

Subliminal Sexism in Current ESL/EFL Textbooks

This article is presented by Hasan Ansary & Esmat Babaii of the Shiraz University, Iran. It examines the issue of sexist language and attitudes in EFL materials.

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Headnote

Critical linguistics has been widely influential and successful in documenting the connection of linguistic and social practices. It has the potential to provide a detailed theoretical account of the operation of ideology in all aspects of texts (see, e.g., Hodge and Kress, 1979, 1993; Fairclough, 1985, 1989, 1991, among many others). One such aspect is sexist uses of language in texts. Of course, language (usage) is essentially a neutral vehicle of communication which can be used to convey a range of attitudes and values. However, language (use) plays a major role in strengthening sexist attitudes and values which, it seems to us, is less widely understood and acknowledged. This article examines some of the specific ways in which sexist attitudes and values are conveyed through the language in texts. Though limited to two books and country specific, it deals with the wider issues and problem of sexism in ESL/EFL textbooks, how it is manifested, with what consequences, and how it can be tackled. The findings of this study suggest that there are a number of problem areas in recent ESL/EFL textbooks and that any attempts to force a linguistic change in the absence of its corresponding social change seem to be unworkable and futile. The most satisfactory solution seem to be a critical pedagogy after all:

Abstract

This study was an attempt to explore the status of sexism in current ESL/EFL textbooks. To this end, two types of analysis were performed to examine the manifestation(s) of sexist attitudes and values in two textbooks (Right Path to English I & II) that are locally designed to cater for and respond to the English language needs of Iranian students at secondary schools. First, a systematic quantitative content analysis was carried out with reference to (a) sex visibility in both texts and illustrations and (b) female/male topic presentation in dialogs and reading passages. Secondly, a qualitative inquiry was made into (a) sex-linked job possibilities, (b) sex-based activity types, (c) stereotyped sex roles (d) firstness and (e) masculine generic conception. Results revealed that Right Path to English I & II can be considered sexist textbooks that present students, in their early exposure to the English language, with an unfair and inexcusable picture of women. It is suggested that this sexism, though embarrassing and undesirable, seems to mirror the institutionalized unfair sex discrimination to the disadvantage of women in society.

Introduction

Sexist practices are those that contribute to demeaning or ignoring women (or men) or to stereotyping either sex; sexism is often not a matter of intention but of effect. (LSA bulletin, 1996, p. 68)

Language is not merely a means of communicating information. Rather, it is an important means of establishing and maintaining social relationship with other members of the speech community. Sex-based linguistic variation is a prime example of the sort of social function that is fulfilled by language. Sex differences are, in fact, a fundamental fact of sociolinguistic life and it is not unexpected that they are reflected in language. That is to say, there exist certain forms of language which are appropriate only for use by men and other forms which only women can use. In some cases, these differences depend not only on the sex of the addresser, but also on the sex of the addressee. In a word, sex-linked linguistic variation involves "the differential use of certain status-marking forms by sex" (Fasold, 1990, p. 115). A major issue in sociolinguistic studies has been the relationship between sex and language and how it is represented. In fact, the study of language and gender began in 1975 by the publication of three books which have continued to

significantly influence sociolinguistic works: *Male/Female Language* (M. R. Key), *Language and Women's Place* (R. Lakoff), and *Difference and Dominance* (Thorne & Henley). Since then, sociolinguists have fundamentally shown a great deal of interest in sex/language relationship mostly with respect to the presence or absence in a few languages of linguistic forms that are used only by speakers of one sex or the other.

In the last two decades, however, much of research on language and sex correlates has been mainly concerned with the role language plays in locating and maintaining women in a disadvantageous position in society (see e.g. **O'Barr & Atkins, 1980; Gomm, 1981; Holmes, 1986; Guy et al., 1986; Cameron & Coates, 1988; Eckert, 1989; Tannen, 1990; McLemore, 1991; Macaulay & Brice, 1994, 1997**). In eliminating disadvantages, part of this new scholarship on sex-linked sociolinguistic variations explicitly or implicitly presents a system of beliefs about the basic features of social life that can be understood from a women-centered perspective (**Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988, pp. 400-443**) and that can be considered critical in its approach (cf. **Davies & Harre, 1990; Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Ochs, 1993; Freeman & McElhinny, 1996**). It seeks (a) to see the sociolinguistic life from the vantage point(s) of women in the social life and (b) to produce a better social world for women.

