

# A Gender Analysis of the ESL textbook Side by Side

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# A Gender Analysis of the ESL textbook *Side by Side*

Nicholas Kemp

## Introduction

Almost four decades have passed since the feminist movement first began to influence the composition of ESL/EFL textbooks. Analysis of textbooks at that time exposed them as under-representing and even demeaning women (Hartman & Judd, 1978). Publishers were initially slow to take corrective measures (Porreca, 1984). A recent decline in the number of 'content and linguistic analyses of gender in language textbooks' (Sunderland, 2000:152) however, suggests that this situation has improved.

Despite this improvement, such analyses remain worthwhile and relevant. Whilst the legal framework exists to ensure equality; society and culture remain guilty of behaviour that excludes and treats women as inferior. Textbooks could potentially be used as 'exclusionist' (UNESCO, 1999) tools to undermine gender parity. In an age of unprecedented equal opportunities: language and the instruction thereof have the power to shape minds. Textbooks should be assessed on a regular basis to establish whether this power is being abused or exercised correctly.

'Language learning is necessarily a culture-learning process'  
(Hartman & Judd, 1978:373)

Nearly forty years on, this statement holds as true as ever. Whilst native teachers of English may take the principle of gender equality for granted, those being taught may hold substantially different cultural values. Thus, textbooks represent a means of teaching not only a language but also the values and beliefs of the societies and cultures it is used in.

This paper examines a popular and long-running EFL textbook (*Side by Side 2, third edition*) in order to assess whether sufficient measures have been taken to show both women and men in a fair and respectful manner. *Side by Side 2* (henceforth referred to as *SBS2*) was one of the textbooks criticized in Porreca's influential paper *Sexism in Current ESL Textbooks* (1984). It is expected that the results of this paper's analysis will show deliberate steps have been taken in the course of the textbook's two subsequent revisions to address such criticism and ensure equal gender representation is achieved.

The importance of the realism of language used by characters in the textbook will also be discussed. There is a great wealth of linguistic research as to how members of different social and ethnic groups speak and interact. Limited in its scope, this paper is unfortunately able to consider only a small fraction of this research. Based on the claims of Lakoff (1975 cited in Holmes, 2001), this paper will attempt to assess how successful *SBS2* is in authentically portraying men and women through the utilization of linguistic traits commonly associated with them.

The final section of this paper will discuss whether enough, or indeed too much, effort has been expended in ensuring gender

equality in textbooks. It will also look at the vital role the teacher plays in determining how the text's content is presented to and interpreted by students.

## Sex and Gender

Before discussing the procedure and findings of this paper's textbook analysis, it is first necessary to define two key terms. Pryzgodna and Chrisler (2000), concerned that many psychologists seemed to use the two labels interchangeably in research, conducted a survey to investigate people's interpretations of the terms 'gender' and 'sex'. The findings of their research suggested that people were in fact aware, at least on a subconscious level, that the two words have distinct and different criteria for usage and as such 'are not synonyms'. UNESCO's Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language (1999) supports this assertion and provides a clearer explanation as to how the two terms differ in meaning:

'A person's sex is a matter of chromosomes... A person's gender, however, is a social and historical construct and is the consequence of various kinds of conditioning.'

(Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language, UNESCO, 1999:5)

Though many linguists have focused their attention on 'sexism' in textbooks (Hartman & Judd, Porreca, Florent & Walter *et al*), this paper concurs with the reasoning of Montgomery (1995) and Holmes (2001) and thus favors the expression *gender (in)equality* as it is the (mis)representation of genders, not sexes, that is the subject of so much debate amongst socio-linguists.

## Text Analysis

The following two sections describe the method and the results of the textbook analysis respectively. The analysis was conducted primarily with the intention of assessing whether the text represents both genders equally, respectfully and realistically.

### Criteria for Text Analysis

Assessing a textbook in terms of how fairly and accurately it represents genders can and should involve many considerations. This section lists and describes the procedures employed for the purpose of analysing *SBS2*. Most of the procedures were borrowed from previous, similar studies and were specifically selected for their relevance and suitability to the analysis.

