



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

“Would you like to dance with me, Miwa?”: gender roles and the EFL Text

Journal Item

How to cite:

Pihlaja, Stephen (2008). “Would you like to dance with me, Miwa?”: gender roles and the EFL Text. The School House, 16(1) pp. 2–9.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2008 Stephen Pihlaja

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.juniorseniorhighsig.org/newsletters/TSH2008january.pdf>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Feature Article

"Would you like to dance with me, Miwa?": Gender Roles and the EFL Text

Stephen Pihlaja

Keiwa Gakuen College

This article is an evaluation of gender roles in the Planet Blue Japanese high school textbook. Using criteria built on biases found by Jane Sunderland, it evaluates the textbook on basis of exclusion, subordination and distortion, and degradation. On the whole, the textbook appears to have made significant improvement in these three criteria, especially in the presentation of career roles for woman. The roles of men and women in romantic relationships presented in the text, however, are still presented in stereotypical terms. The article presents these remaining biases as opportunities for EFL instructors to provoke discussions regarding gender roles in Japanese culture as well as English-speaking cultures.

Key Words: Gender roles, High School, Textbooks

INTRODUCTION

This article will explore the ways in which men and women are represented in the *Planet Blue* EFL textbook for the purpose of investigating whether or not men and women are represented differently in the text, and to what extent representations of each sex reflect positively or negatively on the sex. The findings will show that *Planet Blue* has made progress in the diverse portrayal of men and women, but that problems of gender bias still remain with regard to how romantic relationships are represented. Finally, the article will present the implications of gender bias in EFL texts, suggest opportunities for further research, and discuss ways EFL instructors may overcome instances of gender bias in texts.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

As EFL textbooks mainly present constructed scenarios, the author of an EFL text must create a world in which the text's characters interact. Ansary and Babaii write, "Language is not merely a means of communicating information. Rather, it is an important means of stabilizing and maintaining social relationships with other members of a speech community. Sex-based linguistic variation is a prime example of the sort of social function that is fulfilled by language." (2003) And Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard states, "...it is now widely accepted that many written texts reproduce sexist positioning because the world represented encodes stereotyped views about gender relations." (Caldas-Coulthard in Kennedy et. al., 2003) The author's stereotypes and biases (either personal or accepted social biases) might then impact how gender is represented in a text. As we observe gender representations in EFL texts along with known cultural biases, we are able to deduce whether or not an unfair social bias has played a significant role in the creation of a text and

whether or not a potential bias may be obstructing a more authentic representation of gender.

Cultural bias in gender representation are usually found in vague, unverifiable perceptions that seem true to the speaker, but may not have any basis in what is empirically or sociologically true. As Deborah Cameron points out, "People *do* perform gender differently in different contexts, and do sometimes behave in ways we would normally associate with the 'other' gender." (Cameron in Jaworski et. al., 2005) Acknowledging differences in language patterns is important, but when typically masculine or feminine language is deemed appropriate or female speakers are unfairly misrepresented, gender bias becomes dangerous.

Sunderland writes about three instances of gender bias found in EFL texts from the 1970's and 80's:

- 1) Males were over-represented (e.g. Hellinger, 1980), i.e., exclusion; 2) Men tended to occupy both more powerful and a greater range of occupational roles than did women (e.g., Porecca, 1984); both males and females performed gender stereotypical activities (e.g., Cincotta, 1978), i.e., subordination and distortion and 3) Women tended to be stereotypically emotional and were more likely than male characters to be the butt of jokes (Hartman and Judd, 1978) and of implied slurs (Talansky, 1986), i.e. degradation. (Sunderland 151, 2000)

Sunderland's three points of bias: exclusion, subordination and distortion, and degradation provide a very useful map for analyzing an EFL text. We will draw on Sunderland's analysis to ask several questions of our EFL text.

1. Are male speakers over-represented in the text?
2. Do men and women perform stereotypical roles in occupations or activities?
3. Do women appear stereotypically emotional or the butt of most jokes?