Very much in line with this, the express purpose of this investigation is to explore the treatment of sexism, as an ideology or a system of beliefs, in current ESL/EFL textbooks. It is assumed here that sexism, though embarrassing and undesirable, is subliminal and mirrors the institutionalized, unfair, and inexcusable sex discrimination to the disadvantage of women in society. Further, it is asserted that once educators and practitioners gain awareness of sex bias in the linguistic manifestations in textbooks of a male-dominated society, they may attempt to use sex-neutral terms in order to reduce the bias now present in the portrayal of women (see **Battistella 1997** for a history of the development, adoption, and revision of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) guidelines for nonsexist language usage). However, it seems to us that for an effective combat against sex bias, if desired at all, sex-neutral use of language should be supported by systematic critical consciousness-raising programs aimed at the public.

Background

We bring to the forefront of consciousness only those cultural issues that we deem important, according to the dictates of our political and ideological consciences. (**Hartman & Judd, 1978, p. 384**)

What is sexism? The impetus for contemporary sexism is a deceptively simple question: "And what about the women in social life?" In other words, where are the women in any situation in society? If they are not present, why? If they are present, what exactly are they doing? How do they experience the situation? What do they contribute to it? What roles are they playing? What does the situation mean to them?... The consequences of trying to find answers to such fundamental questions about the place of women in society have been dramatic. Indeed, the effect has been revolutionary: "a discovery of a multitude of hitherto unexpected stars in the universe and a basically novel configuration for each constellation" (**Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988, p. 401**).

All this leads us to a second fundamental question: "Why then is all this as it is?" The first question calls for a description of sexism in the social world. This second question, nevertheless, requires an explication of that phenomenon. Sexism is probably most readily associated with economic issues, such as equal pay for equal work. However, the role played by language in manufacturing consent to gender inequality, in maintaining and strengthening sexist values, and in how we can change and improve the situation is less widely understood or acknowledged. It appears then that description and explication of linguistic sexism can be considered as two faces of a single coherent sociolinguistic theory. And attempts to answer its two central questions may, therefore, produce a theory of some importance for both sociology and linguistics. And what are some of the ways in which sexist attitudes and values are conveyed through language in language teaching materials or textbooks? A review of the literature may shed some illuminating light on the areas of concern.

Review of the Related Literature

To our knowledge, from the early 70's to the late 80's, the most relevant studies of sexism and its manifestations in ESL/EFL textbooks that can be tracked down are **Hartman and Judd's (1978)** "Sexism and TESOL Materials", **Hellinger's (1980)** "For Men Must Work, Women Must Weep: Sexism in English Language Textbooks Used in German Schools", and **Porreca's (1984)** "Sexism in Current ESL Textbooks."

Hartman and Judd's review in 1978 of several then-current TESOL textbooks examined the images of women and men, firstness (the order of female-male mention), and stereotyped roles for females and males. They demonstrated that "since sexist usage is built into our language (English), it is little wonder that textbooks, including ESL texts, model this usage to the students"(p. 390). For each category, they found evidence that ELT materials reflect sexist attitudes and values. All this, they believe, "reinforces the second-place status of women and could, with only a little effort, be avoided"(p. 390).

Hellinger (1980) who is a native German conducted a thorough study of 131 passages from three ELT textbooks used in German schools. She found that men participated in over 93% of the passages, while not even 30% of the texts included women. In addition, it was mentioned that 80% of the speakers were male and that women were rarely engaged in any "demanding, interesting, or successful" activities, while male roles represented a broad range of occupational options.

Porreca (1984) investigated how sexism is manifested in ESL textbooks and with what consequences. In a content analysis of 15 widely-used ESL textbooks, she focused on the categories of (1) omission (the ratio of females to males) in texts and illustrations, (2) firstness, (3) occupations, (4) the frequency of male nouns to female nouns, (5) female-exclusive masculine generic constructions, and (6) the types and frequency of adjectives for men and women. In every category of her study, she found that "there is evidence that sexism continues to flourish in ESL textbooks" (p. 718). She reported that "although females comprise slightly over half the population of the United States, they are represented only half as often as males in both texts and illustrations."

Aside from the above studies of sexism in textbooks, **Graham (1975)**, describing the development of a school children's nonsexist dictionary, discusses nouns used to describe women and men. Before compiling their dictionary, the lexicographers analyze five million words from American children's textbooks. They found that although there are actually more women than men in the real world, these textbooks contained over seven times as many men as women and more than twice as many boys as girls. Yet, the word mother occurred more frequently than father. There were also three times as many wives as husbands, indicating that all in all the main character or speaker in the text was male.

Coles (1977) examined five sets of popular adult basic education materials and found that in the total of 150 stories, men outnumbered women by a ratio of 3:1. He also found that 39 of the total of 61 females were engaged in only 11 occupations, and 19 of those 39 females worked as housewives. By contrast, he found that 106 out of 192 males had 73 different occupations, ranging from truck driving to medicine. In general, "women managed little and owned nothing; on the other hand, men, while holding a large number of unskilled jobs, were the predominant occupants of skilled, managerial, and ownership positions presented in the stories" (p. 42).

