '70s (Porreca, 1984) and examination of educational materials for their gender bias, which soon included EFL/ESL textbooks and dictionaries, sprouted in the late '70s.

Hartman and Judd (1978) pioneered the study of TESOL materials with their analysis of sexism found in several ESL textbooks. They revealed that there were many cases of sexual stereotyping through one-sided role allocation, overt putdowns, and simple omissions in popular ESL textbooks. Hartman and Judd conclude their article with suggestions for the elimination of the biased portrayal of women.

Porreca (1984) succeeded Hartman and Judd's work on sexism in ESL textbooks. She examined 15 then-current ESL textbooks for sexual bias. Her follow-up analysis showed major improvements from Hartman and Judd's (1978) results in two ways: 1) she conducted her study with the textbooks selected on the basis of a compilation of then-current booklists from 27 different ESL centers; 2) she examined sexism using a systematic and quantitative framework which she designed herself. In her work she examined examples of omissions in text and illustrations, *firstness*

(precedence of male or female nouns over the other in a sentence), occupational visibility in text and illustrations, nouns, masculine generic constructions, and adjectives. After shedding light through a quantitative approach on how occurrences of feminine nouns and masculine nouns were imbalanced, that derogatory expressions were often used against women, and that not as many positive roles were assigned to women as men in the textbooks, she did a comprehensive evaluation of each book based on the extent of egalitarian use of the language.

Responding to calls for establishing guidelines for reducing sexist language in EFL and ESL materials, Women in EFL Materials (1991) proposed a set of guidelines for avoiding sexism in EFL materials. In this work are listed a number of *dos and don'ts* for EFL material writing. These guidelines can be considered as elaboration and expansion of the suggestions made in Hartman and Judd (1978).

Until recently, the study of sexism in TESOL has mainly focused on quantifying language items found in texts of the same genre. However, Sunderland (1992) presented a comprehensive study of grammar books, dictionaries, course books, and teacher's guides, as well as *processes*, which entail learner strategies, attitudes, and interactions. Shimazaki (1991) also expanded the issue to include teacher attitudes. She claims that language teachers should be more sensitive and conscious about gender issues and they should play a positive role in abolishing sexist language and gender stereotypes. In her recent study, Lesikin (2001) tried to examine gender in ESL textbooks from the viewpoint of functions of language, focusing on participant roles of nouns and pronouns. She took a unique approach to the

communicative prominence of participants in a discourse using the concept of theme, rheme, and the element last focused upon.

In Japan, Osugi, Sadakane, Shimagouchi, and Takahashi (1990) were among the first to pay attention to gender issues in Japanese EFL materials. They made an extensive quantitative examination of four major monolingual English dictionaries published in Japan for sexual bias in definitions with respect to imagery, number of appearances, personal characters, abilities, occupation, money, and appearances. They concluded that sex-biased content and sexual stereotypes rampant in literature “might originally be the product of a dictionary which unnecessarily perpetuates these images” (p. 236) and suggest that conscious effort must be made to avoid them. More recently, Kanamaru (1998) made a comparative study on sexism among Japanese high school English textbooks and found those texts far behind the Western standard in regard to *degendering*.

Inspired by these studies, I decided to examine an English textbook I used for my class, about which I harbored some reservations concerning gender and culture related expressions appearing throughout the text. I decided to conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis of gender bias in the textbook published in 1998 by a major publisher in Japan. I selected the framework presented in Porreca (1984), for it appears to be the most comprehensive and systematic model for this kind of analysis. In this paper, I will first provide a quantitative analysis of a representative unit in the textbook and discuss some examples of both discriminatory language use against women and inappropriate illustrations. The text under examination is an English conversation

textbook targeted at false beginners at Japanese college level. The selected unit is suitable for this purpose, because the topic is description and comparison of different features in people. I will then discuss some cases of cultural bias found frequently throughout the textbook.

Quantitative analysis of gender bias

Omission

I counted all the sex-linked nouns, proper names or titles, and non-generic pronouns in text, and depictions of females and males in illustrations in the unit. I excluded those pronouns such as *we*, *you*, or *they*, when they refer to both men and women. The result showed a striking imbalance—male referents heavily outnumbered female. Out of 260 occurrences of such words and illustrations, 71 were female, and 189 were male. The ratio is 1:2.7. In sum, the number of illustrations of females in the text were 16, whereas those of their male counterparts were 22 (1:1.38). The word occurrences in text were 54 females against 167 males (1:3.09). This proves that there is prominent representation of males in text, rather than illustrations throughout this unit of the textbook, and the tendency remained the same throughout the textbook. This is a clear case of female *omission* in language presentation.

