Gender Balance in EFL Textbooks: Graded Readers

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1. Introduction

When considering the changes in social values, which also influenced linguistic change, one of the biggest would have to be the rise of feminism in the 1960s. Freeman and McElhinny (1996) list three books, all published in 1975, as crucial in the study of language and gender: *Male/Female Language* (Key, 1975); *Language and Women's Place* (Lakoff, 1975); and *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance* (Thorne and Henkey, 1975). The early feminists investigated how differently women speak from men, and made efforts to eliminate their disadvantages, which were esteemed to be the cause of such difference in their language. Following them, some feminists, such as Spender (1980), indicate that asymmetries in language demean women; and other feminists, such as Cameron (1985), argue that sexism is deep-rooted within society, as well as language. Such research caused, for example, *Ms* as a word meaning women, without relating to their marital condition, to be created. Hence, gender matters and the cultural background behind them are very influential in how to use language, as well as how to communicate between people. The analysis of men's and women's language can, therefore, be considered as a significant study in sociolinguistics.

The movement of feminism, moreover, influenced language education, and this also raised people's consciousness to the issue of gender balance in EFL textbooks. Since sociolinguistics has focused on the gender balance of content, rather than that at the linguistic level, it has been considered that "[t]he primary tool for evaluation of sexism in EFL and ESL textbooks has been content analysis" (Caroll and Kowitz, 1994, p.73). When investigating the functions of language, however, it is necessary to analyse every aspect of language: not only the content, but also vocabulary and grammar.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the influence of gender representation in EFL textbooks. In particular, graded readers, which are designed to improve L2 learners' reading skills, will be focused upon and analysed. There are three main sections to this paper. The sociolinguistic aspects regarding gender references will be discussed in Section 2. After introducing the methodology of this paper in Section 3, the discussion will be developed in Section 4. This will be divided into two parts: gender references analysed (1) from a lexical and grammatical point of view; and (2) from a social and cultural point of view. For the purpose of examining gender representation, three versions of texts, based on the same story, will be analysed and discussed. The results from the text analysis will be summarised at the end of Section 4.

2. Literature review

Montgomery (1995) argues that the difference of language between men and women is influenced by various factors: especially a linguistic and sociological one. Therefore, when gender-differentiated language is discussed in sociolinguistics, it has to be investigated from a lexical and grammatical perspective, as well as from a social and cultural perspective. The former focuses on the linguistic difference between words for men

and words for women, with the latter emphasising the social difference between men and women caused by cultural, environmental, ethical, or social factors.

2.1 A lexical and grammatical perspective

As Spender (1980) argues, grammatical concepts can generally be considered masculine. This will be emphasised by: (1) generic noun references; (2) words with derogatory meaning; and (3) comparative word use by men and women.

2.1.1 Generic noun references

Generally, human beings are referred to in discourse, as if all humans were male. Montgomery et al (2000) explain that this is exemplified by the word *man* as a generic noun. As long as *man* is used as a generic noun, it should refer to both males and females. The anaphoric word of *man*, however, is *he/his/him*, and this gives the impression that *man* means only male people. Montgomery et al (2000) point out the ambiguity of *man* as a generic noun in the following sentences:

> (a) Man's vital interests are food, shelter and access to females.
> (b) Man, unlike other mammals, has difficulties in giving birth.
>
> <div align="right">(Montgomery et al, 2000, p.78)</div>

The sentence (a) apparently uses *man* to refer to male people, while sentence (b) uses *man* for general people. The former sounds more natural than the latter, due to the fact that people cannot help feeling awkward that man gives birth. This shows that *man*, even as a generic noun, carries masculine connotations with it. Montgomery et al analyse them as

follows:

> Thus, so-called generic nouns and pronouns are quite commonly not truly generic in practice: apparently non-gender specific, they often turn out to be referring actually to males. (Montgomery et al, 2000, p.78)