#### **Male/ Female Representation**

Viewing the text in this manner requires a methodical tallying of each and every appearance of a character according to their sex. This process is a critical element of any content-based analysis. The tally counted how many times women and men appeared in all dialogs, text, illustrations and photos. For a textbook to reflect reality, the number of women and men should be approximately equal. A total showing a large imbalance in favour of males would represent what Sunderland cites as an example of 'exclusion' (2000:151).

#### **'Firstness'**

The rule of etiquette 'Ladies first' rarely seems to extend to language. Invariably, when both sexes appear in a pair, it is the male that comes first: *male* and *female*, *Mr.* and *Mrs.*, *brother* and *sister* etc.

This ordering, according to Hartman & Judd (1978:390), 'reinforces the second-place status of women'.

This paper counts every incidence of female/male pairing in *SBS2* and shows which gender's favor the pairing is ordered in.

### **Adjective association**

Borrowing from an approach employed by Porreca (1984), adjectives used to describe women and men were analyzed. These adjectives were then sorted into four types: Character (e.g. friendly); Appearance (e.g. beautiful); Competence (e.g. skilled) and Reputation (e.g. popular). Due to the elementary level of the textbook and thus its limited vocabulary, the 11 categories originally utilized by Porreca were deemed excessive. This paper's approach also differs to Porreca's in that adjectives are also further divided according to whether they carry a positive or negative connotation.

### **Verb association**

As with adjectives, verbs were analysed in conjunction with their agents to investigate whether the text reinforces or challenges the stereotypes of women only being engaged in passive roles and activities, fit for only menial and domestic tasks. The actions of male characters were similarly scrutinised.

### **Occupation**

The jobs of male and female characters were tabulated and subcategorised according to whether the jobs were deemed 'skilled' or 'unskilled'. Furthermore, job titles were examined to determine whether they were exclusionary (appropriate for only one gender e.g. police man), or inclusive (applicable to both genders e.g. police officer) as defined in the National Council of Teachers of English

Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language (2002:5).

**Criteria not evaluated**

It is possible, if not likely, that a text that succeeds in portraying men and women as equal may at the same time fail to give an accurate impression of how men and women really communicate. It was hoped to have been able to evaluate how realistic *SBS2*'s depiction of male & female characters is. Unfortunately, a satisfactory method for conducting this evaluation could not be arrived at. Whilst most linguists seem to agree that speech patterns of women and men do differ, there seems to be a lack of agreement as to how (Montgomery, 1995).

Further complicating the issue is the very concept of gender. In Western communities, where the social roles of men and women often overlap (Holmes, 2001) and factors such as age, class and sexuality are influential, it is unhelpful and grossly over-simplistic to think of men and women as speaking differently. Whilst some people may use language that conforms to gender-specific features, as theorised by the likes of Lakoff, (1975 cited in Holmes, 2001), it cannot be assumed that everyone does. There is considerable evidence to support the assertion that both men and women use language stereotypically associated with the opposite sex depending on factors such as motive, the situation and their audience (Nichols, 1983 & Milroy, 1980 cited in Montgomery, 1995).

In addition to this lack of academic consensus, the elementary level of language used in *SBS2* rendered it practically useless to judge the text in terms of realism. Designed for beginner students with each chapter rigorously drilling pre-determined fundamental grammar

points, the scope for incorporating authentic, gender-characterising linguistic traits such as intensifiers and euphemisms (Lakoff, 1975) is all but non-existent.

## Analysis Findings

### **Male/ Female Representation**

A methodical tally of every appearance of a new character in the textbook revealed that there were 678 male characters compared with 574 females. This equates to a female-male ratio of 1.1811. Whilst not perfectly equal, it certainly does not seem that the writers have deliberately tried to under-represent females.