For Japanese female learners of English using this textbook, this female omission can be disadvantageous, because it may be more difficult for them, compared to male students, to empathize with the characters in the textbook, therefore their motivation to study may be diminished.

Firstness

I counted the *firstness* of males and females, which means the number of times that males or females were presented first in exercises, examples, or sentences. In sentences, I only counted the cases where both the male and the female appear in one sentence. The result is 3 cases of female *firstness* against 15 cases for the males. The proportion of first appearances is 1:5. This big difference suggests that the authors of this textbook consciously or unconsciously prioritize the male. This is, in effect, reinforcing the social “norm” of always treating men first, women second, and it may consequently discourage women to take the initiative in class or in society.

Occupation

I examined the cases of occupational roles assigned to males and females in the unit. I found only three titles, *student*, *waiter*, and *policeman*, for males and none for females. Women all appeared as generic female persons, except in one case an officer is introduced as “partner” of a “policeman”, which implies that the authors of the book may, unconsciously, not feel the necessity to treat women with particular social status. This attitude of treating the male as *somebody* and the female as *nobody* is prejudicial against women.

Nouns

Next I examined cases in which pairs or several male/female noun sets appear in a sentence. Out of 8 cases, only two were in female/male order, e.g. *the mother and father; their friends, (female name), (male name), (male name), (male*

name), and (female name). All the other cases were in male/female order, e.g. *one boy and one girl*; (male name) and (female name). Again the prominence of men is obvious here, but the two cases of female precedence are showing some hope for future improvement.

Masculine generic constructions

In this unit, no masculine generic constructions such as *man*, *mankind*, or *everyone* *he*, were found except the case of *policeman*, which obviously referred to a male in the accompanying picture. The reason for the absence of masculine generic constructions can be attributed to the fact that this textbook is made for conversation classes; the language used is mostly colloquial English.

Adjectives

Since the unit in question is dealing with human physical traits, adjectives used there were limited in six of Porreca's (1984, 713) categorizations: Physical Appearance, Physical State/Condition, Personality Traits, Age, Rapport/Reputation, and Normality/Deviance. There was no significant difference in the kind of adjectives used for females and males in Physical Appearance category such as *tall* and *thin*, and in Age category. In Physical State/Condition category, only one adjective *muscular* for a male was found.

In regard to Rapport/Reputation category, the adjective pair *popular/unpopular* was used frequently for males and females. The distribution was fairly even; however, some Physical Appearance adjectives to support popularity or unpopularity show strong bias for or against certain

physical traits of females and males, which can be considered problematic. For example, Female 1 is depicted in a coquettish illustration, as very popular with the boys because she's "got long shoulder length hair with big eyes and a small nose." Female 2¹ is also popular with the boys because she's "got an intelligent kind of face and long hair pulled back. She's also got a sharp nose and a nice smile" (p. 31). On the next page, however, we find an example of a derogatory description against a woman. Female 3² is not popular because she's "got a long face and a big pointed chin. Her hair is very curly and she looks tough." This is insulting to all women who share one or more traits with Female 3.

One adjective of Personality Traits category is used in favor of both a female and a male who both have a very *nice* smile.³

Illustrations

Although illustrations are not included in Porreca's (1984) framework as an independent category, I felt a need to examine them independently, because the textbook in question contains a lot of questionable illustrations. In the target unit of the textbook, 16 illustrations of females appear, compared to 22 illustrations of their male counterparts (1:1.38). The pictures of males outnumber those of females, but the number is not very significant here. The problem is *how* each man and woman is depicted in the picture. All the pictures are drawn with a humorous touch, which may be good for creating a relaxed atmosphere in a classroom. However, extra caution is necessary when the lesson topic is on comparison of personal looks, especially the appearances

of women. Rather disappointingly, the way they illustrate some “popular” women and “unpopular” women appears stereotypical, inappropriate, and inconsiderate.

Further discussions on gender and cultural bias

As described above, the target unit of this textbook exhibits some serious signs of sexism. Furthermore, the rest of the textbook demonstrates significant insensitivity toward women, people from non-occidental cultures—especially underdeveloped areas, people living in the countryside, people with less valued physical features, and people with less money than other people.

