

So where are the working women? A discussion of gender roles in high school textbooks

Keywords

writing textbooks, gender roles, gender stereotypes, working women, sexism, Japanese senior high school

This study examines English writing textbooks used in Japanese senior high schools in terms of gender representation. The results show the following gender imbalances: Women are less visible than men, housework and child care are mostly assigned to mothers, working women seldom appear, and men enjoy a wider variety of occupational roles than women. In addition, the topics of cooking and fashion are usually associated with women, whereas work, cars, computers, and sports are often associated with men. Although a certain degree of awareness of gender issues is shown in the sections dealing with gender equality or gender-neutral expressions, gender imbalances still exist in current textbooks and need to be corrected. In order to produce nonsexist textbooks, more efforts should be made to raise awareness about sexism in textbooks and take action against it.

この研究は、日本の高校で使用されている英語ライティングの検定教科書5冊の例文や練習問題の英文を、性的役割分担やステレオタイプの観点から分析したものである。その結果、男性のほうが多く登場する。家事や育児は母親の仕事とみなされている。働く女性はわずかしら登場しない。男性のほうがさまざまな職業についている、という男女間の不均衡が明らかになった。また、料理やファッションの話題は女性と、仕事、車、テクノロジー、スポーツの話題は男性と結び付けられる傾向があることもわかった。現在の教科書には、中立的な表現や男女平等を扱うものもあり、一定の評価はできるが、まだ改善すべき点も多い。男女差別のない教科書を作るためには、この問題に対する認識を深め、意識的に改善の努力をする必要がある。

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THIS study examines gender representation in English writing textbooks used in Japanese senior high schools. These texts contain numerous example sentences and exercises that focus on grammar and vocabulary instruction. Little attention seems to have been paid to the potentially influential explicit and implicit impact these sentences make on students' perception of the world. This study, therefore, is an attempt to explore the messages these textbooks send and is specifically concerned with any sexism in them.

In order to promote the formation of a gender-equal society, the Japanese government established the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999. According to the preamble, "it is vital to position the realization of a gender-equal society as a top-priority task in determining the framework of 21st-century Japan, and implement policies related to promotion of formation of a gender-equal society in all fields" (Basic Law No. 78, 1999). Article 4 in Chapter 1 refers to the possible negative effects of stereotyped division of roles on the basis of gender, and requires that care be taken so that social systems and practices have as neutral an impact as possible on the selection of social activities by women and men.

Studies of sexism over the years in a variety of ESL and EFL contexts have revealed a lack of female referents, women as the object of jokes, and assignment of stereotypical roles to both men and women (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Porreca, 1984).

As for English textbooks used in Japanese senior high schools, Nakai (2001) found numerous examples of male dominance, gender imbalance in social status and occupations, and stereotyped gender roles. On the other hand, Pihlaja's (2008) recent analysis of an oral communication text revealed a more or less balanced portrayal of men and women, except in romantic relationships.

This study examines English writing textbooks at Japanese senior high schools and seeks to answer these questions: How are women and men represented in them? Does sexism still exist, and if so, what can be done about it?

Method

The five government approved textbooks analyzed in this study were:

- *Crown English Writing New Edition* (Shimozaki et al., 2008)
- *Genius English Writing Revised* (Sano et al., 2008)
- *Revised Polestar Writing Course* (Minamide et al., 2008)
- *New Edition Unicorn English Writing* (Ichikawa, Hestand, Shiokawa, Kobayashi, & Hagino, 2008)
- *Voyager Writing Course New Edition* (Minamimura et al., 2008)

These five were chosen from among 30 writing textbooks published in 2008 mainly because of their availability to the author and because they were a representative sample (based on market share and popularity) of writing textbooks currently in use (*Naigai Kyouiku*, 2008, p. 11).

Figure 1 shows the number of female and male co-authors of each textbook.

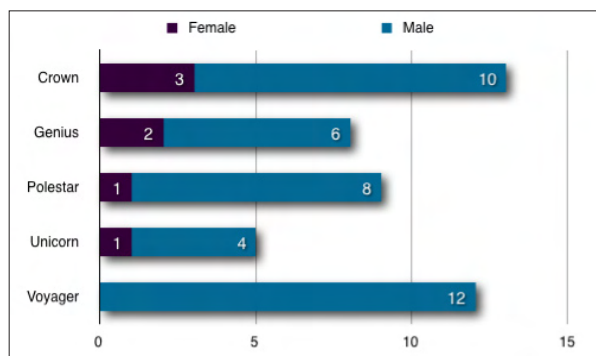


Figure 1. Number of female/male co-authors

In all of the textbooks, the number of male authors was more than double that of female authors. In *Voyager*, all of the co-authors were male.

Each text was similarly organized, with 20-36 lessons of two to four pages and a specific topic or grammar point to be learned. Exercises included gap-fills, word reordering, sentence completion, and Japanese-English translation. English passages and sample sentences usually had Japanese translation, and more than half of the exercises were translation exercises from Japanese into English.