After several decades of academic scrutiny it seems that most textbooks at least consider the importance of gender parity as part of the editing process. This is certainly the case with *SBS2* but the analysis did uncover some other slightly disturbing findings. Credit should be given to *SBS2*'s writers for not only representing both genders adequately but also different racial and ethnic groups. However, the text was found to be completely absent of representations of inter-racial marriages or couplings. Assuming that the text is likely to be used by those planning to live in English-speaking countries, this omission is narrow-minded, outdated and misrepresentative.

Also disturbing, was the absence of any characters with disabilities. According to the British Disability Rights Commission, over 10 million people in the UK are disabled yet not one of *SBS2*'s 1,252 characters appeared to have any disability.



With the exception of a few photographs occasionally found at the end of some chapters, *SBS2* relies solely on illustrations to represent its fictional characters. Steven J. Molinsky (one of *SBS2*'s co-authors) in an interview conducted by an on-line publication, ELT News<sup>(1)</sup> (Dec, 2003), explained the rationale behind this approach. Illustrations apparently engage students more than photographs, which many students find difficult to associate with. In theory, the use of illustrations enables the text's creators to visually present any situation. Unfortunately, in this instance the drawback to this approach is that a society resembling that of a right-wing utopia was created where races do not mix and neither homosexuality nor disability exists.

#### **'Firstness'**

Analysis of *SBS2* in terms of 'firstness' revealed that on 15 out of 18 occasions the male in the pair came first. This finding is particularly disappointing in light of the fact that *SBS2* was criticised by Porreca for the same failing over two decades ago (1984:714). Furthermore, in all of the text's grammar tables the pronoun 'he' proceeds its feminine counterpart 'she'. Admittedly, every text has a responsibility to present standard and normal usages of language and this goes some way to justifying pairings such as 'Mr. and Mrs.' in *SBS2*. The effect of repeatedly placing the male first is difficult to assess but Hartman and Judd's caution that it 'reinforces the second-place status of women' (1978:390) seems warranted. *SBS2* can and should make more effort to alternate between male and females.

#### **Adjective association**

Porreca's article showed that a number of texts were guilty

Table 1: Instances of Firstness

Female		Male		
p.42		p.8	p.36	p.100
		p.8	p.56	p.110
p.95		p.25	p.87	p.120
		p.25	p.94	p.121
p.120		p.36	p.94	p.126
<b>Total:</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>15</b>		

of describing women only in terms of aesthetic qualities whilst descriptions pertaining to intellect and ability were reserved for men. The findings of this paper (presented in Table 2) clear *SBS2* of any such accusation.

The analysis of gender specific adjective association clearly shows females to be described and portrayed in a far more positive light than men. Negative adjectives are almost exclusively attached to male characters. This finding suggests that perhaps too much has been conceded to equal rights campaigners with the result being that the text has now become discriminatory towards males. This could represent a potential barrier for male learners and teachers using *SBS2*.

#### **Verb association**

Scrutiny of the text with regards to verb association uncovered no discernible discrimination. Both women and men were depicted as taking part in a wide variety of activities. In this respect the text should commended for challenging gender stereotypes. Women are shown fixing cars, repairing fences, running and skiing whilst men appear in illustrations sewing and shopping for groceries

Table 2: Adjectives associated with females &amp; males

Female		Male	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
[ab]Accurate (1)	[c]Impatient (1)	[c]Bright (1)	[r]Bad (2)
[c]Bright (1)	<i>-refers to a couple</i>	[ap]Fashionable (1)	[r]Boring (1)
[ab]Capable (1)	[c]Stubborn (1)	[c]Friendly (2)	[ab]Careless (1)
[c]Careful (1)	[c]Unfriendly (1)	[c]Funny (2)	[c]Dishonest (3)
[c]Energetic (2)	<i>-refers to a couple</i>	[c]Generous (3)	[ab]Impatient (1) – <i>refers to a couple</i>
[ab]Fast (1)		[r]Good (3)	[c]Impolite (1)
[ap]Fashionable (1)		[ap]Handsome (1)	[r]Lazy (5)
[c]Friendly (2)		[c]Honest (2)	[c]Mean (3)
[r]Good (1)		[c]Hospitable (1)	Noisy (3)
[ap]Graceful (1)		[ab]Intelligent (1)	[c]Obnoxious (1)
[ab]Hard (diligent) (1)		[r]Interesting (1)	[c]Rude (2)
[r]Helpful (1)		[r]Nice (3)	[ab]Sloppy (2)
[c]Honest (1)		[c]Polite (2)	[c]Stubborn (3)
[ab]Intelligent/Smart (5)			[ap]Ugly (1)
[r]Interesting (2)			[c]Unfriendly (1) <i>-refers to a couple</i>
[c]Kind (1)			
[r]Nice (3)			
[c]Patient (2)			
[c]Polite (2)			
[r]Popular (1)			
[ap]Pretty (2)			
[c]Talented (4)			
<b>Total:</b> 40	3	23	30

