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Voices of Practice: Teachers' Perceptions of Sexism in Business English Textbooks

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Abstract: *This study looks at how instructors perceive sexism and respond to the portrayal of gender in a textbook. A total of six instructors of an institution of higher learning were interviewed. These instructors were asked three basic questions: (1) Do you discuss gender issues in the classroom? (2) Were you aware of the gender stereotypes in the textbook? (3) How are you going to respond to gender stereotypes in the textbook after being aware? Findings indicate that the instructors did not intend to discuss gender in the classroom. Discussions on gender would be incidental, depending on the topic of the units covered in the textbook. In addition, the instructors did not discuss gender because they had not been aware of gender stereotypes in the textbook. However, most of them felt reluctant to discuss issues on gender even after they were made aware of gender stereotypes in the textbook. Reasons for this include time constraints in completing the syllabus, students' level of proficiency and students' awareness of gender issues. The avoidance of discussions on gender issues was also due to two main reasons: one, gender issues were not part of the syllabus to be covered and two, these issues were not part of the local culture. It is suggested that the instructors should attempt to discuss gender stereotypes and the idea of equality among gender in the classroom, especially if sexism existed in the textbook, to avoid gender stereotypes being part of the hidden curriculum.*

OBJECTIVE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a plethora of content and linguistic analyses of gender representation in mainly, but not only, language textbooks (Gaff, 1982; Jaworki, 1983; Abraham, 1989; Porecca, 1984; Gupta & Yin, 1990; Willeke & Sanders, 1978; Talansky, 1986; Joshi & Anderson, 1994; Titus,1993). The analyses found that almost always in any textbook, males were over-represented; occupied higher positions, occupations and roles; performed activities; and in dialogues, males were found to speak more, speak first and perform a greater range of discourse roles (Talansky, 1986; Graci, 1989). As a result, textbook writers and publishers began making changes, as they were becoming more aware of the gender stereotyping that may occur in the textbooks they were producing (Bushnell, 1986). Stereotypes are essentially cliches, which emphasize a few characteristics, which are supposed to belong to the normal subject. "But this norm has always been an ideal - white, middle-class, male-defined and male-dominated" (Sunderland, 1997). Gender stereotyping concentrates on the characteristics that are supposed to go hand in hand with biological sex and on the roles which men and women are supposed to perform. Thus, men are shown in a great variety of work roles, while adult women are limited to the roles of wife and mother.

The question now is why do we discuss gender in language teaching? Obvious reasons include the growing interest in global issues from the West which include women's studies and human rights as content-based themes, as well as learner development and teacher education, which aim to empower students and educators, females and males alike.

Kessler et al. (1985) noted that discussions of sexism or pre-judging of persons based on their sex rather than on their individual qualities or unique characteristics (Cincotta, 1978) in education have tended to neglect teachers' aspirations and ideas about what they do especially when using the textbook. The approach to teacher perspectives on sexism in teaching materials is limited because it provides few insights into the teacher's belief-systems which are likely to oppose or accept anti-sexist initiatives (Abraham, 1989).

There is a need to investigate if gender is an issue in language teaching as we all live in a multicultural society. If so, what do the teachers do? Theories on gender from the West have established that gender differences among males and females are caused by socially accepted practices of a community. These practices that people engage themselves in, produce

their identities. However, we have a choice as we enter new communities of practice, either to constantly reproduce our gendered identities by performing what are taken to be the appropriate acts in the communities we belong to – or else, challenge prevailing gender norms by refusing to perform those acts (Bergvall, Bing & Freed, 1996). Learning institutions are potential places for the construction of gender identities among male and female students. Meece and Eccles (1993) reported that gender bias in school experiences of those in schools and higher levels of institution can have a lasting effect on women's development.

Gender is related to culture and it is the society of that culture, which decides the gender roles (Ornstein & Levine, 1989). If the society fails to identify or analyze gender bias or sexism then the bias will be accepted as a 'norm' and inextricably interwoven with the oppression of women in that society (Titus, 1993). It is undeniable that studies on gender exist because of women's liberation in the West, which gives birth to the concept of feminism. Women's struggle for the acceptance and recognition in the patriarchal society is seen as a struggle for equality. According to Lott (1994), feminists are concerned with "politics, power, and with the reliable and valid expansion of human knowledge in all areas" and so what feminists want is "respect for women as full and equal members of the human race" (p. 239).

