Japanese EFL Student Perception of Gender Representation

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Efforts to offer women the same advantages as men in Japanese society have been less successful than those in many other nations; a key report ranked Japan in 114th place (of 144) on a number of key measures (World Economic Forum, 2017). In order to explore attitudes among Japanese young people on matters of gender, 155 students at a private university in West Japan were questioned on their perceptions of equality in their own country and, as a point of comparison, in English-speaking societies. Although it was acknowledged that the gender balance was skewed somewhat more strongly in favour of males in Japan than in the Anglosphere, it was generally felt that progress was being made and neither female nor male participants appeared to be seriously concerned about the matter.

他国に比べ、日本の男女平等化は成功していないと言える。世界的に認められているWorld Economic Forum（2017）によると、日本は世界男女格差指数ランキングで144ヶ国中114位である。そこで、西日本の現役私立大学生155人に日本と英語圏での性別バイアスの意識調査を行ったところ、結果は英語圏に比べると、日本の方がまだ平等になるには時間がかかりそうではあるものの、少しずつ女性差別が減少していると感じており、男女学生とも、この問題をあまり大きい問題と捉えていないように見えた。

As global movements towards gender parity make gradual progress, Japanese society remains a bastion of male power (World Economic Forum, 2017). Although the causes of such imbalance cannot be firmly identified, educators can play a part in either reinforcing the status quo or precipitating change. The former may lead educators to forfeit the opportunity to help balance societal gender roles. Measuring the opposing effects of honouring these roles or of advocating gender equality in the classroom is impractical and potentially unethical. Before carrying out such extensive research in the classroom, an attempt is needed to uncover what learners think about matters of gender perception and balance. If it were to turn out that learners prefer not to deal with measures that are potentially able to alter the gender imbalance, the case for equality in the classroom might need to be made to them more strongly.

In this paper I will review literature of relevance to gender bias in language and education, particularly in the EFL classroom, before reporting on an exploratory questionnaire that was carried out among 155 students at a private university in West Japan. In the questionnaire, students were asked for their interpretation of existing gender imbalance in society, language, and the classroom, in both Japan and English-speaking countries. Respondents were also asked how concerned they were about gender bias. The results will be followed by a discussion of their implications.

Literature Review

Although Japanese women are able to enjoy financial comfort and a decent education, these benefits come with an expectation to conform to maternal stereotypes (Buckley, 1997). In fact, there is comparatively low female participation in the political and economic arenas (Hicks, 2010; Skov & Moeran, 2003), with Japan ranking 114th out of 144 countries for gender equality in the report by the World Economic Forum (2017). This compares to rankings in what Vucetic (2011) called the Anglosphere (the U.S.A., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand) of 45th (the U.S.A.), 35th (Canada), 20th (the UK), 46th (Australia), and 9th (New Zealand). In Japan, pressures in society force both men and women to conform to their stereotypical roles, meaning that not only are men restricting the freedom of women, but women are also restricting it for themselves (Kitamura, 2008). Hendricks (2015) explored the attitudes of students in Japan to sexism in society and found that, although participants acknowledged its existence, they were

unable to fully grasp the concept, believing it was something that happened in the past. Hendricks's research suffered from being conducted only in English, an L2 for many of the participants.

Sexism in Language

Although elements of the English language do exist that favour one gender group over another (such as diminutive female forms *actor/actress* or *lion/lioness*), it is well known that movements in political correctness have attempted to reduce these. However, forms with male bias are still in widespread use. Society in the Anglosphere has come to recognise that its participants are often disadvantaged by such differences. In English, the nongender-specific uses of the pronoun *he* have declined as a result (Brown, 2007). However, alternatives such as *he/she* or *she/he* are not always satisfactory. The former has been found, like *he*, to elicit mostly male images among male subjects (by giving the female pronoun first it may be possible to reduce female omission); using the plural third person pronoun *they* to refer to singular people of undefined gender appears to remove some of these problems (Gastil, 1990). Whether the language is inherently sexist or whether its masculine advantage is caused by its users cannot be declared decisively. However, the belittling or omission of women through the language used to refer to them does not sit comfortably with notions of equality. In addition, it is true that linguistic differences such as those given here do not apply universally across all cultures (Wardhaugh, 2010). In Japanese, linguistic differences that have been identified centre in particular around syntactic variants, intonation, and nonverbal expressions (Brown, 2007).