CONTEXT

This article deals specifically with high school students in a large private high school in Niigata City, Japan. Students range in age from 15 years old to 18 years old with a background of three to six years of mandatory English instruction. Most students' English ability is limited to correcting grammar mistakes, learning vocabulary, and doing dictation with little to no speaking practice in the classroom. The author serves in an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) capacity with responsibilities ranging from complete control of classroom activity to leading pronunciation drills. Students are mostly typical Japanese teenagers focused on passing their college entrance examinations and uninterested in the practical application of English. Japanese English teachers are also mainly interested in preparing students for these exams and do not usually use spoken English in the classroom.

EVALUATION

Planet Blue is a Japanese high school English text produced by a Japanese publisher. The authors of the text are primarily Japanese with two foreigners cited as consultants. The text was first published in 2002.

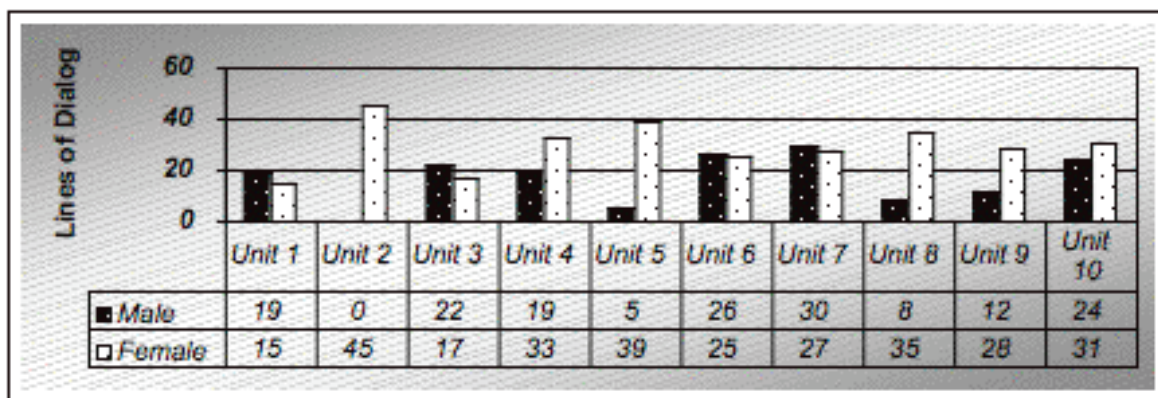
In the context school, *Planet Blue* is only used in first-year classes (students aged 15 or 16 years old) primarily for listening comprehension drills. A separate text is used for grammar. *Planet Blue* follows the story of Miwa, a Japanese high school exchange student who lives in New York with her host family. Most of the dialogs revolve around Miwa's various experiences in America and follow situations typical to EFL textbooks (e.g. making introductions, ordering food at a restaurant, going to the doctor, etc.). There are ten units in the book broken up into three topics per unit. Each topic features several sections: Words and Phrases, Warm Up, Task Listening, Focus Listening, Pre-Speaking, and Speaking. All the dialogs are read by actors on an accompanying CD. The only portion of the text to feature dialog between characters is the "Task Listening" section and most of the information drawn for this article will come from these dialogs.

Evaluation of Gender Representation

1. Is one gender over-represented in the text?

Sunderland's analysis of ESL and EFL textbooks from the 1970's and 1980's found that male speakers had been over-represented. *Planet Blue* does not seem to over-represent male speakers. There are an equal number of male and female characters in the text (seven male and seven female characters). Furthermore, although the number of speakers is equal, women are by far the most represented speakers in "Planet Blue" accounting for over 67% of the dialog.

Table 1: Comparison of dialogue distribution



Moreover, several Units of the text (2, 5, and 8) eliminate the male voice almost entirely. Surprisingly, there are no dialogs between two male characters in the text.

In a closer look at dialogs in which both genders are present, the text appears to be more even. With no exceptions, all conversations involving men and women are within two lines of being even. All dialogs in which men and women are present generally follow a male-female or female-male exchange pattern, with a very small occurrence of dialogs in which female speakers follow female speakers or male speakers follow male speakers. The dominance of the female voice in *Planet Blue* primarily comes from instances of female-female conversations in which no males are present.