One startling case is found in an exercise in a separate unit, which reads, “Does (male name) have a new girlfriend? (Yes, he does.) Is she better-looking than his old girlfriend?” The question is accompanied by an illustration of the male switching his hand from a chubby dark-haired woman with freckles and glasses to a smiley light-haired woman with big eyes. According to the teacher’s manual, the *correct* answer for this question is “Yes, she is.” This kind of exercise is outrageous, and it only reinforces stereotyping of women, imparting the message that physical features are all that matters for a woman to be attractive.

Cultural bias is seen in a more covert fashion than gender bias. The following example involves neither linguistic nor illustrative, but situational awkwardness. The “Acting It Out” exercise on page 29 instructs students to memorize a conversation at a restaurant, then act it out in front of the class. Three people are needed for this role play: a couple and a “waiter”. There is a picture of a couple, probably

husband and wife, sitting at a dinner table and a male server standing by. We cannot tell who’s speaking to whom from this picture. Under that is the model conversation.

Waiter: Can I take your order please sir?

Customer: Yes, please. Can we have two steaks please?

Waiter: How would you like your steaks sir?

Customer: Medium please.

Waiter: Would you like anything to drink?

Customer: Yes, can we have two coffees please?

Waiter: Before or after your meal?

Customer: Before please.

Perceptive and sensible readers will notice that this conversation is going on between the male customer and the waiter, where the male customer is deciding everything from *his* taste. However, the situation and the illustration require *three* people for this role play to be acted out. This makes us wonder what the female customer is supposed to do in the role play in front of the class. Keep smiling? Here is a case representing a male dominant culture in this textbook.

In another case, on page 91 a picture is shown where two men with shovels are engaged in road construction work. An accompanying question asks, “What nationality do you think these two men are?” To this the teacher’s manual gives “British” as a model answer. The third question asks, “What do you think their hobbies are?” To this the TM lists “football, drinking.” I think this activity does more harm

than good to the book users by imposing an unnecessary stereotype about nationalities, jobs, and hobbies. In my opinion, we should not relate nationality to any particular jobs or hobbies, because these are personal matters and not national characteristics. This kind of activity only breeds cultural stereotypes in students' minds.

Other exercise questions insensitive to world cultures and people include *Are Tobans* [the Toba tribe in Indonesia?] *fatter than Japanese people? What is the poorest country in the world? If you were very fat, what would you do? Are people in Africa as rich as people in Japan?* and more. I wonder what kinds of answers are expected to be “good” answers to these questions and what kinds of reactions the teacher is expected to show to just any kinds of answers that students give.

Conclusion

In this paper I have conducted a quantitative analysis of one unit of one English textbook for sexism based on the framework designed by Porreca. I have found that 1) the unit in question contains a far greater number of male referents than female; 2) male characters generally precede the female when they are introduced in text or exercises; 3) male characters are more often associated with higher social status than the female; 4) there are some expressions in text and in illustrations which are derogatory towards women. These points are found not only in the unit in question but throughout the textbook. Furthermore, I have argued that the textbook contains a number of problematic examples of cultural bias against people with less-dominant cultures, people with culturally non-valued physical features, and

people with less money than others. From these findings I must conclude that this text is an EFL textbook containing a number of gender and cultural bias and stereotypes. Conscientious educators are advised to refrain from using such texts, and material writers are recommended to reflect upon the materials they produce to ensure that they avoid the charge of gender or cultural bias.

This has been a case study on one textbook targeted at Japanese college students. Generalizations must await future studies on a multiple selection of texts developed by general publishers.

Notes

1. This same female character in earlier editions of the textbook was illustrated and depicted as a girl who “isn’t popular with the boys” because she’s “got a round fat face and long hair pulled back. She’s also got a big flat nose and narrow eyes.” This kind of description of a female person must be considered very inconsiderate, and it could be very offensive and insulting to women with a round face, a flat nose, or narrow eyes. In fact there are many women with such physical traits in Japanese classrooms and it is very prejudicial to asseverate that such women are unpopular with the boys. It could also do harm as a cultural bias against most Asian people, who usually have flatter noses and narrower eyes than Western people. The publisher apparently changed this description of the female to the present way after receiving criticism from readers, including this author.

2. Again this female character in earlier editions was depicted as an unpopular woman with the boys because she's "got a long face and a big pointed chin. Her hair is very curly, and she's got a strange neck." Here is one adjective of Normality/Deviance category used to describe the woman's neck: *strange*. This adjective was only used here for a female and never for a male.
3. Such a positive personality trait was not used for females in earlier editions.

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