

“Beloved Brothers” and “Brave Men”: Examining Gender Bias in an English as a Foreign Language Reading Textbook in Japan

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Abstract: Despite the considerable efforts to remove overt gender bias in language learning materials during the last 30-40 years, some modern English as a foreign or second language textbooks continue to exhibit implicit gender bias. This study analysed the extent of gender bias in an intermediate-advanced level English language textbook that is widely used in Japan. The analysis focused on four ways in which gender is textually and pictorially represented: (1) female and male visibility; (2) male ‘firstness’; (3) the use of male generic noun and pronoun structures to refer to both sexes; and (4) female and male occupations. The results of the analysis revealed considerable implicit gender bias, and even more surprisingly, some instances of overt gender bias. In terms of the presence of female and male characters, there were well over twice as many male characters as there were female characters, with the two most prominent female characters clearly exhibiting negative female stereotypes. There was also a large imbalance in the instances of male firstness (listing male nouns/pronouns first) over female firstness (three to one), and a high frequency of masculine nouns and pronouns being used to refer to both male and female characters. The number and diversity of female jobs that featured in the textbook were also of concern (there were 3.7 male jobs for every female job). Much of the gender bias in this textbook is in the adapted versions of original (often historical) texts. There is considerably less gender bias in the pre- and post-reading comprehension questions and activities. This indicates that the textbook authors were perhaps aware of avoiding gender bias in their own writing, and this paper suggested how such care and consideration could be applied to the remainder of the textbook in order to remove gender-biased textual and pictorial representations.

Keywords: gender bias, EFL textbook, EFL materials.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is inextricably tied up with the culture, attitudes and social values of its users, and for most second language learners this makes the language learning process extend beyond mere linguistic aspects of a language. This can be very problematic for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and English as a second language (ESL) learners, given that, as Holmes (2008: 339) notes, different languages and cultures view and filter social realities in different ways.

The way in which gender is conceptualised and represented within language is a key component of these broader sociolinguistic considerations, and has been the subject of a great deal of research since the 1970s. Influential research carried out by Hartman and Judd (1978) and others sought to highlight the apparent gender biases in EFL and ESL textbooks, with the result that today, “it is becoming increasingly rare to find overtly problematic depictions of gender in professionally produced materials” (Lowe, 2013: 8). Yet despite this, gender bias still seeps into numerous ESL and EFL textbooks in various ways. Even a cursory glance through the reading textbook under examination in this paper reveals a noticeable lack of female characters. This initial observation has led to the writer’s interest in undertaking a more detailed sociolinguistic analysis of how gender is represented in and to what extent gender bias affects this particular EFL reading textbook.

Seeing as gender is at the heart of this paper, the writer begins by looking at how gender has come to be defined within language, focusing particularly on the performative view of gender (Butler, 1990; Cameron, 2005; Swann, 2003). From there, the literature on sexism and gender bias in foreign language textbooks and materials in various international contexts will be reviewed, followed by a look at research which centres on Japanese learning contexts. From there, the writer examines the extent of gender bias in *Crown English Reading* (Shimozaki et al, 2008), which is a widely-used EFL textbook in Japan. The analysis of this textbook covers four categories of gender representation: visibility of females and males (in the text and in visual images), male ‘firstness’ (listing the male noun first when two gendered nouns – such as husband and wife – are paired), the use of masculine generic noun and pronoun constructions to refer to both males and females, and representations of female and male occupations (in the text and in visual images). The writer will explain more about the nature and scope of these categories in section four of this paper, where the results and implications of this study’s findings will also be discussed.

2. POSITIONING GENDER WITHIN LANGUAGE

Although a detailed examination of the various theoretical models of gender within language is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth commenting briefly on the recent “shift” as to how gender is conceptualised within language, and its impact on language education (Swann, 2003: 625). Early theories about language and gender focused on male dominance and female weakness, arguing that women’s language was somehow ‘deficient’ when considered in relation to paradigmatic men’s language (Lakoff, 1975). This ‘deficit’ model (and the related ‘dominance’ model) was challenged by the ‘cultural difference’ theorists, most notably Tannen (1990), who saw gendered language as a by-product of the social structure and social interaction of early childhood and adolescence, resulting in contrasting ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ subcultures.