Sexism in the Classroom

Sexist behaviours may be learned in the classroom. Male participants are seen as being dominant in classrooms (Sunderland, 1992), and female students in Japan have been observed adopting traditionally male language forms in order to compete (Reynolds, 1998). However, an understanding of the negative effects of male dominance can lead to behavioural change. Frawley (2005) warned against setting up "boy versus girl" activities, pointing out that teachers would be reluctant to segregate students according to ethnicity or other demographic features. Another way of raising awareness of the benefits of equality is through employing female teachers. A U.S. study found that students demonstrated fewer gender stereotypes when they had been taught by females (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004). However, Japanese university faculties, on average, contain only 10-20% females (Inuzuka, 2014). Even against a background of such imbalance, student teachers,

in this case in Turkey, indicated that they would rather avoid "controversial" topics in class, while claiming that gender imbalance in lesson materials is a mere reflection of society (Kızılaslan, 2010).

Gender bias can be manifested in all aspects of society, and this paper is focused specifically on its role in the EFL classroom, as this learning situation serves as the forum where the research was carried out. Previous research has revealed gender bias in the EFL forum, such as in teaching materials, even in more recently published textbooks (Lee, 2014), This paper is intended to serve as a follow-up to research by the author (Musty, 2015) that also recognised the existence of a male power bias in a recent textbook, projected through linguistic phenomenon such as listing male words first (*he/she*; see Hartmann & Judd, 1978) or the depiction of men in professions that are typically more highly paid than those of female characters.

Method

Participants

Participants came from mandatory 1st- and 2nd-year classes in the faculty of economics at a large private Japanese university. Students are placed in general English classes of around 30 mixed-ability students, separated according to their TOEIC scores. Those who took part in the study are all likely to have scored anything up to 600. The classes were taught by a native English speaker, the author of this paper. Time was assigned in class to respond although participation was anonymous and not compulsory. In total, 155 students responded, 53 female and 102 male.

Procedure

Based on a review of relevant literature, questions were compiled with the aim of exploring, as opposed to confirming, student perceptions on gender representation in society in general as well as in the EFL classroom in particular. At the initial stage of this research, the aim was to make some general investigations regarding views on the topic of gender, and to that end a set of 10 questions (see Appendixes A and B) was compiled. First, identifying the gender of respondents was thought to be of relevance as results have been found to be influenced by this variable (Wardhaugh, 2010). Subsequent questions were aimed at finding out whether respondents could identify sexism in any of the domains concerned: the culture of a particular society (Tannen, 1994; Wardhaugh, 2010), its language (Brown, 2007), the classroom (Reynolds, 1998; Swann, 1992), or the class textbook (Lee, 2014; Musty, 2015). Where appropriate, questions sought the

respondents' perception of the extent to which they agreed that a male bias was felt to be apparent in both Japan and the Anglosphere (the author does not take the position that the Anglosphere countries share a single culture, but the five countries are taken as a reference point with which to compare Japanese society, which is the main focus here). Respondents were then asked to state how important they felt equality of gender representation to be in three domains (society, the English classroom, and textbooks). Finally, they were asked to leave an optional comment.

After the initial 10 items had been selected, they were discussed with a peer and then, with the assistance of a native Japanese speaker, translated into Japanese. Another Japanese national, with experience in academic publishing, then looked through the translations and confirmed that they were clear and consistent with the English originals. The items were then entered, in both English and Japanese, into an online Google form. Question one operates a binary option of *female* or *male*; questions 2 to 9 use a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 meaning *strongly disagree*, 2 *disagree*, 3 *agree* and 4 *strongly agree*. The reason for choosing an even number of points (4) on the scale was to avoid allowing respondents to take a neutral option. Participants were asked for their perceptions and therefore were not expected to offer expert opinions. Rather, they were asked to identify whether or not they agreed with each item and whether their agreement (or lack of) was strong or not. The final item was included to seek comments.

The data were first analysed using the mean and standard deviation scores of items 2 to 9 in order to ascertain the views of the population. A second analysis compared female and male responses in order to examine whether or not there was a difference in perception between sexes (Brown, 1998; Dörnyei, 2007). A third and final analysis only compared the strong opinions, in other words those reported as either a 1 or a 4 on the Likert scale. Having not been offered a neutral response, respondents were forced to either agree or disagree. Therefore, disregarding responses of 2 or 3, which can be assumed to be relatively neutral, and focusing on only responses of 1 or 4 allowed for a comparison of only those respondents with clearly defined opinions.

