

A Critical Analysis of Gender Representation in an EFL Textbook

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Abstract

This paper analyzes an EFL textbook entitled *Conversation Topics for Japanese University Students*, published by the researcher in 1994, using Porecca (1978) and Leiskin's (2001) theoretical frameworks for investigating the gender representation of male and female textbook characters. Gender imbalance of textbook characters that has been noted in previous studies was not found in this book. In contrast, the female characters were more visible and played more active roles than male characters. Although a number of gender stereotypes, which were mainly related to the topics, were found, it appeared to be that a conscientious effort was made to counterbalance gendered stereotypical ideals and that there was no social dominance of one gender over another in terms of sentence structure.

1. Introduction

Examples of sexism in ESL/EFL (English as a second language/English as a foreign language) textbooks provided by Hartman and Judd (1978) and Porecca (1984) seem almost laughably out-of-date nowadays. It is hard to imagine language-teaching materials today containing sentences stereotyping the sexes such as "Boys become men. Girls become housewives" (Alt and Kirkland, 1973, cited in Hartman and Judd, 1978), or with sentences that trivialize a woman's profession by "adding a title to differentiate its referent from the norm—a male" (Porecca, 1978, p. 717), as in the following example: "A T.V. host is interviewing a famous *woman* author who is eighty-five years old" (Fingado, Freeman, Jerome, and Summers, cited in Porecca, p. 717). Not only was sexist language found to be rampant, the number of female characters and their participation in dialogues were far fewer than male characters. An example of this was found in a study carried out by ETHEL (cited in Jones, Kitetue & Sunderland, 1997), where in the textbook *Functions of English* (1977), fifteen dialogues occurred between two or three men, eight

between a man and a woman, and none took place between women only. Such a discrepancy in gender could lead to female students having fewer chances to practice language than male students.

What makes these examples from the above textbooks even more surprising is that they were mainly authored by women. Of the 27 authors in the 16 textbooks analyzed by Hartman and Judd, 59% were women, and out of the 29 authors in the 15 textbooks analyzed by Porecca, 62% were women. In fact, in Porecca's study, the author of the textbook with the most examples of sexism was a woman. One might consider that these women were merely products of their time, and such sexist writing would be unlikely to occur today. However, recent analyses of EFL and linguistic materials have found sexism exists in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic representation (e.g. Sunderland, 1992; Jones, Kitetu & Sunderland, 1997; and Ma, 1998; Farooq, 1999; Cook, 2005). As Freire (1970) says, the views of the oppressors can become internalized in the oppressed, and thus make it difficult for those who are oppressed to become free of the constraints of the oppressors, which in this case are textbook writers. Hartman and Judd (1978) support this notion and caution, "Stereotypical images are far too ingrained on our unconscious imaginations to allow us to produce nonsexist ESOL materials without thinking about it. No one, not even the ardent feminist, is immune" (1978, p. 392). Because of this, they assert, "ESL professionals should review their own writings (and pictures) for the sexual attitudes they portray" (p. 392).

Considering Hartman and Judd's (1978) words of advice for EFL material writers, I decided to review an EFL textbook I had written in 1994 to investigate sexism that I myself may have unwittingly internalized and reproduced in the textbook. This study should not only improve my own materials writing skills, but also provide useful insight or developing future EFL materials in the Japanese context.

2. Method

The textbook analyzed in this paper is called *Conversation Topics for Japanese University Students* (1994), a topic-based, three skills (reading, listening, and speaking) book. The book is comprised of 20 chapters, each with a short reading followed by vocabulary exercises, a task listening exercise, conversation practice, and a crossword puzzle. Each chapter is designed so that it can be completed within a 90-minute period, which is a typical time frame for most university classes in Japan. The topics were selected based upon my experience as a university English teacher in Japan, and include the following:

- | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Dating | 6. Illness | 11. Driving | 16. Food |
| 2. Weekends | 7. Fashion | 12. The Telephone | 17. Cooking |
| 3. Movies | 8. Shopping | 13. AIDS | 18. Christmas |
| 4. Television | 9. Travel | 14. Astrology | 19. Valentine's Day |
| 5. Staying Healthy | 10. Parties | 15. Careers | 20. Weather |

Adopting Porecca's (1984) framework, the illustrations, dialogues, and readings were analyzed for the following:

- Visibility

- Gender firstness
- Gender neutral and gender specific nouns
- Gender stereotypes

Visibility refers to actual presence of female characters, both in text and in illustrations. Firstness refers to the number of times a male or female character appears first in a reading, a dialogue, or an exercise. The number of gender-neutral nouns (such as teacher or person), gender-specific nouns (such as a mother or housewife), and gender stereotypes (such as a female character cooking, a male character working on a car) were counted.