As a result, it can be considered that generic words are constructed with male-oriented words. Hence, it is possible to argue that *woman* is made invisible and even neglected in society and culture. This fact encourages people to use other words, instead of *he/his/him*, to express general people. Freeman and McElhinny (1996) suggest possible strategies to avoid using the generic masculine pronoun as follows:

> 1. Drop the masculine pronoun
> 2. Rewrite the sentence in the plural rather than the singular
> 3. Substitute the pronouns *one* or *one's* for *he* or *his*
> 4. Use *he* or *she*, *his or her* or *s/he* (in writing)
> 5. Use *their* when the subject is an indefinite pronoun
>
> (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996, p.223)

This effort to treat *man* and *woman* equally in language leads the movement to change some words, which are distinguished by gender: *firefighter* for *fireman*, *chair*(*person*) for *chairman*, *flight attendant* for *steward/stewardess*. The last words *steward/stewardess*, which should be called a pair word, provides an interesting example. Although they are expected to mean the same occupation, pair words cannot always mean the same position of men and women. That is, it can sometimes be seen that the distinction of pair words holds derogatory meaning in it.

2.1.2 Words with derogatory meaning

The suffix *–ess* usually changes some words to female ones, such as *lion* to *lioness*, *actor* to *actress*, *prince* to *princess*, and *host* to *hostess*. Each pair can be considered to mention the same kind, even though they are distinguished by sex. Moreover, there is another type of pair word, which consists of individual words without any superficial similarity, such as *king* to *queen*, and *husband* to *wife*. It is noteworthy here that the male words have the dominant image over female words. As Montgomery et al (2000) argue, the pairs are not always symmetrical in meaning; it can be determined that masculine words sometimes downgrade women.

> Most of the terms on the male side have positive connotations and seem to refer solely to an occupation, whereas the female equivalents often have negative sexual connotations. (Montgomery et al, 2000, p.81)

This tendency can be seen, for example, through the comparison of the meanings between *king* and *queen* in the dictionary. According to *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, *king* has several meanings, such as (1) the male ruler of an independent state, (2) a person or thing regarded as the finest or the most important in its sphere or group. While *queen*, on the other hand, has meanings, such as (1) the female ruler of an independent state, (2) a woman or thing regarded as the finest or most important in its sphere or group, (3) a flamboyantly effeminate male homosexual. Meanings (1) and (2) of both words can be recognised as equivalent meanings, though *king* does not have an equivalent meaning (3) to *queen*. This means that the feminine word *queen* carries a negative connotation. In the terms of *husband* and *wife*, Carroll and Kowitz (1994) investigate the frequency of *husband* and *wife* in a series of textbooks, and discovered that *wife* appears

more frequently than *husband*. They explain that "[t]he underlying reason for wife occurring more frequently than husband is mainly because the stereotypical wife is an appendage" (Carroll and Kowitz, 1994, p.75). They conclude that *wife* is used as (1) an appendage, (2) a passive participant, and (3) subordinate to her husband; whereas *husband* is more likely to be the subject of an active verb. It is obvious here that a more negative image is attached to the feminine word *wife*.

Another example of typical pair words is in naming conventions: *Mr*, *Mrs*, and *Miss*. Men have only one reference *Mr*, while women have two types of reference *Mrs* and *Miss*. This shows the major tendency to distinguish women by marital status in society. Freeman and McElhinny (1996) argue that it reflects "the notion that whether or not a woman is in a heterosexual marriage is her defining characteristic" (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996, p.222). In addition to this, the usage of *Mrs* is noteworthy. It is usually followed by a woman's name: eg. *Mrs Ann Shakespeare*. In fact, it is not strange that she is called *Mrs Shakespeare* in society. This means that her name is hidden behind her husband's name, and her marital status is emphasised here. Moreover, she can also be called *Mrs William Shakespeare*. In this case, her name is completely buried under her husband's, and the marital status of belonging to her husband is emphasised more distinctively. As a result, it can be considered that the usage of *Mrs* expresses, as well as produces, a women's negative status in society.