Results

The results are set out in Tables 1 and 2. More respondents indicated that male dominance was encouraged in Japan (M = 2.54) than in the Anglosphere (M = 2.22). Although neither language was strongly perceived to encourage male dominance, bias was thought to be more closely attached to Japanese (M = 2.05 vs. M = 1.99). Regarding class textbooks, all but six participants agreed that gender balance was apparent (M = 3.42), with none disagreeing strongly. Only six students disagreed that it was important

for men and women to be represented as equal in society (M = 3.47). Statement 7 contains two proposals: that men and women be seen as equal and that this equality is important. It therefore cannot be assumed that those six students thought it important that men and women be represented as different. Proportions were similar regarding the importance of representation in both English class (M = 3.43) and in EFL teaching materials (M = 3.28), with a slightly higher number of respondents disagreeing that each was important for them.

Table 1. Overview of Results (N = 155)

Item no.	Item	M	SD	Female (n = 53)		Male (n = 102)	
				M	SD	M	SD
2	Japanese culture encourages male dominance.	2.54	0.72	2.60	0.63	2.51	0.77
3	The Japanese language encourages male dominance.	2.05	0.76	1.94	0.63	2.11	0.82
4	The culture of English-speaking countries encourages male dominance.	2.22	0.69	2.30	0.64	2.18	0.71
5	The English language encourages male dominance.	1.99	0.68	2.00	0.56	1.99	0.74
6	The textbooks we use in English language class are well balanced for gender.	3.42	0.57	3.49	0.58	3.38	0.65
7	It is important for me that women are represented as equal to men in society.	3.47	0.62	3.60	0.49	3.39	0.66
8	It is important for me that women are treated as equal to men in English class.	3.43	0.61	3.40	0.57	3.44	0.64
9	It is important for me that women are represented as equal to men in the textbooks we use in English class.	3.28	0.69	3.26	0.71	3.28	0.68

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree

The eight comments made (see Table 2) can be broadly categorised into three groups: respondents who are concerned about gender imbalance working against women (comments 1, 4, 5, and possibly 2); those who appear to support the existing system (comments 6, 7, and 8); and two who had not considered the matter before but appreciated the opportunity to study it (comments 2 and 3).

Table 2. Comments (in Translation)

Number Gender	Comments
1 F	In France, I felt that there was a culture of gender discrimination, which I also felt from the language.
2 M	I had never considered about gender in textbooks but I was glad to be able to realise that such a problem exists.
3 M	I have learnt something!
4 M	I think it's an area that needs continual improvements and prudence.
5 M	The tendency in Japan was once for male dominance but I think that great improvements have been made. However, it's difficult to say that the process of creating an equal society is complete.
6 M	I've heard that in societies with powerful females, the birth rate is lower.
7 F	I've never really felt disadvantaged by my gender but it seems that, in comparison with women, there are more things that men are required to do. Around me, unavoidable dinner events involve men more than women.
8 M	There is an increasing tendency towards providing opportunities for women in society so I think it is fine to continue in this way.

On the whole, female and male respondents did not show a great deal of difference in their answers. Female participants in general expressed that it was important for their gender to be represented equally in society (100% gave a response of 3 or 4, $M = 3.60$), the English classroom (96%, $M = 3.40$), and its textbooks (87%, $M = 3.26$); male responses were generally close to this (94% $M = 3.392$; 94%, $M = 3.441$; and 88% $M = 3.284$ respectively). On these three measures, two male respondents (less than 2%) expressed a strong level of disagreement with the proposition (compared to none of the female respondents). Although it is possible to find some small discrepancies, it would appear that perceptions of gender bias do not show significant difference according to gender.

In comparing responses of only strong agreement or disagreement, the number of responses is massively reduced in Items 2 to 6 (a reduction of between 73.6% [Item 3] and 86.5% [Item 2]) when compared to the full range of responses. While it is not surprising that results cluster around the centre of the scale, this smaller sample suggests that the respondents with more clearly defined opinions also perceive that neither Japan and its language nor English-speaking countries and their language are thought to have particular problems of male bias. There was a much higher level of agreement that textbooks are well balanced (Item 6): 71 participants strongly agreed and none strongly disagreed. Regarding the importance of equal gender representation in society and the classroom, there was also a comparatively high level of strong agreement: 80 respondents felt strongly that a well-balanced society is important for them (Item 7), while only two strongly disagreed. Seventy-five respondents strongly believed that female students deserve equal treatment to their male counterparts in the classroom, while only one strongly disagreed (Item 8). Sixty-one participants felt strongly that genders should be equally represented in EFL textbooks, while three strongly disagreed (Item 9). Although this demonstrates a strong sentiment that men and women should be offered equal opportunities, these relatively high levels of agreement are in contrast to the percentage of respondents who felt that Japanese culture (Item 2: strongly agree, $n = 7$; strongly disagree, $n = 14$) and language (Item 3: strongly agree, $n = 4$; strongly disagree, $n = 37$) encourage male dominance. As for the Anglosphere, the perception of male bias was less than that of Japan in terms of both culture (Item 4: strongly agree, $n = 3$; strongly disagree, $n = 20$) and language (Item 5: strongly agree, $n = 2$; strongly disagree, $n = 34$).