This study focuses on the sample sentences used to explain grammar points, sentence-level exercises, and additional samples at the end of the textbook (if any). These sentences were chosen as the focal point of analysis because they tend to receive more

attention during typical English lessons in Japan than those found in introductory passages, sample paragraphs, or paragraph-level exercises. In addition, since it is very common to have students memorize these sample sentences, their potential impact and influence on students is greater. Sentences with male or female referents were extracted and divided according to gender. The two groups were then compared to determine how each gender was represented.

Findings

In all five Japanese high school writing textbooks examined, there were more sentences containing male referents than female referents (Figure 2), a problem previously pointed out in other teaching contexts (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Nakai, 2001; Porreca, 1984).

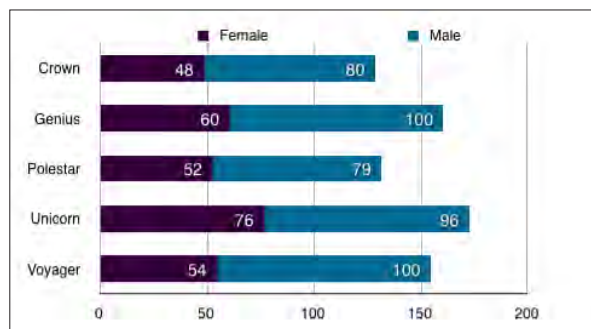


Figure 2. Number of sentences with female and male referents

Significantly more male subjects were found, as if some authors used *he* out of habit when constructing the sample sentences. For whatever reason, female subjects appeared far less frequently than male ones in the textbooks reviewed.

Fifty-five sentences contained the words *mother* or *mom*, and 68 sentences contained *father* or *dad*. The number of sentences referring these terms to *work* and *cooking* is shown in Figure 3.

Only one sentence (2%) depicted the mother working outside the home, while 18 sentences (26%) associated work with the father. In contrast, the word *mother* was commonly associated with cooking. Moreover, mothers were portrayed most often at home, doing child care, housework, and such things as calling children to dinner or reading aloud to them. Fathers' contact with children was limited to three occasions: going out, buying something, or driving them to a station.

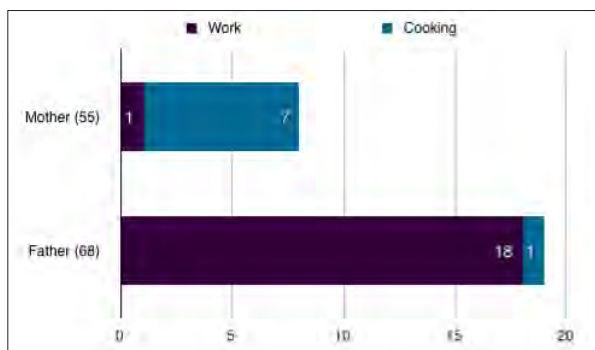


Figure 3. Sentences where mother/father is associated with work/cooking respectively

The sample sentences referring to working women and men showed a further gender imbalance (see Appendix A). In these sentences, men drove to work, worked hard to support their families, came home late, traveled or lived away on business, and continued working until retirement age. However, there were no examples of women doing these things. In addition, men were seen holding a wider variety of jobs (see Appendix B). Women were represented in only six jobs: teacher, pianist, actress, film director, nurse, and receptionist. One possible consequence of these depictions is that such gender stereotyping could bias students' views of their future job possibilities (Porreca, 1984).

Some other topics associated with either women or men are shown in Figure 4. For example, cooking was almost exclusively associated with women although professional cooks were mostly depicted as men (see Appendix C). Women were overwhelmingly associated with fashion, while the topics of cars, computers, and sports were represented as the domain of men.

Discussion

Schools are places where inequities, such as those based on gender, can be challenged and potentially transformed through a better selection of materials that more equally represent various identity groups (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996, p. 261). However, in the Japanese high school writing textbooks examined, women (especially working women) were definitely underrepresented and stereotypical gender roles persisted. As a result, these textbooks may reinforce gender differences and inequalities (Swann, as cited in Freeman & McElhinny, 1996, p. 263).

There were some signs of increased gender role awareness, however. For example, some of the text-

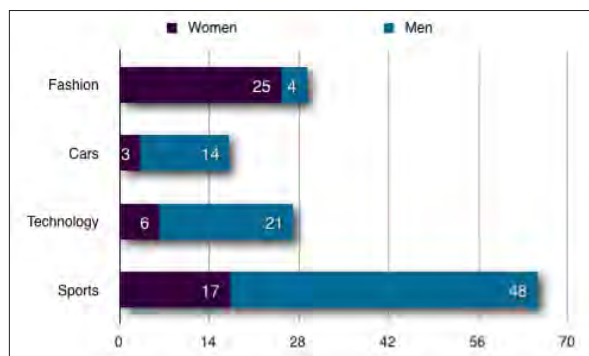


Figure 4. Number of sentences associated with specific topics

books had a section dealing with gender-neutral expressions. *Polestar* and *Unicorn*, for example, explicitly told students to use *human beings* instead of the generic *man*, and to use *they* or *he or she* as a pronoun for *everyone*. *Crown* (Shimozaki et al., 2008, p. 28) also explained gender-neutral expressions in a section entitled *discriminatory language*, such as in this example:

- My aunt was a *stewardess* when she was young.
- Her mother was a *policeman* before getting married.