2.1.3 Comparative word usage by men and momen

As some critics (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1992, 1995; Yule 1996) point out, there is an apparent difference between language used by men and language used by women. The most significant features of the difference were first determined by Lakoff (1975). They are explained by Holmes,

who divides them into two groups: hedging devices and boosting devices (Holmes, 1992, p.316). Hedging devices include (1) lexical hedges (e.g. *you know*, *sort of*, *well*, *you see*); (2) tag questions (e.g. … *is it?*, … *isn't it?*); (3) question intonation; (4) superpolite forms; and (5) euphemisms. Boosting devices include (1) intensifiers (e.g. *just*, *so*); and (2) emphatic stress. In particular, tag questions are most often mentioned as a characteristic function of women's language by critics. According to Holmes' analysis, tag questions are used to offer "the addressee an opportunity to contribute" and/or to ask for "confirmation of an assertion" (Holmes, 1992, p.320). When considering that more tag questions are used in women's talk with men rather than with women, however, it is possible that it could be influenced by a social relationship with men. As Yule (1996) argues, men interrupt the conversation more often than women, and they are generally considered to be more aggressive and in control. This causes women to become more tentative and insecure, and encourages them to involve addressees in their talk, and/or get some response from them. As a result, more hedging or boosting behaviour will be produced in women's language.

Moreover, Lakoff (1973) argues that women's language tends to use more terms expressing colours, particular adjectives, and intensifiers. As mentioned above, intensifiers, such as *so* and *just*, are typical examples, and even tag questions, trying to involve addressees in their talk, can be also recognised as intensifiers. In addition to them, Wardhaugh shows a list of some characteristic adjectives in women's language: *charming*, *divine*, *lovely*, *sweet*, *exquisite*, *precious*, *adorable*, *darling*, and *fantastic* (Wardhaugh, 1998, p.312). It can be said that they are words expressing personal feelings. This means that women can be considered to talk about matters of a more personal nature far more emotionally than men. On the other hand, as Yule expresses, men "prefer non-personal topics" (Yule,

1996, p.242) such as sports and news. He explains that this phenomenon is because women are more "co-operating and seeking connection via language", whereas men are "more competitive and concerned with power" (Yule, 1996, p.242). As a result, the usage of words is also connected with each gender's stereotypical image.

2.2 A social and cultural perspective

As mentioned above (in Section 2), it can be considered that the difference of language is influenced by various social factors. It is, therefore, important to stress that the social classification of people is not only by gender, but also by social class, age, ethnicity, educational background and so on.

Social class is another measure of deciding people's language. Holmes investigated gender-differentiated language in each social class, and discovered that "class membership seems to be more important than gender identity" (Holmes, 1992, p.168). This means that women sometimes use their language as a sign of their class status in society: social status is more important for them than gender identity. At the same time, Holmes discovers that women use more standard forms, while men use more vernacular forms in any social class. It can be explained that women use their language to prevent their social status from being revealed, as well as to standardise themselves. On the other hand, men seem rather willing to keep themselves closer to other classes in society by using the vernacular form. This may be caused by the stereotypical gender roles in society: men need to be related with society for business purposes, while women, who do not always have particular occupations that prove their social status, need to create their own status through their language. Therefore, the standard form of language is more useful for women. As a result, it is sometimes considered that the

standard forms tend to be associated with feminineness. Moreover, age of speaker is another crucial factor in distinguishing language used by men and women. Children's language can not be expected to always be the same as that of elderly people. Holmes (1992) states that middle-aged people use different language to that of children and elderly people because of the environment surrounding them. Since they are supposed to be in the centre of society, they are more likely to use more standard forms. Hence, age can be considered very influential on people's language. Finally, it is necessary to consider the social roles which are imposed on people in society; such as the role in one's family (eg. husband or wife), company (eg. employer or employee), and so on.