- Numbers in parentheses represent number of instances

[c] – character    [ap] – appearance    [ab] – ability    [r] – reputation

### Occupation

As shown in Table 3, occupations assigned to female and male characters correspond with the overall number of characters

in the text. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that skilled occupations are set aside as the reserve of men. Likewise, the table shows that women are not pigeonholed as housewives and secretaries.

Hartman and Judd debated the issue of whether texts should be prescriptive or descriptive. Cross-referencing *SBS2* with 2004 census figures from the United States suggests that the text is the former. Female carpenters and construction workers represent a paltry 1.8% and 3.2% of their respective total workforces in the United States, yet examples of both can be found in *SBS2*. Likewise, the receptionist in *SBS2* is one of the mere 6.5% of receptionists in the U.S. who happen to be male.

With the exception of the terms actor and actress, the text is careful to avoid the use of gender-specific occupation labels. This move, however, should be viewed as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Such is the political climate in most English-speaking countries that to use such terms would be met with surprise if not offense.

The text does devote an entire page to the topic of gender and professions. It carries photographs of both men and women engaged in work traditionally associated with the other sex (e.g.; female pilot, male babysitter etc.). Whilst the text does not explicitly state that this is either unusual or something to commend, it is heavily hinted at and is obviously intended as a point of discussion and cultural insight for students.

Table 3: Occupations associated with females &amp; males

Female		Male	
skilled	unskilled	skilled	unskilled
actress (2)	assembler (1)	actor (4)	bank clerk (1)
architect (1)	construction worker (1)	baker (1)	bellboy (1)
boss (2)	department store clerk (1)	boss (3)	businessman (2)
bus driver (1)	diner waiting staff (1)	bus driver (2)	construction worker (3)
carpenter (1)	factory worker (3)	designer (1)	factory worker (4)
dancer(2)	florist (1)	director (2)	hardware store clerk (1)
engineer (1)	ice-cream parlor staff (1)	doctor (1)	ice-cream parlor staff (1)
English teacher (1)	inspector (1)	driver (1)	machine operator (1)
fashion model (1)	janitor (1)	driving instructor (1)	mail carrier (1)
gardener (2)	newsagent (1)	engineer (1)	office worker (3)
judge (1)	office worker (4)	eye doctor (1)	painter (2)
lawyer (1)	painter (1)	fashion model (1)	parking attendant (1)
musician (1)	parking attendant (1)	floor manager (1)	receptionist (1)
newscaster(1)	sports stadium marshal (1)	football coach (1)	restaurant waiting staff (3)
office manager (1)	supermarket cashier (2)	inspector (1)	school receptionist (1)
piano teacher (2)	thief (1)	landlord (2)	shoe store clerk (2)
plumber (1)		mayor (1)	station attendant (1)
police officer (1)		musician (1)	supermarket cashier (3)
politician (1)		photographer (1)	thief (7)
programmer (1)		police officer (2)	typist (1)
runner (2)		politician (2)	
singer (1)		professor (3)	
supervisor (1)		senator (1)	
teacher (3)		singer (2)	
translator (2)		soccer player (1)	
writer (1)		teacher (3)	
		translator (1)	
		TV repair person (1)	
		weather forecaster (1)	
		welder (1)	
		writer (1)	
<b>Total: 35</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>40</b>

## Beyond the Text

So far, this paper has focused almost exclusively on the text and the editorial decisions of its creators. This is a worthwhile process but little can be concluded from such an analysis alone. Arguably, far more influential to a student's progress and understanding is the form of instruction given by their teacher. The following section discusses some ways that teachers and students have the potential to redress gender inequality found in a text.