Students were instructed to replace the words in italics with *flight attendant* and *police officer* respectively. It was unfortunate, however, that these sentences portrayed women as people who usually quit in mid-career, which rarely happened with men in the textbooks. It would be more appropriate if students were simply asked to write:

- My aunt **is** a flight attendant.
- Her mother **is** a police officer.

Overall, the sample sentences contained few examples of women in leadership roles, such as *chairperson*, *businessperson*, or *police officer*. Terms such as *doctor*, *professor*, or *winner* also tended to be exclusively male, so despite signs of growing sensitivity toward gender-neutral language, there remains room for improvement.

In some textbooks, examples of lip service paid towards working women or gender equality could be found. For example, the *Women's Working Conditions* lesson in *Genius* began with this sentence: "Today in Japan, most single women and more than half of married women have jobs" (Sano et al., 2008, p. 118). However, this reality was not reflected in the rest of the textbook. In a *Voyager* lesson dealing with gender equality, students were asked to learn expressions for making suggestions. One of the sample sentences was, "Why don't we abandon

the idea that women should stay home while men work outside?" (Minamimura et al., 2008, p. 83). However, this proposal was not supported on other pages of the textbook, where women working outside the home seldom appeared. Another sample sentence from *Voyager* was, "Why not give up the idea that men are superior to women?" However well-intentioned, this sentence seemed to paradoxically emphasize that the idea of male superiority did indeed exist.

It is clear from the findings that the textbooks reviewed do not reflect principles outlined in the Japanese government's 1999 Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. In actual fact, there are no specific guidelines concerning gender equality in the textbook authorization criteria set up by the government. As a result, the realization of gender equality in textbooks solely depends on author awareness of sexism and personal efforts to eliminate it.

In order to better implement governmental policy, guidelines for creating nonsexist textbooks should be drawn up. Hartman and Judd (1978, p. 392), with their textbook assessment checklist, provide some examples of possible guidelines:

- Is there a roughly equal quantity of gender-linked referents?
- Are both men and women shown in a variety of roles?
- Are men shown with children, doing dishes, cooking meals, etc?

Once adequate guidelines such as these are set, a system needs to be set into place to ensure they are followed.

Increasing the number of female textbook authors is another good idea. Although women may not always be gender-conscious, more female co-authors may aid in detecting and dealing with examples of gender imbalance. More importantly, an increase in the number of female authors would also constitute an actual demonstration of the Japanese government's already existing commitment to promote gender equality.

Gender stereotyping is widespread, very often occurs unintentionally, and often goes unnoticed (Schmenk, 2004, p. 522). The authors of the writing textbooks examined in this study may well have been unaware that working women and cooking men (for example) rarely appeared, especially as they focused on grammatical forms while constructing the sample sentences. Textbooks play a major role in the Japanese high school EFL classroom (Matsuda, 2002; Nakai, 2001), so it is crucial that authors become more aware of the gender imbalances that currently

exist in their materials. Even if the main purpose of the sample sentences is for practicing grammar points, the messages they send may influence the students' view on gender roles. In addition, it should be remembered that awareness of gender imbalance does not automatically lead to its correction. Gender roles are so deeply ingrained in society that without conscious effort, removing sexism from textbooks will not be possible (Hartman & Judd, 1978). Raising awareness should thus be considered a vital first step and not an end in and of itself.

Conclusion

This study examined the sample sentences used to highlight key grammar points in five writing textbooks used in Japanese senior high schools in terms of gender representation. The results indicated the following gender imbalances:

- Women were less visible than men
- Housework and child care were mostly assigned to mothers
- Working women rarely appeared
- Men enjoyed much more diverse occupational roles than women
- Cooking and fashion were usually associated with women
- Work, cars, technology, and sports were often associated with men

These findings show that the principles established by the government to promote gender equality are not reflected in these government-approved textbooks. In addition, these textbooks failed to match up with current realities in Japanese society, where many women are already working outside their homes. In order to create nonsexist textbooks, it is first necessary to become aware of current examples of gender imbalance and then make conscious efforts to correct them. Examples of such efforts include establishment of clear guidelines, a means for enforcing them, and adding more female authors.

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Appendices

The appendices for this article can be downloaded from <jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2009/0902b.pdf>.

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