  As a result, it is important to take into consideration other possible social factors behind speakers, as well as the gender of language users for the purpose of understanding gender-differentiated usage of the language.

3. Methodology
3.1 The aim of the analysis

  The aim of the analysis is to investigate the degree to which EFL textbooks are influenced by gender features linguistically, as well as non-linguistically. Among the many types of EFL textbooks, it is 'graded readers' that will be examined. They are sometimes stories written specifically according to the lexical and grammatical level; and they are sometimes abridged stories made from the retelling of authentic ones, such as classic novels, popular novels, and filmed novels. Since one of the purposes of graded readers is to encourage L2 learners to read more books in English without the aid of a dictionary, the grammatical and lexical difficulty is strictly adjusted. The question is, however, whether or not it is enough just to control grammatical and lexical difficulty: — how is gender balance adjusted in graded

readers? Therefore, this paper will analyse graded readers, and investigate how gender features are controlled in them.

3.2 The object of the analysis

The objects to be analysed are two (graded reader) versions of a short story, which were actually used in two Extensive Reading classes for freshmen (male: n = 21, female: n = 55) at a university in Japan. Both versions of the story retell 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry, adapting it to a certain difficulty level. Story A, 'The Gift of the Magi' from *The Gift of the Magi and Other Stories*, is at the beginner level with 300 headwords; and Story B, 'The Christmas Present' from *New Yorkers' Short Stories*, is at the lower intermediate level with 700 headwords. In addition to them, the original (unabridged) text, 'The Gift of the Magi' from *O. Henry: 100 Selected Stories* (1995), will be referred to when necessary.

4. Analysis and discussion

The story of 'The Gift of the Magi' is fairly straightforward. It is about a poor couple, Jim and Della, living in New York around the year 1900, getting a Christmas present for each other. They are young: their ages are about 20; and they are poor: their income has just been cut from 30 dollars down to 20 dollars per week. Therefore, their social class can be said to be working class.

4.1 Lexical aspects
4.1.1 Generic noun references

The word *man* as a generic noun does not appear in the original text. Nevertheless, when the narrator appears at the end of the story, *you*, whom the narrator is telling, appears as the general reader. This means that the

original text can successfully avoid using *man* as a generic noun. Towards the end of Story A, people in general are expressed with *we*, and the ending is very briefly summarised in Story B without using any generic words. Hence, both versions succeed in avoiding *man*. Moreover, the interesting thing is that Story A has its own introductory paragraph, which is telling readers about the background of the story. Here, it uses *people* instead of *men*. As a result, it can be concluded that both stories in the graded readers skillfully replace a generic noun with words other than *man*.

4.1.2 Words with derogatory meaning

Name references in each story express its gender features clearly. Each character is called as follows:

Table 1: Name References

	Story A	Story B	Original Text
Della	Della, she/her, *Mrs* Young	Della, she/her, *Mrs James Dillingham Young*, *his* Della	Della, she/her, the *mistress of the house*, *Mrs James Dillingham Young*, *his* Della, *my girl*
Jim	Jim, he/his/him	Jim, he/his/him, James Dillingham young, *her* husband, *her* Jim	Jim, he/his/him, *Mr* James Dillingham Young, *her* Jim
Della and Jim	*Mr and Mrs James (Jim) Dillingham Young, Mr and Mrs James D. Young*	*The James Dillingham Youngs*	*The James Dillingham Youngs*

As seen in Table 1 (above), Della is obviously positioned as a married woman by being called *Mrs*. That is, both Story A and Story B still hold gender-differentiated lexical items even after being adjusted for L2 learners. Examining how *Mrs* is used in each story, it can be said that *Mrs* connects Della with Jim, like *Mrs Young* in Story A, and *Mrs James Dillingham Young* in Story B. As discussed in Section 2.1.2, the name references derogate women; Della's identity is hidden behind Jim. Judging

Mrs lexically, the vocabulary level allows it to be used by L2 learners in EFL textbooks. Hence, there is no problem that Story A and Story B keep *Mrs*. This, however, results in carrying the gender-differentiated items in EFL textbooks. That is, merely controlling the text lexically is not enough to exclude gender inequality from it.