Then, using Leiskin's (2001) theoretical framework, which is based upon the work of Halliday (1985), three chapters were randomly selected for analysis to determine if gender bias existed in terms of communicative prominence and social prominence.

Clauses within each of the readings and conversations were examined for theme, rheme, and last stressed element. According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), the theme is the psychological subject, which is the starting point of the message. The rheme is the remaining part of the message, which develops the theme. The last stressed element and the theme carry a great deal of importance in a message, and according to Leiskin, people displayed in a theme or a last stressed element position are in a position of communicative prominence. She says:

People who are centers of conversations, topics of writing, or the information focus would seem to have more social prominence than people who are not. We communicate about people who in some way interest us or are important to us; those who are not of interest are not the focus. Thus people can be perceived as having different degrees of social prominence by the degree of interest shown in them (p. 277).

Leiskin's method of analysis also provides a way to determine the role of importance the character has. For example, let us look at the following short exchange that could appear in a Japanese EFL textbook:

(A) Hi, where are you doing?

(B) I'm reading a book about careers.

(A) Really? Are you thinking about getting a job already?

(B) Yes. At first I thought I wanted to work for a trading company, but now I think I want to get a job in a bank.

(A) A bank! Won't that be boring?

(B) No. I think that working in finance would be really interesting.

In the conversation above, we can see that (A) asks questions to (B) in order to guide the conversation. Although (A) is the person who initiates the conversation, and thus has a position of firstness, it is (B) who occupies the position of dominance within this conversation as the actor. In

other words, (B) occupies the position of social dominance within this exchange. Looking at textbook characters through this theoretical lens, therefore, may shed more light on how male and female characters are depicted in EFL books than merely counting the number of times men and women appear, and who appears first.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of *Conversation Topics for Japanese University Students*. Section 3.1 shows the instances of visibility and firstness of male and female characters and gendered nouns. Section 3.2 shows the results of sexual stereotypes that occurred in the textbook, and Section 3.3 presents the results of the analysis of three chapters using Leiskin's (2003) framework that focuses on the theme, rheme and last element in clauses.

3.1 Visibility, Firstness and Gendered Nouns

Table 1 shows that in terms of visibility, females appeared in the textbook's illustrations far more often than male characters.

Table 1. Visibility in Illustrations

| | Number of appearances |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Females | 26 |
| Males | 15 |
| Unable to determine | 1 |

Table 2 shows that female characters in the conversation practices have more opportunities to speak than the male characters do. Conversations between women only occurred in 30% of the dialogues, whereas conversations with males only occurred in 5%,

Table 2. Visibility in Conversation Practice Dialogues

| Characters | Visibility |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Female to female | 6 conversations |
| Female to female | 6 conversations |
| Female to male (sometimes with more characters) | 12 conversations |

In addition to being more visually prominent, female characters were found to have uttered more sentences and have more speaking turns than male characters, which is illustrated in Table 3. In addition, female characters were found to initiate conversations almost twice as often as male characters.

Table 3. Sentences, Turns, and Firstness in Conversations

| Characters | Sentences | Turns | Firstness |
|------------|-----------|-------|-----------|
| 15 Males | 134 | 74 | 7 |
| 26 Females | 216 | 122 | 13 |

Table 4 shows the visibility of female characters in the task listening exercises. In Chapter 20, the gender of the speaker is unclear. In these exercises, conversations between female characters only occurred 10% of the time, whereas there were no conversations between males only.