Criticism of these models highlights that they overlook other important sociological factors such as ethnicity, class, age and even life experience, and that these factors make it inherently difficult to define gender in an overarching, fully inclusive way (Butler, 1990; Cameron, 2005; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999, 2013). Such criticisms have led to the above-mentioned shift to a more fluid, diverse conceptualisation of gender, which sees gender as being ‘constructed’ or ‘done’ through discourse. As Baxter (2011: 336) notes:

[Gender roles] are not fixed and static but shifting, fragmentary, multiple, frequently contradictory and constantly in the process of being negotiated and reconstituted through linguistic interactions.

Relating this to language education, it is therefore important that EFL curricula, textbooks and materials (and EFL teachers) attempt to avoid and remove gender biased language, and present a balanced, multifaceted view of gender and gender roles (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004). Such a view should not only emphasize the diversity of gender, but should also actively seek to deconstruct ‘traditional’ negative gender stereotypes such as men as active doers and women as passive recipients. The success with which these goals have been and are being achieved has been considered in numerous learning and language contexts, and the author will now turn to look at the literature on gender bias in foreign language textbooks and materials.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON GENDER BIAS IN EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

This section begins with an overview of some of the key studies that have been carried out internationally, before looking at research in the Japanese context which informs the present study.

A. International Research:

Since the late 1970s, there has been a significant body of international research on gender bias in a variety of EFL (and other foreign language) textbooks and other learning materials such as learner grammars (MacAulay & Brice, 1997) and dictionaries (Kaye, 1989). Early studies carried out in relation to EFL textbooks found that males not only consistently outnumbered females in both text and visual images, but did so in overwhelming proportions (Coles, 1977; Hartman & Judd, 1978; Hellinger, 1980). In addition to this problem of female (in)visibility, these studies also pointed to the pervasiveness of problematic stereotypical roles for both genders – for example “easily frightened” and “nagging” women, compared with “helpful” and even “patronizing” men (Hartman & Judd, 1978: 386). Similar issues were also noted in relation to stereotypical representations of job roles for men and women, and in particular the limited range of job roles which women were portrayed in. Indeed, Hartmann & Judd (1978) saw the problem as significant enough as to warrant

producing guidelines for EFL textbook and materials writers in order to avoid gender bias in EFL texts (the guidelines are included in the Appendix of this paper).

Porreca (1984) conducted a comprehensive review of the (then) most widely used EFL textbooks, in an attempt to gauge the extent of gender bias in these textbooks since Hartman & Judd's (1978) study. She found that the ratio of females to males in some of the textbooks had improved slightly. However, she also noted that these ratios were misleading, as many of these textbooks contained sections focusing on women's issues, and therefore there was a higher concentration of women in those sections and a failure to integrate women more fully throughout the text (Porreca, 1984: 713), a point which Sunderland (1992: 87) later picked up on. In addition, Porreca highlighted continuing problems in relation to the number and range of women's occupations, male firstness and masculine generic constructions – in particular, the use of seemingly gender neutral noun referents (for example, student or teacher) which later in the text are revealed to refer only to males.

Recent work would seem to indicate that the situation has improved insofar as there is a general absence of obviously gender biased language in most current EFL textbooks and materials (Sunderland, 1992; 2000; Lowe 2013). Moreover, some research has pointed to more balanced representations of women and more varied job roles for women (see, for example, Jones et al (1997), who found that discourse roles within some EFL textbook dialogues were evenly balanced between the genders).

However, numerous studies highlight the continuing lack of visibility of women and negative stereotypical portrayals of women in many EFL textbooks. Poulou (1997) analysed discourse roles in the dialogue sections of two Greek as a second language textbooks, and found that there were gender imbalances against women interlocutors in relation to the total length of speech and also in terms of initiation and completion of dialogues. A number of recent studies on gender bias in EFL textbooks emanating from Iran suggest that, in those learning contexts at least, very little has changed. A study of gender bias in Iranian high school EFL textbooks found that women were far less visible than men, and also that jobs and activities were portrayed along gender-stereotyped lines; this, the authors noted, amounted to “subliminal sexism” (Ansary & Babaii, 2003: 49). These findings in relation to the under-representation of women in EFL textbooks have been corroborated by subsequent studies in Iran (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012), although a more recent study by Kazemi et al (2013) found that men were less visible than women .