The fight for equality has resulted in more and more women preparing for careers by attending colleges, universities, earning advanced degrees, leading to them making great progress in traditionally male-dominated areas (Lott, 1994). However, the number of women in jobs traditionally done by men is still small, as pointed out by Lott (1994), "women are still largely absent, however from the heavy industry and manufacturing sectors and from the boardrooms of the largest and most prestigious companies" (pp. 240 - 241), and if both men and women are represented regardless of occupation, "it is the men who tend to have the more powerful, prestigious and remunerative jobs" (p. 245).

The situation in Malaysia is rather similar. Focussing on the upper ranks of occupational roles, Noraini Abdullah (1984) claimed that in the 1980s, 3% of the total administrative and managerial workers are women, which is a tiny leap from 2% in 1962. In other words, male predominates at every level and "women remain clustered in the middle or lower ranks of their professions"(p. 328). According to Noraini Abdullah (1984), the entrance of women into the workforce is an important development in Malaysian social history. They do not enter to fill family needs but to find

self-fulfilment. Peninsular Malaysia's workforce is to a large extent structured according to jobs, which are considered 'suitable for men' and 'appropriate for women'. This explains why teaching and nursing tend to attract more women.

Saedah Siraj (1990) elaborately explained the roles of women in Malaysia and how differences might be attributed to their educational level and the place or areas they live in, which determine the traditional and customary practices of the community. Like Noraini, Lott, and Saedah (1990) too claimed that the "proportion of women in the professional fields when compared to men is still considered small" although "this has been a major improvement over the last 30 years" (p. 21).

Earlier findings exemplified the portrayal of women as being passive and dependent on the male, lacking linguistic knowledge and intelligence, showing weakness either physically or emotionally (Hellinger, 1980; Talansky, 1986), holding unchallenging positions in terms of occupation (Abraham, 1989), completing simple tasks and obeying instructions rather than making decisions (Hartman & Judd, 1978; Joshi & Anderson, 1994).

As we approached the 21st century, this inequality still exists, and the feminist struggle still persists as Danner, Fort and Young. (1999) put it "(a)ny struggle against domination must include the struggle against male domination"(p. 257). The change in the role of women especially in Malaysia has improved and is still improving as the country enters the new millennium. The scenario in the colleges or universities, for instance, reveals a predominant increase of women's enrolment. The effect of this increase mirrors the need to ensure 'equality' in the truest sense of the word in establishing the role of women and men in their society. Thus, in learning institutions the idea of gender equality must be addressed to ensure parity in the representation of women and men in key dimensions of social life.

Textbooks have a central place in the organisation and practice of teaching and learning in institutions. Almost always, if surveyed, textbooks are used in every institution as illustrated in the Malaysian Cabinet Report (as cited in Saedah Siraj, 1990, p. 31) "textbooks form an important learning material for the pupils and an important source of reference to aid teachers in the teaching process". In all modern school systems, the textbook has long served not only to support instruction but also to symbolise that instruction, which defines the curriculum (Westbury, 1990).

Studies on sexism in teaching materials, namely textbooks, have started more than a decade or so. They encompassed studies not only on various subjects but also in different countries, thus implying that sexism is

a global phenomenon (Willeke & Sanders, 1978; Gaff, 1982; Jaworki, 1983; Porecca, 1984; Talansky, 1986; Abraham, 1989; Gupta & Yin, 1990; Titus, 1993; Joshi & Anderson, 1994). The growth of research, which expanded from the feminist movement, includes looking at changing attitudes and behaviour, as awareness of gender equality begin to emerge in the society.

The most subtle way in which the inferior position of women is 'taught' in educational materials is simply by ignoring them and their contribution to life (Whyld, 1983). Analysis of textbooks found that there will be at least more than five pictures of males to every one picture of a female (Talansky, 1986; Graci, 1989). The appearance of females in non-traditional roles is uneven and issues involving sexism in society both today and in history are virtually ignored. This finding is also substantiated with that of Saedah's (1990) analysis of Malaysian primary textbooks, which found that even though females appear in the text much more than they used to, males still predominate.

Although many authors and publishers claim that they are not sexist (Bushnell, 1986), and that occupational stereotyping is a statistically accurate reflection of the society in which the target language is spoken (Sunderland, 1994), sexism is still prevalent in teaching materials. Sexism may occur in different forms in the materials, for example, through language, images, representation of males and females, in the introduction of male-interest topics or texts and the distribution of male and female characters.