The high occurrence of the female voice in *Planet Blue* seems to be due mostly to the fact that the main character, Miwa, is female. As nearly every conversation in the text involves Miwa in one way or another, she becomes by far the most represented speaker in the text. The equality of speakers in mixed-sex environments, however, is worth noting as males and females contribute equally to almost every conversation, whether it is in lines of text or initiating subjects in conversations. From this perspective, *Planet Blue* does not show signs of female speaker exclusion.

2. Do men and women perform stereotypical roles in occupations or activities?

Almost all male and female characters in the text have a counterpart. The waitress at the restaurant has a male counterpart as the receptionist. There seems to be little bias in these choices. Gender also seems to play little role in the topics that are chosen in conversations. Male high school student Harrison mentions how he is happy with Danny's new hairstyle, a typically "feminine" observation. (Task Listening Script 26) Miwa is a fan of baseball, a typically "masculine" hobby. (Pre-Speaking Script 7)

Planet Blue presents speakers that are more-or-less genderless. Male speakers and female speakers are interchangeable in the sense of the linguistic role they place. Men and women both initiate the same topics, and there does not seem to be a clear indication of gender specific words or phrasing. Moreover, given the same linguistic task, men and women perform identically. There seems to be no hierarchy based on gender in conversational settings and men and women converse equally.

An example of this genderless voice appears when Miwa leaves a message on her host family's answering machine:

Hello, Mr. Mason. Thank you for your voice mail. My name is Miwa. I'm a high school student. My father, Hideki here, is an illustrator... And my mother, Akikio, teaches at an elementary school. And I have an eighteen-year-old brother, Ichiro. Ichiro is a university student. We live in Yokohama. I love watching baseball, and I'm looking forward to watching the Major League Baseball games. See you soon. Bye. (Pre-Speaking Script 7)

When compared to the following text (spoken by Miwa's host father in an answering machine message), the similarities are striking.

Hello, Miwa. My name is Richard Mason. I am a computer programmer. My wife, Carolyn here, is a dentist... And we have an eighteen-year-old girl, Laura, and a ten-year-old boy, Fred.... Also Sam is our family member. We live in New York State—in New York City. Please let us know your flight. We'll meet you at JFK airport. We are looking forward to seeing you soon. Bye. (Task Listening Script 7)

With the exception of the details, both messages are constructed almost identically. This same pattern persists throughout the text. Instances in which there is a clear task-orientation, every character's linguistic choices are almost always gender neutral.

The main exception to this gender-neutrality comes in a series of events in which "Danny" pursues a romantic relationship with Miwa. In this case, there is a clear sense of gender subordination. Miwa takes a much more traditional role as an object of Danny's desire and

follows Danny's leadership. The following examples are both taken from a conversation that occurs at the school dance.

Danny: Yeah, well... um... I really think you're very charming, Miwa, so I was wondering if I could ask you out on a date, say, next Sunday?

Miwa: A date? Gee, I don't know. It's so sudden.

Danny: I hope you can come. (The dance music changes and time passes.) Um.... would you like to dance with me, Miwa?

Miwa: Okay. (Task Listening Script 48)

Miwa never takes an active role in her relationship with Danny, and her friends seem to encourage this pattern of relationship (see below). Miwa also, though initially uncomfortable with Danny's advances, seems to accept her role and plays the part of the traditional girlfriend with little trouble. Danny not only initiates the romantic relationship with Miwa, but for the duration of their relationship and the text, always "makes the first move" in every aspect of the relationship whether initiating dates, giving gifts, or calling on Miwa when she is ill. Given Miwa's role as an exchange student, the situation may be more complex than what might be considered a typical male-female romantic relationship. This seems to be less important factor, especially as the relationship moves forward and Miwa is seemingly more comfortable with Danny.

Although Danny positions himself in a leadership role, his language is never particularly authoritative and very reserved, especially when speaking with Miwa. He takes the role of caretaker when Miwa falls ill:

Danny: Is there anybody who can take you home?

Miwa: Well, Fred's probably at home, but Richard's out today and Carolyn's away on a business trip.

