Gender Bias in Language Textbooks

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Introduction

According to Beebe (1996), it is important that teachers pay attention to gendered language because language is not value-free, lifeless, or free of political bias. It is possible that exposure to gender-biased texts may influence women's behaviour in such a way as to restrict their "social, behavioral, and linguistic roles" also, female students conscious of the fewer number of female characters with limited roles could feel offended, alienated, marginalized, demotivated, and disempowered (Sunderland, 1992a, Beebe, 1996, Porreca, 1997, Jones, et al, 1997).

Ma (1998) argues that because the educational system maintains sexist elements and reinforces the already-existing gender roles and stereotypes, students learning a second or foreign language might "internalize images of male and female gender roles based on what they have learned from textbooks (pp. 13). What women learn then may shape their identity, roles, and behaviour (p. 3). If female students are not completely familiar with a culture, they may accept what they see at face value. Says Lesikin (2001), "the textbook may influence how our students view their own social power relative to that of others as they sort out a new gendered identity in the acculturation process" (p. 280). This is particularly true of younger learners, who tend not to question what they read and to trust the printed word more than adults (Porreca, 1984).

Hartman and Judd (1978) were the first to explore the issue of gender bias in ESL materials. Since then, other (predominantly female) researchers, such as Porreca (1984) and Ma (1998) have undertaken charting the progress of ESL materials in ensuring that women are portrayed in a fair and equal light. However, this research found that while small changes have occurred, there is work yet to be done.

This paper examines gender-based language and portrayals of women as they have appeared in textbooks in the distant and recent past, under the headings characteristics of gender-biased language; male and female presence; characteristics of women, female expression and power relationships; women's roles, activities and conversational topics; and visual depiction and description of women. At the end, recommendations for teachers are suggested.

Characteristics of gender-biased language

Beebe (1996) discusses morphemic marking by sex in words with '-ess', '-ette' and '-trix' endings. She, along with Hartman and Judd (1978) argue that these suffixes carry the idea "that the female is a subset, a deviation, a secondary classification" that a person's gender is unnecessarily specified, and that they "carry the sense of littleness or cuteness" (Maggio, 1992,

cited in Beebe, 1996, p. 105). Sunderland (1992b) adds that feminine forms of words are seen as "less prestigious", and words about women are under- or over-lexicalized (p. 82). Another similar problem occurs when the word"woman"is used as an adjective before"lawyer", "doctor", or "author"; thus underscoring the irrelevant fact that the occupation is held by a woman (Porreca, 1984).

Another issue is that of the "generic masculine", which far from being strictly generic, excludes women, "interferes with clear communication" and has caused legal and employment injustices (Hartman and Judd, 1978, Porreca, 1984, Beebe, 1996). Pugsley (1992) citing the research of Martyna and DeStefano (1978) notes that not only the generic masculine, but also supposed "inclusive" terminology ("mankind", etc.) calls to mind images of males (p. 6).

The meanings of certain words, such as "feminine", "masculine", "manly", "womanly", "mannish", and "effeminate", themselves perpetuate sexual stereotyping. They imply that certain behaviour is appropriate to one, but not the other sex, and that rewards and penalties are given by society to those who conform, or fail to conform to sex-role expectations. Hartman and Judd (1978) note that "taken as a set, such sex-linked words are tools for keeping all of us, men and women, in our places" (p. 390). Other words are used in such a way as to connote distinct negative associations, such as "mother-in-law", or sexual undertones, such as "provocative" (Porreca, p. 716).

Female and Male Presence

Hartman and Judd (1978), Porreca (1984), and Sunderland (1992b) found that a characteristic of many textbooks was the "absence of female characters" (p. 18). Hartman and Judd (1978) note that worse than omission is the "use of women as a class as the butt of jokes particularly those in which women are portrayed as overly-curious, changeable, superficial, and greedy or in jokes trivializing feminism (p. 385). The studies of Ma (1998) and Lesikin (2001) found that more males than females were depicted; in the latter, males dominated positions of communicative prominence (p. 279). Hartman and Judd (1978), Porreca (1984), and Sunderland (1992b) also mention 'male firstness' ; that in certain word groupings, such as "men/ women" or "boyfriend/girlfriend", the masculine word precedes the feminine.

Poulou (1997) notes that in her study of Greek language textbooks, that there were more utterances by males in dialogues. In addition, males initiated and completed dialogues more often. What this means is that in class, where students practice mixed-sex dialogues, males are likely to have more opportunities to practice than females (p. 70).

Characteristics of women, female expression, and power relationships

Hartman and Judd (1978) saw women depicted as over-emotional, easily frightened, angry, nagging, and having a tendency to faint. Jaworski (1983) found that women were portrayed as being unpunctual, complaining, forgetful, absentminded, awkward, intellectually dependent, jealous, and suspicious. Sunderland (1992b) added weak, timid, scheming and malicious to the list (p. 17). Pugsley (1992) citing Talansky's (1986) study of English language coursebooks

used in Italy, mentions that when women made infrequent appearances, they were working at menial tasks or exhibiting idiosyncratic traits. Although Ma's (1998) study revealed females as portrayed in a slightly more favourable light, they were only shown as dominant when depicted as mothers or teachers. Unfortunately, they were still shown as being dependent on males, but not on other females (p. 12).

Ma (1998) citing Lakoff (1973) notes the characteristics of "appropriate" women's speech as being less strongly expressed, more uncertainly expressed, and generally inconsequential. Women are spoken of euphemistically, as objects, and their relationships to men are of a dependent nature. Their identities are "linguistically submerged" (p. 3).