B. Japanese Research:

The situation in Japan to some extent mirrors some of the developments referred to above. Early studies by Faneslow & Kameda (1994) and Nakai (2000) noted problems in relation to a lack of visibility of women in EFL textbooks, as well as stereotypical characterisations of males and females and a narrow range of job roles for women as compared with men. There is evidence that some Japanese EFL texts are more balanced in terms of visibility of women and men and also the roles and actions undertaken (Sano et al 2001). However, Sano et al (2001) also highlighted that, in spite of the increased visibility of women and diversity of roles for women in the textbooks that they analysed, negative gender stereotypes were still played out to the extent that many of the male characters took the lead in decision-making, with female characters mostly consigned to supporting roles.

Similarly, Mineshima's (2008) study found that, in addition to a relatively even distribution of women and men throughout the EFL textbooks that were under consideration, there was also a balanced and diverse range of occupational roles and activities for both genders. Indeed, men were sometimes depicted in those textbooks in distinctly non-stereotypical roles, such as wearing aprons and cooking family meals. However, there is still a recurrent theme of females bearing a greater share of the responsibility for household chores (Mineshima, 2008: 134-135).

These Japanese studies seem to point to a greater awareness on the part of EFL textbook writers in Japan as to the importance of avoiding overt gender bias. But as Lowe (2013:10) highlights, “while gender bias may have been eliminated from the surface level of EFL texts in Japan, it may remain pervasive in the form of ‘subliminal sexism’”.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE CROWN ENGLISH READING TEXTBOOK

A. Method and Materials:

The foregoing literature review reveals that the key areas of focus in relation to gender bias research on EFL materials are visibility (or lack of visibility) of women, male firstness, the use of male generic constructions, and representations of women and men in stereotypical job roles and activities. There are also other aspects that have been studied, such as

analyses of discourse roles within textbook dialogues (Jones et al, 1997; Poulou, 1997), as well as linguistic analyses which demonstrate gender bias through the adjectives that are used to describe women and men in EFL textbooks (Porreca, 1984). For this study, the writer has chosen to focus on the issues of the visibility of women in the text and in visual images, male firstness, the use of male generic constructions to refer to both genders, and representations of women and men in job roles in the text and in visual images.

The text that is the subject of this study is *Crown English Reading* (Shimozaki et al, 2008) (**Crown**), which is an upper-intermediate to advanced level EFL reading text. As of 2010, Crown was the top-selling high school EFL reading textbook in Japan (Underwood, 2010), although its use is by no means limited to high school learning contexts. It primarily consists of excerpts and adaptations of selected authentic texts by various authors and well-known figures, and each lesson is made up of a reading text and pre-reading and post-reading exercises. The writer's analysis covers not only the reading text and associated images, but also the pre- and post-reading questions and activities.

B. Results:

The author's initial observations about the marked lack of females appearing in Crown are borne out by the results of the analysis of gender visibility in Crown (see Table 1 below). A total of 58 female characters are included in the written component of the textbook (combining both the text and the pre- and post-reading questions). The most prolific female characters are a fictional character called "Mistress Tassel" (who is mentioned on 15 occasions) and a fictional grandmother (who is referred to 8 times). By contrast, there are 147 male characters referred to, the most prominent of which are the Japanese architect Tadao Ando (who is mentioned 48 times) and the Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte (who is mentioned 42 times). The situation is no different in relation to photographs and illustrations. In all, there are only 48 females portrayed visually, compared to 103 men. In fact, the number of males would have been even greater if photographs and illustrations of large groups of people whose gender cannot be clearly identified were included.

TABLE I: GENDER VISIBILITY

	Text	Pre- and post-reading questions	Photographs and illustrations	TOTAL
Females	26	32	48	106
Males	104	43	103	250

In terms of male firstness, female-referent nouns or pronouns are mentioned first in gendered noun pairs on only 6 occasions; this compares with male-referent nouns or pronouns appearing first on 17 occasions (see Table 2 below). Also of interest is the fact that masculine generic noun or pronoun constructions were used on 32 occasions within the text to refer to both females and males (see Table 3 below).