Discussion

This research indicates that the university learners of English in this study attach some degree of importance to gender representation. They tentatively acknowledge that society (in Japan and, to a lesser extent, in English-speaking countries) does contain some male bias. Gender bias is regarded as being a problem of culture in general rather than one of language, and very few respondents were concerned about gender imbalance in

their class textbooks. Respondent concern for gender imbalance in Japanese society may seem at odds with the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2017), which suggested that this male bias is a far greater problem than that perceived by the majority of these participants. Although the scales are incomparable, the results of this study do show that the respondents agree slightly with the World Economic Forum study, that gender inequality is more prevalent in Japan.

Subconscious reinforcement of traditional gender values is said to be a potential risk of EFL textbooks used where such values already exist (Sakita, 1995). Although recent studies have suggested that current textbooks do contain some instances of gender bias (Lee, 2014; Musty, 2015), the representation of gender in the numerous books being studied by participants in this research are not under investigation in this paper. Respondents were apparently not concerned by sexism in their coursebooks but subtle values may simply have been overlooked, particularly if they appear to match those of the participants' own culture. An alternative textbook that makes deliberate attempts to subvert traditional gender positioning (e.g., through the use of *she/he*) has the potential to challenge these roles. On the other hand, learners attending a class on a weekly basis for one or two semesters are bound to be less concerned with their textbook than with their own societal roles.

Conclusion

The existence of a bias towards male power in Japan was generally acknowledged by respondents to this survey, who felt that gender equality in Japan has not progressed as much as that in the English-speaking world. Language or even the language classroom and its textbooks were not thought to be as much a matter of concern as the general culture of the society. Japan's ranking in the *Global Gender Gap Report*, in a lower position to that of the previous year or even that of 10 years earlier (World Economic Forum, 2017), does not fit well with comments from respondents to this study, such as the respondent who felt that "it is fine to continue in this way."

The results presented in this paper reflect the views of a sample of learners, all of whom belong to the same faculty of the same university. Therefore, it is an opportunity sample, which does have a limiting effect on its generalisability (Dörnyei, 2007). For this reason, findings are only presented in a descriptive manner, and the use of inferential statistics has been avoided. The study could have benefitted from a qualitative element, pursuing the ideas presented in order to understand what factors are considered to be of most significance in the area of gender representation. Future studies could approach this in the form of interviews or through a further questionnaire consisting of open

questions. In addition, research into suggested solutions by the respondents to the current problem would be able to provide some ideas for how the next generation of adults perceive gender issues developing in future. This matter is one that educators can get involved in and is an opportunity to bring about change for a more balanced future society.

Bio Data

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Appendix A
Items in the Questionnaire (English)

No.	Item	Options
1	Are you female or male?	Female, Male
2	Japanese culture encourages male dominance	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
3	The Japanese language encourages male dominance	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
4	The culture of English speaking countries encourages male dominance	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
5	The English language encourages male dominance	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
6	The textbooks we use in English language class are well balanced for gender	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
7	It is important for me that women are represented as equal to men in society	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
8	It is important for me that women are treated as equally to men in English class	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
9	It is important for me that women are represented as equal to men in the textbooks we use in English class	1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly agree
10	Please write any comments you have on this topic (in English or Japanese)	

Appendix B
Items in the Questionnaire (Japanese)

No.	Item	Options
1	あなたの性別	女性, 男性
2	日本の文化は、男性優位を助長していると思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
3	日本語は男性優位を助長していると思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
4	英語圏の文化は男性優位を助長していると思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
5	英語は男性優位を助長していると思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
6	今英語の授業で使っている教科書はだいたい性別のバランスが取れていると思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
7	社会で性別の立場のバランスが取れている事は私にとって大切だと思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
8	英語の授業で性別の立場のバランスが取れている事は私にとって大切だと思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
9	英語の授業に使っている教科書で性別のバランスは私にとって大切だと思います。	1 (強く反対する), 2 (反対する), 3 (賛成する), 4 (強く賛成する)
10	以上についての意見があれば、入力してください（英語でも日本語でも構いません）。	