Ma (1998) found in a study of eleven ESL reading textbooks, that a "significant degree of gender bias was observed in the assignment of dominant/subservient roles." Dominance was described as "exercising power and influence and/or control over others", while subservience meant being depicted as "serving others, acting in favor of others, and/or putting themselves last" (p. 6).

Women's roles, activities, and conversational topics

It has been revealed that stereotypical roles were ever-present with reference to housework and childrearing (Gaff, 1982; Hartman and Judd, 1978). Outside of the home, women's work consisted primarily of "student, bank employee, nurse, stewardess [and] salesgirl" (Hartman and Judd, p. 387). Porreca (1984) notes that five years later, more occupations were listed for males than for females and that women were still engaged in "traditional" employment. Twenty-years later, Ma's (1998) study found that although women were frequently shown as primary characters, they were portrayed as "either hardworking mothers, school teachers, or involved in women's issues" (p. 11). And, although they were shown as more active than males, they were active in domestic, teaching, or same-sex-related arenas. Gaff (1982) notes that a French textbook, updated fourteen years later, more strongly emphasized the "image of a woman as provider of food" than did the original (p. 77).

Hartman and Judd (1978) cite textbooks in which women are shown having long telephone conversations, finding excuses to buy new clothes, keeping their husbands waiting, and "conniving to find a wealthy husband or lover" (p. 386). Jaworksi's (1983) study saw women's activities including complaining and cleaning, and that they were also portrayed as having a tendency to wander off topic and to need help doing anything requiring brainwork, such as solving a crossword puzzle. Lesikin's (2001) study found that males were actors, strongest participants, had more roles, and were "doers and verbalizers", while females were primarily "sensers" (p. 280).

Jaworski (1983) found that women's usual topics of conversation were, in contrast to men's more "interesting" topics, cooking, child rearing, movie stars, neighbours, and the affairs of others. Sunderland's (1992b) study revealed that women used to language to talk about other people, accept invitations, and agree. Jones, Kitetu, and Sunderland (1997), in looking at textbook dialogues, mention research done by ETHEL, which found that while males asked about and described likes and habits, "women only asked about other people's, and only men gave orders to women" (p. 472). In Poulou's (1997) study, women tended to ask for information, which men

provided, and that most of the "expressive" language was used by female characters (pp. 70-71).

Visual depiction and description of women

Hartman and Judd (1978) note that in textbook drawings, grocery and department stores are "the exclusive domain of women" (p. 387). Women are also depicted doing all the housework. In photographs, however, the researchers found that while women were portrayed doing a variety of activities, none of these were reflected in the accompanying texts. Sunderland's (1992b) study found that, regarding visuals, women appeared to be younger, less active, and dressed in a more formal, "narrower range of styles" (p. 17).

Porreca (1984) notes that in her study, more adjectives describing women tended to fall under the headings "Emotionality or State of Mind, Physical Appearance, Environmentally Descriptive, and Physical State/Condition" (p. 718). In addition, adjectives under the heading Physical Appearance hinted that women are obsessed with their appearance. In contrast, the adjectives "famous", "well-known", and "intelligent" are frequently used to describe men (p. 718).

Conclusion and recommendations for teachers

Although textbooks have come some way in writers' and publishers' attempts to eliminate gender bias since Hartman and Judd's (1978) study, gender-bias' pervasive and subtle nature still requires teachers to undertake analyses of their textbooks before choosing them for their students. The following paragraphs offer recommendations to teachers in addressing gender bias in their classrooms.

Many researchers suggest that teachers alert students to the existence of sexist language, either as it arises in course materials or devoting lessons to the study of it. Instead of avoiding textbooks containing gender-bias, they suggest using them as teaching tools for discussions about sexism (Hartman and Judd, 1978, Gaff, 1982, Sunderland, 1992a, 2000, Beebe, 1996, Porreca, 1997, Ma, 1998, Lesikin, 2001). Teachers should help learners make choices informed by how listeners will react to their language, their "contribution to the evolution of the English language and possibly to relations between the sexes" (Beebe, 1996). They also recommend teachers have resource materials on bias-free language at hand (Beebe, 1996, Ma 1998).

Beebe (1996) proposes that teachers "warn their students that should they ever work abroad in any of several countries that have laws to encourage equal employment opportunities, sexist language could bring on their company legal charges of discrimination, as has happened to some Japanese companies" (p. 110). In addition to talking to students, Pugsley (1992) also recommends that teachers talk to each other, the institutions in which they work, and textbook publishers in order to help eliminate gender bias in as many pedagogical areas as possible. Sunderland (1992a) suggests that teacher's guides "raise awareness of the likelihood of teachers paying more attention to male students, and, where the input of the book reflects on sexist practices or attitudes, if culturally appropriate, comment on this" (p. 87).

In speaking of general school texts, Sleeter and Grant (1991) note that we cannot be complacent about gender bias being completely removed from them:

> One gains little sense of the history or culture of women, and learns very little about sexism or current issues involving gender. Females are shown in many more nontraditional roles than males, suggesting that it is not important for males to broaden their roles. The books convey the image that there are no real issues involving sexism today, that any battles for equality have been won. (p. 98)

Howe (1975) summarizes the implications of gender bias in educational materials: "The images we pick up, consciously or unconsciously, from literature and history significantly control our sense of identity, and our identity — our sense of ourselves as powerful or powerless, for example — controls our behaviour" (p. 20).

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