TABLE II: FEMALE AND MALE FIRSTNESS

	Firstness instances	TOTAL
Females	"Lorene and I"; "ladies and gentlemen"; "ladies and gentlemen"; "She is the perfect girl for me. He is the perfect boy for me"; "Two days before I arrived, a woman was killed. Two months earlier, a man was killed"; "sisters and brothers"	6
Males	"Steve and Lorene"; "The men, the women"; "Hansel and Gretel"; "boys and girls"; "he or she"; "thy father and thy mother"; "a boy and a girl"; "The boy was eighteen and the girl sixteen"; "He wasn't unusually handsome, and she was not especially beautiful"; "a lonely boy and a lonely girl"; "the perfect boy and the perfect girl"; "Both the boy and the girl"; "The boy was thirty-two, the girl thirty"; "the boy was walking from west to east, while the girl ... was walking from east to west"; "little black boys and little black girls"; "little white boys and white girls"; "man and wife"; "Some of the neighbors took the man's part, and some the woman's"	18

TABLE III: MASCULINE GENERIC CONSTRUCTIONS

Male generic construction instances	TOTAL
<p>“Any lazy person ... when he goes to bed;” “If you complained to the clerk ... , you told him”; “a human being who had lots of time ... but he was poor”; “Oh, you beloved brothers” (= Samoan people); “What advice does Tuiavii have for his brothers?” (= Samoan people); “If a successful papalagi were to move [to Samoa], Samoans might think he was”; “Oh, you beloved brothers” (= Samoan people); “Homo Sapiens should rid himself”; “some dirty little thief has stolen it! Well, if I ever catch him”; “men or beasts” (= human beings); “You expect the hero to win ... in the end, he wins”; “then I would ... talk to that person ... I would bring myself down to his level”; “any person ... expects his”; “the sun was shining ... with all his might”; “any artist who ... he;” “All men are created equal” (= human beings); “a teacher ... receiving his old students”; “a teacher ... receiving his old students”; “the Negro ... finds himself in exile in his”; “all men, black men as well as white men” (= human beings); “the Negro is granted his”; “white people ... white brothers” (= white people); “Negro in New York ... his”; “sons of former slaves” (= children); “sons of former slave-owners” (= children); “my fathers” (= ancestors); “black men and white men” (= black people and white people); “my fathers” (my ancestors); “all men” (all people); “the brave men” (people); “richest man” (person); “Every man that loves his country”</p>	32

Finally, as regards occupations which are mentioned or depicted in the text and images (see Table 4 below), females are shown in a total of 15 different occupations (9 in the text; 6 in visual images). This total is far smaller than that for men, who are portrayed working in 56 different jobs (36 in the text; 20 in visual images).

TABLE IV: OCCUPATIONS

	Occupations (text)	Occupations (images)	TOTAL
Female	Writer, inventor, musician, clerk, artisan, queen, editor, librarian, abbess	Writer, musician, banker, artisan, actor, abbess	15
Male	Inventor, designer, co-founder, professor, artist, psychiatrist, doctor, clerk, Samoan chief, musician, president, business owner, thief, ship captain, writer, explorer, seaman, fisherman, archeologist, head of department, banker, pilot, scientist, envoy, commodore, teacher, rickshaw driver, movie director, insurance salesman, driver, journalist, boxer, architect, businessman, priest, illustrator	Inventor, writer, doctor, musician, president, business owner, thief, explorer, archeologist, banker, farmer, artist, envoy, waiter, architect, scientist, soldier, police officer, firefighter, activist	56

These results indicate the existence of a substantial bias against women in Crown. So the writer will now turn to discuss the implications of these findings and how this gender bias might possibly be redressed.

C. Discussion:

Although this study is only a small-scale sociolinguistic study of an EFL textbook, the findings arguably present a troubling picture given the widespread use of Crown and other similar thematically-organised EFL reading textbooks in Japan. Considering that gender bias in EFL texts has been so widely researched, and considering also the availability of guidelines for EFL textbook writers on avoiding gender bias (see the Appendix at the end of this paper), the mere existence of gender bias in Crown is troubling enough. However, of more concern is the sheer scale of the gender bias in this text. There are well over twice as many men as women in both the text and the images. Furthermore, the most prominent female characters both portray negative female stereotypes: “Mistress Tassel” is depicted as a nagging wife (and she is referred to by the derogatory term “Mistress”, not “Ms” or “Mrs”); the grandmother character is described as shrieking and flailing her arms in anger, before “several strong men finally moved her away and calmed her down” (p 165). In contrast, the grandfather is a “kind and gentle man, full of wisdom and patience” (p 165).