Laura said she'll be seeing her friends after school.

Danny: Then let me take you home. (Task Listening Script 54)

The romantic relationship between Miwa and Danny also brings out more stereotypical behavior in both Danny and Miwa's friends. For example, several other males who make appearances in the text provide what might be considered the most stereotypically gendered activity. In the school dance conversation, Bruce, Danny's brother, pushes Danny to speak about his romantic feelings for Miwa.

Bruce: Hi, Anne, you look terrific with those earrings! And... you must be Miwa, right?

Miwa: You know me?

Bruce: Sure, Danny's been talking a lot about a girl from Japan lately.

Danny: Hey, Bruce, stop it...!

Miwa: ...Talking about me?

Danny: Um... Miwa, yes... no,... I mean...

Bruce: Come on, Danny! (Task Listening Script 48)

This is also true of Miwa's female friends, particularly Anne, who are stereotypically more feminine in relation to romantic relationships especially in their support for one another. In the conversation that takes place at the high school dance, Miwa is invited out on a date by Danny, but is hesitant to accept the invitation. Quickly, the second female present enters the conversation to interject, "Don't take it too seriously, Miwa. You can get to know each other better [on the date]. Danny's a really great guy." (Task Listening Script 48) A second instance of this kind of encouragement appears when Beth calls Miwa to ask for advice about a love

letter she received from a boy. She says, "When I opened the letter, I got really disappointed. Well, Miwa, give me advice. I'm waiting for your call." (Task Listening Script 64) Miwa's contact with Anne and Beth is extremely limited so a full understanding of these characters is almost impossible.

From these situations, it seems that *Planet Blue* presents female subordination in romantic relationships, but doesn't distort females by limiting their roles in other non-romantic settings.

3. Do women appear stereotypically emotional or the butt of most jokes?

Emotionally, there is little distinction between male and female speakers in *Planet Blue*. Miwa's interactions with her female friends (discussed above) seem to be the only instances when woman appear slightly more emotional than their male counterparts, but these two examples are very short and do not play a prominent role in the text. Miwa, as the primary female speaker, is smart, polite, and guarded. She is not prone to emotional outbursts.

Men also do not appear stereotypically male in their emotional expression. In a Topic entitled "Sharing Your Feelings," a male character, Harrison, notes that his Grandfather "loved [him] so much." (Task Listening Script 64) Danny is able to share his feelings of desire for Miwa and Miwa's reaction to these advances is in no way stereotypically emotional. Although one might point out that there are few instances of men expressing emotions in the text, there is an equal absence of female emotional expression. Women are not the butt of any jokes in *Planet Blue*. It does not seem that *Planet Blue* shows any signs of female degradation.

IMPLICATIONS

In any instance of non-authentic text creation, the author is building a world based primarily on a perception rather than empirical or authentic material. This has implications on a sociolinguistic level. Per Cameron's quote at the beginning of this article, it can be proven that men and woman sometimes *do* speak differently. The authenticity of gendered language should not be avoided so long as careful attention is paid to authentic representation. In *Planet Blue*, this seems to be the largest problem.

Although the text is set in a high school in New York, there is little attention paid to authentic New York high school gender relations; that is to say, this New York high school is not actually a New York high school in *Planet Blue*, but rather just a place in America. When an author disregards authenticity and favors the reductionistic approach of creating "an American city," stereotypes and oversights are almost certain to follow. Maybe men in New York high schools are more likely to take leadership roles in romantic relationships, but without empirically testing this hypothesis or looking to actual source data, stereotyping will occur. Further research is needed to explore ways authentic texts (based on empirical, scientific data) can be used to help create more accurate depictions of gender in English-

speaking countries. Certainly, questions of presentation will remain even in authentic texts, but this seems to be a good first step in eliminating stereotypes.