Table 4. Visibility in Task Listening Exercises

| Characters | Visibility |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Male to male | None |
| Female to female | 2 conversations |
| Female to male (sometimes with more than two characters) | 17 conversations |

Table 5 shows that female characters have slightly more speaking turns than male characters. However, males initiate speech 60% of the time.

Table 5. Turns and Firstness in Task Listening Exercises

| Characters | Turns | Firstness |
|------------|-------|-----------|
| 18 Males | 67 | 12 |
| 23 Females | 70 | 8 |

The total number of occurrences of gender-neutral nouns and gender specific nouns were counted in the dialogues, the readings, and the listening practices, and the results are shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Gender Neutral Nouns

| | Number of Occurrences |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| People | 46 |
| Person | 9 |
| Students | 14 |
| Teenagers | 8 |
| Parents | 6 |
| Children | 5 |
| Friends | 5 |
| Families | 5 |
| Guest | 1 |
| Total | 99 |

Table 7. Gender Specific Nouns

| | Number of Occurrences |
|---------|-----------------------|
| Girl | 3 |
| Boy | 2 |
| Men | 1 |
| Hostess | 1 |

Not many occupations were mentioned in the book, but those that were gender specific were actor, actress, housewife, and cowgirl. Other occupations, such as movie producer and teacher, were mentioned in such a way that the gender is undetermined. A doctor appeared twice in the dialogues, once as a male

character and once as a female character.

3.2 Sexist Stereotypes

It was found that there were several instances of sexist stereotypes in the textbook's illustrations. For example, in Chapter 7, "Fashion," a young woman with a perplexed look on her face sits on the floor surrounded by discarded clothing, wondering what to wear. Then, in Chapter 8, "Shopping," only women's clothing and accessories are displayed, suggesting that only women go shopping, and when they do, that it is for fashion items.

Gender stereotyping also occurred in several of the dialogues and task listening exercises. Jenny complains in Chapter 6 that she has nothing to wear to a party. She ignores David's suggestion by saying, "That old thing? I wouldn't be caught dead in it. It's out of style, and besides, everyone who will be at the party has already seen it" (p. 36). She says that she will "try to convince her father to loan [her] the money" (p. 36) in order to buy a new dress instead. Several other examples can be found in Chapter 17, which focuses on cooking. The reading says that anyone can learn how to cook if they want to, but gives the following suggestion: "One of the best ways to learn cooking is to ask your mother to show you how to make your favorite foods" (p. 86), assuming that a person's mother is the most qualified for teaching cooking. This stereotype appears again in the conversation practice of the same chapter where Susan asks her mother to show her how to bake a cake. The strongest sexist stereotype in the entire book occurs in the task listening exercise of this chapter, in which Joe, a bumbling husband, tries to help out in the kitchen. He drops the eggs instead, perpetuating the idea that a man is not capable in a kitchen.

3.3 Theme, rheme and last element

The readings of three chapters (Chapters 6, 10 and 16) were chosen at random, and all of the sentences were analyzed in terms of theme, rheme, and last element to see if sexism exists at these levels. Only three sentences including incidences of gender specific nouns and pronouns were found:

1. "By putting the food out all at once, the hostess is able to enjoy the party more than if she had to keep running back and forth to the kitchen" (p. 49)
2. "These days cooking ethnic food is not only limited to the ladies" (p. 81)
3. "A lot of young men take pleasure in learning how to cook something foreign for their friends" (p. 81).

Leiskin's theoretical framework includes six procedural steps for analysis (see p. 278), but because only three sentences were found that involved gender specific pronouns and nouns, I decided to abandon steps 3, 4, and 5. The majority of the roles in the readings, the speakers, the sensers, the tokens, the sayers, and the behaviors (p. 280) were, for the most part, non-gendered. They were "everyone," "child," "you," "people," and "friend."

4. Discussion

Conversation Topics for Japanese University Students did not have the same type of gender imbalance

regarding visibilities as noted in some of the early studies of gender representation in EFL materials (e.g. Hartman & Judd, 1978; Porecca, 1984). In contrast, female characters in this book were much more visible and seemed to play more active roles than male characters. They had a visual majority by appearing in 62% of the illustrations that included people. The majority of the characters speaking in conversations and task listening exercises were female, which is not surprising considering a number of conversations took place between women only. Women spoke first 65% of the time in conversations and 40% of the time in the task listening exercises. Although there was no great difference in who speaks first in the dialogues in this textbook, it is worth noting that whoever spoke first tended to have more speaking turns.