Comparing Story A with Story B, it is noticeable that Story B contains lexical items which express more directly each character's personal possessions of their partner: Della belonging to Jim, such as *his* Della, and Jim belonging to Della, such as *her* husband, and *her* Jim. Given that the same lexical items can be seen in the original text, it seems that Story A successfully erases any lexical items expressing marital position. That is, it can be argued that Story B is more conscious to marital positions than Story A.

It can be concluded that this graded reader, at least, does not take gender balance into consideration, when adjusting the level of difficulty. This was, however, problematic for the L2 learners in this study when they read Story A and Story B: they could not find *Della* behind the name references, *Mrs Young* in Story A; or *Mrs James Dillingham Young* in Story B. One of the reasons could be attributed to their lack of cultural knowledge. Although they are aware that a married woman can be called by her married family name like *Mrs Young*, most of the students did not know that a married woman is sometimes called by her husband's full name, as in *Mrs James Dillingham Young*. That is, a name reference like *Mrs James Dillingham Young* could confuse many L2 learners. This is a problem caused by the usage of gender-unbalanced items.

4.1.3 Comparative word usage by men and women

The investigation of Story A and Story B has discovered neither hedging

devices nor boosting devices. Lexical items, which are recognised as adjectives and preferred to be used by women, also could not be identified. After analysisng the original text, however, some tag questions and feminine items could be determined in Della's words; she says to Jim, '…, *will you?*', '…, *ain't I?*', and she often uses intensifiers, such as *awfully* or *What a* …, as well. Moreover, Della cries 'Oh!' and even the narrator expresses 'alas!' These words emphasise that the story is told with emotion. Such emotional words cannot be identified in either Story A or Story B.

Analysis of the description of each story, however, identifies some emotional items from Della: in Story B, it gives her speech an exclamation mark (!) six times, whereas the Della in Story A has no exclamation marks in her speech. This makes the Della in Story B a more emotional woman than the Della in Story A. Hence, it can be considered that Story B inherited Della's emotional character from the original text.

This feature of Della's character is clarified more strikingly by the scene of "Della ran to him" (Henry, 2000b, p.5) upon his arrival back home. On the other hand, in Story A, it is Jim who goes to the kitchen to see Della, which is faithful to the original story. That is, the Della in Story B expresses her personal feelings more directly than in the other two versions. As Yule (1996) argues (see Section 2.1.3), it is a more typical image of an emotional woman.

4.2 A social and cultural perspective
4.2.1 Story settings

Considering the cultural aspect of the original story, it is, in fact, fairly biased in the sense of gender balance. The two treasures which Della and Jim possess are Della's hair and Jim's watch. *Hair* is associated with beauty, and *watch* is associated with business. As Yule (1996) claims,

women's interest is more likely to be in personal matters, while men's interest is to be in non-personal matters. That is, it is possible to identify the stereotypical features of each gender in the couple's treasures: *hair* and *watch*. Moreover, Della chooses a *chain* for Jim as a Christmas present, and Jim chooses a *comb* for her. *Comb* and *chain* are lexical collocates of *hair* and *watch*, and, therefore, the two pairs of items emphasise the distinction between men and women more clearly.

Since this setting is crucial to the story, it is retained in both Story A and Story B. Therefore, it is unavoidable that both of them include gender-differentiated elements in the story.

4.2.2 Social roles of characters

As Table 1 in Section 4.1.2 shows, the original story calls Della "the mistress of the house". This determines that Della is a housewife, looking after the house for her husband, who works all day in society. This relationship is considered to be stereotypical of a married couple around the time 1900: one of the typical roles imposed on men and women by society.