Christian-Smith (1989) reported that in the United States, adolescent trade paperbacks are used as instructional materials in the classroom. These books are stereotypical gendered texts where boys are associated with adventure and mystery, while girls are involved with romance, dating, and choices of early marriage or remaining in schools. In her study, the teachers admitted that they did not have enough time to adapt the material and realised that the textbook was biased but adhered to using them due to students' preferences.

Whyld (1983) suggested that teachers need to be aware of the way sexism operates in teaching materials. This can be done by choosing passages or images which have equal representation of gender or at least those that give verbal explanations for women's under-representation, as there will be students who will be alarmed by this (Mannheim, 1994). Cincotta (1978) stated that the learner observes and learns about the society around him or her primarily through the medium of books and that sex-role stereotype formation is influenced by the textbooks with which children come into contact during the long years of their formal education, mediated by the teacher.

Hence, it is pertinent to understand what the teachers feel about gender issues in the textbook they use since "the most non-sexist textbook can become sexist in the hands of the teacher with sexist attitudes" (Sunderland, 1994; p. 64). Thus three research questions were formulated to assist data gathering processes, 1) Do the teachers discuss gender issues in the classroom? 2) Are the teachers aware of gender stereotypes or gender bias in the textbook? 3) What are the teachers going to do after being aware of gender bias in the textbook?

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

The participants in this exploratory study were six instructors from an institution of higher learning (four females, two males), who at the time of the study were and have been coordinators of a Business English course. These instructors have had between five to fifteen years of experience teaching English at secondary and tertiary level. All of them trained either in United Kingdom or the United States.

The criteria used to choose the participants were that they teach Business English, use the textbook *Business Class* and that they volunteered for the study. Data were gathered through interviews with the instructors who were asked the three basic research questions. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Data were then categorized to identify common themes. An independent rater assisted in analyzing and categorizing data. This was necessary to ensure inter-rater reliability. A percentage of inter-rater agreement of 89% was obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender issues were not discussed by all the participants and if they did it was not done deliberately but occurred accidentally (refer to Appendix A). It was done not to instill awareness among students of the concept of equality and extension of the traditional gender roles but for comparison between two cultures, the West and the East.

The instructors were concerned with covering the syllabus and discussions on gender were not part of the curriculum. Hence, in completing the syllabus they did not have time to discuss gender. Pedagogical reasons for these instructors seem to have superseded social considerations.

All of the instructors, except Sally, were not aware that the textbook was gender biased (refer to Appendix B). However all the instructors as-

sociated business with a man's world. As discussions on gender were not their teaching agenda or part of the syllabus to be covered, teaching only dealt with the nuances of the language and the instructors' prime concern was to ensure students do well in the exam. Some also felt that culture and religion played significant roles in obscuring the effect of gender stereotypes, leading to their acceptance as part of the norm. Strangely, those who blamed religion as the culprit were Moslems. In the Islamic business world, men and women can be successful and equal. This can be exemplified through Khadijah during the days of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). Thus, if inequality existed, it could be due to cultural enforcement, which is socially constructed by the society.

According to an instructor, Farah, courses associated with women's rights/studies were not made known or familiar to the society, thus sexism should not be taught. This lack could explain why gender issues remain oblivious. The instructors also felt that the students have not been aware of gender issues so discussion on gender issues would be insignificant as the students would not be affected.

When asked what they would do once they are aware of gender stereotypes and gender bias in the textbook, most of the teachers (except Sally) confessed that they will not be discussing them because it would lead to many arguments and debates among students (refer to Appendix C). They also admitted that students would be aware of gender bias and gender stereotypes if instructors pointed these to them. Thus, it would be better to avoid such discussions as there were other more important things to discuss in the language classroom.

The participants, regardless of gender and age, were not receptive to the idea of equality in the representation of gender, what more propagate the idea of equality in their classroom. They indirectly bought predominant ideology. Some even played down the textbook writer's contention of portraying sexism in the textbook, claiming that the texts/ excerpts were taken from authentic materials, which reflect reality.

Even after they were aware and agreed that the textbook *Business Class* is lopsided as males dominated in visuals, distribution, occupation and language, they still felt that there were no reason to change their way of teaching as gender was never their focus in the classroom. They only wanted to concentrate on the language aspect. The instructors presumed that social considerations like discussing gender issues in the classroom did not have a place in the syllabus; it was like a blind spot. The roles of the instructors were not seen as activists or advocates of equality in gender representation but primarily as language teachers.