### **Personalising the text**

It is relatively safe to state that the majority of professional EFL teachers do not rely solely on a textbook to teach students. It is suspected that most instructors instead use the text as a source for ideas, a starting point of sorts. Worksheets can be produced that place the female first in mixed-gender pairings. Extra flashcards can be made to balance the representation of both genders. Likewise, dialogues and exercises can be scrapped in favor of teacher-produced versions.

### **Role reversal in dialogs**

In a text such as *SBS2*, students are expected to assume the roles of illustrated characters. Whilst it may seem most natural for male students to assume the roles of male characters and female students to take on the parts of female characters, it is not imperative. Indeed, in single-sex learning environments it would prove impossible. Even in situations where this is not the case, some students may relish the opportunity to assume the role of someone of the opposite sex and classes can become a lot livelier and more

entertaining through such exercises of role-reversal.

### **Teacher commentary**

In the majority of cases, the responsibility of ESL and EFL teachers extends beyond teaching language alone. Without some insight to the cultures and societies English is used in, true understanding of the language and its nuances cannot be acquired and it is usually the teachers who provide this insight. Competent teachers are able to use even poorly-written and discriminatory textbooks and make students aware of current social and cultural beliefs and sensitive issues. However, the reverse is also true and the prejudiced opinions and beliefs of a teacher can easily undo the best intentions of a well-written textbook. Ideally, both the textbook and the teacher that uses it should be enlightened and unprejudiced.

### **Class discussion**

Even when prejudice survives through the editorial process of a textbook and a teacher fails to alert students to this, there still remains the possibility that the students themselves may notice that something is awry. Often keenly interested in the cultures and social workings of English speaking countries, students may question the information presented in textbooks. Though never intended by the text's writers, such inquisitiveness can often make for stimulating discussion in the class.

## **Conclusion**

It is the finding of this paper that *SBS2*, for the most part, makes notable effort to represent both genders in an equal and fair

manner. Clearly conscious of social and political pressure to portray women as competent equals to their male counterparts, the text's writers have taken obvious steps to avoid accusations of sexism and stereotyping.

The results of this paper's analysis showed that whilst not achieving perfect balance, women were adequately represented both visually and textually. Furthermore, analysis of adjectives and verbs showed that language was not used a means of undermining female integrity.

The analysis did however uncover some faults within the text. Women rarely came first in mixed gender pairings, a criticism which has apparently been ignored for decades. Men were more frequently portrayed in a negative manner and used as the butt of jokes. Occupations of characters, though stereotype-challenging, were shown to be unrepresentative of reality in some cases. Furthermore, whilst equal gender representation was achieved, representation of minority groups and inter-racial relationships was noticeably absent.

Ansary and Babaii claimed that 'since the first study of sexism in ESL/EFL materials in the 70's, little has changed over the past three decades' (2003, p.8) This claim was based on findings from the study of only two textbooks, both produced by the same publisher in Iran, a country that, according to the U.S. Department of State (2006), equates the testimony of two women with that of one man and requires women to ride in reserved sections on public buses. It is the conclusion of this paper that Ansary and Babaii's claim is incorrect. This paper asserts that most textbook publishers are now sensitive to the demand for gender equality and that this is reflected



in a gradually decreasing level of academic attention.

It is hoped that textbook writers will continue to ensure that equality is always striven for and that minority groups are not overlooked or excluded. It is also hoped that such considerations will never take priority over the objective of producing user-friendly, effective textbooks designed to improve students' English ability.

#### Notes

- (1) [http://www.eltnews.com/features/interviews/030\\_steven\\_molinsky1.shtml](http://www.eltnews.com/features/interviews/030_steven_molinsky1.shtml)

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