In this regard, it is also worth noting that there are ample opportunities for the authors to include more positive female role-models. The final lesson in *Crown* is about the American civil rights movement, and focuses on an excerpt from Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. Rosa Parks is shown in a small photograph, and her exploits are briefly mentioned in the caption. Given that *Crown* is crying out for more female characters, it seems to this author that Rosa Parks's exploits are an ideal candidate to be the subject of – or at least a more substantial part of – that lesson. This would not only broaden students' knowledge about the civil rights movement, but would also increase the visibility of women in this textbook.

Aside from the (in)visibility of women in *Crown*, another interesting finding is the prevalence of masculine generic constructions to refer to both men and women (32 instances). This is despite numerous writers suggesting that such obviously problematic representations of gender are rare in current EFL texts (Jones et al, 1997; Sunderland, 2000; Lowe, 2013). One possible explanation for the high frequency of these masculine generic constructions is that the majority of the texts in *Crown* are authentic texts whose language is a product of their time period (specifically, before gender bias became a prominent issue). This is particularly so in relation to the previously-mentioned Martin Luther King speech (given in 1963), which contains 14 of the 32 masculine generic constructions. However, as was mentioned earlier, *Crown* consists not only of authentic original texts, but also adaptations of texts. Thus, there seems to be no reason why the authors could not change the translation of a Samoan chief's comments (addressed to all Samoans) from "Oh, you beloved brothers" to "Oh, you beloved brothers and sisters" – or possibly better still, to "Oh, you beloved sisters and brothers" (p 52).

Despite these shortcomings, one area of *Crown* which shows comparatively little evidence of gender bias is the pre- and post-reading questions and activities. There is a more even balance of female characters (32) as compared with male characters (43), and significantly there are no instances of the use of male generic constructions to refer to both females and males. This demonstrates that *Crown*'s authors are at least cognisant of avoiding obvious gender bias in their own writing, if not in their adaptations and translations of original texts.

Finally, and regrettably more tellingly than any of the other categories, the number and variety of female jobs in *Crown* was drastically lower than the number and range of male jobs. For every female job, there were 3.7 male jobs. And although the authors did make an effort to include some non-stereotypical jobs for women (for example, a female inventor), this numerical and range bias against women could, as Porreca (1984: 711) notes, negatively affect female learners' perceptions about their future job options.

5. CONCLUSION

As was noted at the outset of this paper, the postmodern view of gender within language behoves EFL textbook writers to present a varied, balanced account of gender and gender roles within the textbook. Thus, as far as is practicable, female and male characters should be shown in even numbers and in a variety of social and job contexts which avoid gender stereotypes. The EFL textbook that was examined in this paper regrettably falls short of these goals. There is evidence of what numerous writers have termed "subliminal" gender bias in *Crown*, particularly in relation to the (in)visibility of female characters and the paucity of female jobs in both the text and images (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Kazemi et al, 2013; Lowe, 2013). Perhaps more worrisome, though, are the overt instances of gender bias in *Crown* – in particular, the large number of male generic constructions and the fact that the two most prominent female characters exhibited negative stereotypical characteristics.

The writer has suggested ways in which the gender bias in *Crown* could be addressed, and given that the authors of *Crown* adapt texts to suit Japanese EFL readers, it seems that remedying the problems identified in this paper is not beyond the realms of possibility. But as a final point, it is worth noting that, beyond the text itself, the teachers who use *Crown* have an important role to play in addressing gender bias in the classroom. Highlighting instances of gender bias and gender stereotypes would be one measure that teachers could adopt, as would reversing traditional gender roles, and prompting class discussion and reflection about gender issues. As Sunderland (2000: 155) so aptly comments, an EFL text "is arguably as good or as bad as the treatment it receives from the teacher who is using it."

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