A number of gender stereotypes in the textbook, however, were discovered. These stereotypes appeared to be mostly related to the topics. My original aim in writing this textbook was to provide Japanese university students something to talk about, but upon closer examination, many of the topics appeared to be aimed at what I perceived *female* students would want to talk about, particularly chapters dealing with dating, shopping, fashion and cooking. It could be said that the topics reflected reality to a certain extent: women do sometimes worry about what to wear to a party and young people may ask their mothers how to prepare a certain type of food. At the same time, however, female characters in the textbook did discuss meatier topics as well, such as AIDS, careers, and travel.

In chapters that appeared to be gender-biased in content, efforts were made, nevertheless, to counterbalance stereotypical ideas. For example, a sentence in Chapter 17 says that anyone can become a good cook if they just practice, and that cookbooks are available for children, teenagers, students, men and new brides, moving way from the idea that only and all women cook (which is still a commonly believed notion in Japan).

Even the chapter on fashion strays from stereotypical images as the following excerpt shows:

Someone who is working in an office would probably need tailored skirts and jackets, and a housewife would need to have casual and comfortable clothes for working at home. The same principles of smart shopping also apply to men who want to buy clothes. Unless a person is wealthy, it is a smart idea to plan fashion purchases carefully. By examining your wardrobe.... (p. 34).

In this excerpt, it is assumed that both men and women shop for clothing, but the illustration at the beginning of the chapter does not present this image. The phrase “Someone working in an office...” may bring an image of a male character to students’ minds, but when the rest of the sentence gives advice regarding tailored skirts—clearly a female fashion item—stereotypical images of male office workers may shift.

The most important finding through the analysis of this textbook was the lack of gender bias in terms of sentence structure in the readings, which prevented gender social dominance. In almost all cases, gender-neutral nouns were chosen. Main actors were “people” with 46 occurrences, followed by “students,” “teenagers,” and “person.” Some sentences such as the following occurred: “It is still very common for

a boy to pay for a girl on a date. But when they get to know each other, it is common for the couple to go Dutch. And sometimes the girl will treat the boy when they go out” (p. 2). The boy is the actor in one sentence and the girl is the recipient of the action, but the pattern reverses itself in the next sentence when the girl is the actor and the boy is the recipient. However, it was found that in most of the sentences in the textbook, the genders of the actors and of the recipients are unclear.

In terms of pronouns, the most commonly used pronoun was “you.” Many readings were conversational in tone, as the following sentence demonstrates: “When you hear the word ‘Hollywood,’ what is the first thing that comes to your mind? If you are like most people, you probably think of movies” (p. 12). In such sentences, readers can assume that the text is addressing them, and not a member of the opposite sex. In addition, plural pronouns were generally used to avoid the problematic “he or she,” although an exception to this was found on page 54.

5. Conclusion

When I wrote this textbook in 1994, I was unaware of the imbalance of female representation in EFL textbooks. I therefore undertook this analysis of the first EFL textbook that I had written with some apprehension. Lesikin (2003) warns that ingrained sexism is difficult to avoid, so I was worried that I may have inadvertently promoted sexist ideals through this textbook. However, my analysis revealed that sexist language and sexist stereotypes were minimal. Instances of gender stereotypes were found mostly in the illustrations (which were drawn by a professional illustrator).

It was somewhat surprising, however, to find that the female characters showed far more visibility than the male characters. One plausible explanation for why this occurred may be that the target audience I had in mind at the time of the writing was my students, who were predominately female.

At that time I selected topics that I believed my students would like to talk about in class. Since then, however, I discovered that students, both male and female, like to talk about more serious topics than most of those in *Conversation Topics for Japanese University Students*. Nevertheless, this book is still in print and there are still a few teachers who seem to be using this book every year. Although the book is quite outdated now, students who study English using this book will find that female characters are strongly represented, and no social dominance of one gender over another exists in terms of sentence structure.

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