Story A inherits the typical social role from the original story. Della stays at home, and "[s]he has food on the table for him", waiting for him to come back home (Henry, 2000a, p.1). "Della walks across her kitchen", thinking of Jim's present (Henry, 2000a, p.1), and "Jim walks into the kitchen" (Henry, 2000a, p.2) to see his wife when he gets back home from work. "*her* kitchen" shows that it is the place where she should be, while "*the* kitchen" is just *one* of the rooms for Jim. In this way, Story A clarifies their social roles: Della is a housewife always staying at home, and Jim is working outside.

It is, however, very interesting that Della is not in the kitchen in Story B, though she is always at home. The image of a housewife is reduced

by mentioning that Della is looking for a job: "Della tries to find work, but times were bad, and there was no work for her" (Henry, 2000b, p.1). Considering that Della's job is not mentioned in the original text, one may be able to recognise Story B's effort to make the story more up-to-date with the present social and financial realities so that L2 learners can feel it much closer to their own lives.

4.3 Summary of the discussion

As a result of the analysis and the discussion of gender matters seen in EFL textbooks, it can be concluded that graded readers will not always consider the issue of gender balance. The overall result, discussed in 4.1 and 4.2, can be shown as follows;

Table 2: Results of Analysis

		Story A	Story B	Original Text
4.1 Lexical aspects	**4.1.1 Generic noun references**	• Avoids using *man* • Uses *people*	• Does not exist	• Avoids using *man* • Uses *you*
	4.1.2 Words with derogatory meaning	• Negative to women	• Negative to women	• Negative to women
	4.1.3 Comparative word usage: men and women	• Does not exist	• Does not exist • Emotional woman	• Exists • Emotional woman
4.2 Social aspects	**4.2.1 Story settings**	• Stereotypical gender features	• Stereotypical gender features	• Stereotypical gender features
	4.2.2 Social roles of characters	• Equal position	• Stereotypical social role (woman=housewife)	• Stereotypical social role (woman=housewife)

In terms of the lexical aspects discussed in 4.1, it can be identified

that graded readers effectively succeed in reducing gender-differentiated items, although some items remain in the texts. This may be because graded readers usually aim at employing higher frequency lexical items. On the other hand, regarding the social aspects investigated in 4.2, it can be considered that the gender balance has received little attention. This may be recognised as a result of the effort of graded readers to keep the original atmosphere. Considering that graded readers are based on fiction, it is significant to retain the atmosphere, as well as simplify the story. In this sense, it is understandable that graded readers cannot reduce gender-differentiated elements effectively.

In conclusion, although graded readers are controlled in terms of vocabulary and grammar according to the level of difficulty, the adjustment does not seem to take the question of gender balance into account. It is most probable, therefore, that any gender biased language be retained in them. Rather, such remains provide a good opportunity for L2 learners to understand the cultural and historical background (such as name references discussed in 4.1.2). As long as gender-unbalanced language unavoidably exists in English discourse, it is necessary for L2 learners to recognise the fact that language possibly holds gender-differentiated factors.

5. Conclusion

For teachers of English, it is important to help L2 learners recognise that language is a tool of communication in its spoken and written forms. As a material of teaching language, EFL textbooks can be assumed to hold well-balanced views about gender matters. The analysis shown in Section 4, however, did not support this assumption. Although some effort to make EFL textbooks gender-balanced can be identified, it cannot be said that they always exclude gender-differentiated elements successfully. Especially

in the case of analysisng graded readers, it is determined that they have reason to retain some gender-differentiated elements. As Carroll and Kowitz claim, "even when a conscious attempt is made at gender fairness", it is necessary to understand "there is gender imbalance at a subtle level" (Carroll and Kowitz, 1994, p.82). This means that L2 learners also must understand such gender-unbalanced factors of language. That is, L2 learners need to accept them as an aspect of the culture, as well as to cultivate the social/cultural knowledge associated with gender, age, social class, ethnicity, and so on, in addition to the lexical aspects of language. An understanding of gender aspects of language should help L2 learners to expand their cultural/lexical knowledge, as well as to make their English more real and actual.

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