In fact during the interview, Ricky, Johan, Farah and Cindy were rather uncomfortable and annoyed with the suggestion that issues on gender needed to be raised in a language classroom. To them pedagogical priorities superseded social considerations to educate or change the society they live in.

Inevitably sexism and the secondary portrayal of women in society remain invisible issues and radical changes in pedagogy or in view of gender in learning institution cannot occur.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Instructors must review all texts in textbooks that give a lopsided representation of gender before using them in the classroom. They must recognize the subtle ways in which their course materials reinforce maleness as norms and be accountable to discuss the portrayal of males and females in the textbook so as not to give a false indication of the demands of the future, which can limit the educational and occupational aspirations of females. They should let their voices be heard by the textbook representatives and communicate their interests in purchasing non-sexist materials. Instructors should attempt to give equal treatment to both sexes in the classroom, not only in terms of participation but also in highlighting the representation of gender in the textbook.

This study only examined the instructors' perspectives. Further studies should include students' perceptions. The study heavily relied on past literature and especially those from the West, primarily because limited studies have been done in Malaysia. In addition qualitative data cannot be generalized as well as quantitative data; hence there is a need to use both types of data to produce an in depth and generalizable study of instructors' treatment of gender in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A

Instructor	*Sex*	*Age*	*Vignettes*
Sally	F	36	No I didn't.
Cindy*	F	37	There was nothing to talk about; there was no time.
Hani	F	34	No I wasn't concerned about that.
Ricky	M	43	No.
Farah**	F	34	No that is not part of the syllabus.
Johan	M	60	I am a language teacher.

* - past coordinator
** - present coordinator

APPENDIX B

Instructor	*Sex*	*Age*	*Vignettes*
Sally	F	36	I was not aware but I was hinted by someone...no I didn't (make any comments).
Cindy*	F	37	Well I didn't think of that...being busy that not having the time to think whether it is gender bias or not...I just accept it as a fact...these are all authentic materials.
Hani	F	34	I was not aware of that (the textbook having unequal distribution and stereotypes) I'm not really into accepting or rejecting I was just using the textbook to teach English.
Ricky	M	43	No...I think this book purports to take materials from the existing business world rather than sort of a conscious attempt to put women at the secondary level.
Farah	F	34	I don't take gender bias as my consideration so I was not aware of it...it is not right for us to expose to the students when they are not aware of gender bias...it's not our culture...we don't have women studies courses.
Johan	M	60	No I wasn't aware...there must be differences between the masculine and feminine gender...in many instances what men can do women can't like carrying heavy things.

APPENDIX C

Instructor	*Sex*	*Age*	*Vignettes*
Sally	F	36	I think I would not directly give comments as to how the materials are presented in the textbook but I would welcome students to analyse it themselves.
Cindy*	F	37	These are authentic materials and we deal with authenticity and men are dominating in the business sector the examples are real examples so we have to use and it is real and we can't change something that is real...Gender issues? I don't think I would emphasize on that my role is just to improve their proficiency level I wouldn't discuss or go in detail into that.
Hani	F	34	I don't think the students are aware of the biasness in the textbook...culture and religion could play a role...I don't have a firm opinion about that what I can do is that I can just let things be as they are... we need to go back to our foundation or belief that certain things cannot be done by one gender so I accept that I would just let things be as they are.
Ricky	M	43	Gender issues? No there's nothing to talk about...because you're drawing their attention to that when their attention may not be drawn to that in the first place their attention may be drawn to the content of the passage or the words or the language structure that may be their main focus and that would be something that they would be grappling

			with most of them...I don't think they have time for there's just one woman there...I'm only interested with teaching the language and the use of it.
Farah	F	34	Because it's up to you if you go into discussion if we don't talk about it the students would not really know...because the males and females have a lot of things to say aboutwhat they feel and we don't want our students to talk and have gender differences it's not the time to expose them to gender differences...I'm sure they can argue for more than an hour...but if we don't talk about it the students would not know...we don't have a course on women' right I don't think they'll be influenced...if they look at the other management courses and textbooks there's a lot of male pictures also so they'll understand.
Johan	M	60	No I don't think I would I don't see any reason for doing so i'm just concerned with the language teaching language as such...I don't know unless the students ask me why is this textbook made for men...otherwise I don't see any reason to focus on that...if they asked I would say there are jobs that men can do and women can't and others women can do and men may not be suitable...but it also interchange...to be very honest with you I never think women so much associated in the business sector my mind is also thinking men in the business sector.