Although issues of positive gender or negative misrepresentation and bias may be easily observed in *Planet Blue*, the implications of gender bias are less clear. Benjamin Rifkin offers this stark analysis: "The exclusion of girls and women from FL textbooks may seriously impair their abilities to understand the target language and its culture(s)..." (Rifkin, 1998) Sunderland, however, is less convinced: "...claims about the relationship between bias in a textbook and a learner's gender identity... are also hard if not impossible to prove." (Sunderland, 1998)

Sunderland's point is well taken, especially in light of our discussion of *Planet Blue*. Certainly, any link between students' understanding of their gender roles in romantic relationships and the influence of the text would be impossible to measure. This does not, however, eliminate the possibility for research (per Rifkin's statement) that might link EFL textbook gender representation and students' perception of gender roles in the studied English-speaking country. For example, though it may be difficult to prove that the conversations between Danny and Miwa in *Planet Blue* are playing a role in the gender development of the high school students who are reading the text, research can be done to discover whether or not students perceive this kind of relationship as normal or preferable in New York. The EFL textbook presentation of acceptable or normal gender roles in English-speaking countries' effect on student's perception of gender roles in the studied country should be further investigated.

Regardless of the text's impact on the student, the use of the text is much more important than the contents or biases in a text. (Sunderland, 2000) Of course, finding instances of gender bias in EFL textbooks is not nearly as difficult as considering ways in which to address these biases. In Japanese high school and jr. high school classes where native Assistant Language Teachers are employed to teach, but are given very little room to make choices regarding the textbooks or the course of the discussion during a given class, this is a particularly daunting task. But, for teachers using texts like *Planet Blue*, biases present opportunities for discussion.

The relationship between Miwa and Danny presents an opportunity for teachers to start conversations about cultural "rules" regarding romantic relationships, thus creating a balance to any subconscious damage the gender misrepresentation may be causing. This need not be intrusive in the course of normal class activities or take more time than simply pausing during the course of a class to ask students which gender normally initiates romantic relationships in their culture and whether they think this is a good thing or not. Teachers might also supplement course material with authentic material from the states (i.e. graphs or charts from English newspapers regarding gender roles in the studied country, etc.) to give a more authentic depiction of gender roles in the studied country. Authentic, easy to understand source material should play an important role in linking the world of the text with the real world.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, *Plant Blue* provides clear positive presentations of men and women. While teaching from this text, the goal of the EFL instructor should not be to impose false, created gender representations upon their students, but rather provide places where gender roles can be addressed and authentic depictions of gender can be presented. As mentioned above, until use of sociological well-researched textbooks built on authentic source material is commonplace, the problem of stereotyping will remain. For the high school EFL instructor, remembering that ultimately, every class is more than simply a language lesson will undoubtedly lead to a much fuller experience for the student as they are challenged to consider not only the mechanics of a new language, but also address broader cultural questions.

REFERENCES

- Ansary, H. & Babaii, B. (2003). Subliminal Sexism in Current ESL/ EFL Textbooks. *Asian-EFL Journal*, 5 (1), Article 1.
- Jaworski, A. & Coupland, N. et al. (2005). *The Discourse Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, Martha A. et al. (1997). 'Discourse Roles, Gender and Language Textbook Dialogs: Who learns what from John and Sally.' *Gender and Education*, 9 (4), 469-490.
- Kennedy, C. et al. (2000). *Sociolinguistics*. Course Materials: University of Birmingham.
- Negishi, M. et al. (2005). *Planet Blue*. Tokyo: Oubunsha Press.
- Sunderland, J. (1998). *New Dimensions in the Study of Education and Learner Gender?* Lorogno, Spain: Dept. of Philosophy, University of La Rioja.
- Sunderland, J. (2000). 'New Understandings of gender and language classroom research: texts, teacher talk and student talk.' *Language Teaching Research*, 4 (2), 49-173.
- Rifkin, B. (1998). 'Gender Representation in Foreign Language Textbooks: A Case Study of Textbooks of Russian.' *The Modern Language Journal*, 82 (2), 217-236.

Stephen Pihlaja is an American English teacher from Chicago, IL. He holds his Masters degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham. After teaching as an ALT at Niigata Meikun High School for two and half years, he has recently begun teaching at Keiwa Gakuen College in Shibata City, Niigata Prefecture.