Nilsen (1977) analyzed words for females and males found in a standard dictionary. Her analysis revealed a number of interesting facts about the attitudes towards women and men which are reflected in the vocabulary. She found that there were more than five times as many words for things named after men as there were for things named after women and that, of the words named after women, the only two in common use were both related to female anatomy. Nilsen also found that words for women very often reflected a passive role. For example, women were referred to very often as various types of food and flowers (e.g. peach, sugar, wallflower, etc.). Men were called by such words as wolf, while words for women were restricted to names for helpless creatures such as chick and kitten.

Britton and Lumpkin (1977), however, compared reading, literature, and social studies textbooks published before and after the year 1970 to determine whether guidelines to correct sexism had resulted in any positive changes. They found that females portrayed as major characters had increased only by 2%, up to 16% in the newer textbooks.

Hoomes (1978) conducted a systematic examination of 28 high school literature anthologies for grades 9 through 12 and found that the overall ratio of total female characters to total male characters in the books was 1:3.5. She also found that the mean ratio of available professions for females to those for males was 1:5 in texts and 1:7 in illustrations

Arnold-Gerrity (1978) performed a content analysis of a 1976 series of primary reading textbooks, examining, inter alia, the visibility of female characters. She found that in the first four textbooks, for grades one and two, there were twice as many male-oriented stories as female-oriented; in the three readers for grades three and four, male-oriented stories were five times as frequent, and in the two textbooks for grades five and six, there were three times as many male-oriented as female-oriented stories. She also found that men were portrayed in four times as many paying occupations as women and that the females were most frequently portrayed in a housewife -mother capacity, occupied with household tasks and serving their children and husbands.

In the 90's, **Peterson & Kroner (1992)** examined gender biases in textbooks for psychology and human development. They reported a content analysis of 27 current textbooks in introductory psychology and 12 for human development courses. It was demonstrated that "representation of work, theory, and behavior of males significantly exceeds the representation of females; and females are frequently portrayed in negative and gender-biased ways."

Poulou (1997) explored differences in the discourse roles of men and women in dialogs of textbooks for teaching Greek as a foreign language to adults. Her focus on whether sexist differences can affect negatively the pedagogical value and goals of textbook dialogs was quite revealing. Besides, in his analysis of current Iranian high school EFL textbooks, **Davoodi (1999)** also showed that "of the total pictures of male[sic.] and females represented, 59.48% are male[sic.], 26.72% are female [sic.]" This, he believes, is "an indication of strong prejudice against women."

Most recently, however, **Babaii and Ansary (2001, p. 8)** demonstrate that in Iranian TV advertisements "they (women) are present but to qualify and strengthen the traditional patriarchal morality in which women are expected just to cook,

wash the dishes, and do the housework." They assert that "perhaps this can be taken as a covert practice of sexism." All this boils down to a single indisputable sociolinguistic fact: both adults and children English language education materials provide students with sexist attitudes and values. In light of this fact, this study intends to determine whether, after almost three decades now, we are still using sexist TESOL teaching materials which convey the biased language of a male-dominated society or recognition of the problem and of the need for change which has led to the publication by LSA and TESOL organization of formal policy statements which pledged to encourage the use of nonsexist language has been effective.

Materials

Two current English Language Teaching textbooks Right Path to English I and II (Birjandi & Soheili, 1999) that are locally designed to cater for and respond to the English language needs of Iranian students at secondary schools were taken to serve as the corpus of present study. With reference to both sexes, they were content analyzed in terms of the dialogs, reading passages, exercises, and illustrations.

Data Collection & Analysis Procedures

Two types of analysis were performed. First, a systematic quantitative content analysis was carried out with reference to (a) sex visibility in both texts and illustrations and (b) female/male topic presentation in dialogs and reading passages. Secondly, a qualitative inquiry was made into (a) sex-linked job possibilities, (b) sex-based activity types, (c) stereotyped sex roles (d) firstness and (e) masculine generic conception.

In fact, several different manifestations of sexism were examined in the analyses. First, the number of occurrences of females and males in both texts and illustrations was counted and tallied. Second, instances of female/male topic presentation -the number of times that male-related or female-related were presented in dialogs and reading passages- were tallied and summed.

Next, the type of jobs for females and for males was identified. In addition, the type of portrayed activities in which females and males often participate was recorded. Then, all traditional female-inclusive stereotyped sex-roles were paired with its male-inclusive counterparts. The instances of sex firstness -cases where male or females were presented first in texts, dialogs, examples, and exercises- were also attended to. Finally, in an attempt to document whether masculine generic constructions are truly intended to be generic (including both sexes) or they are merely male referenced, the association between all pronouns and their referents were determined.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in two sections. Section A addresses the results of the quantitative content analysis and section B attends to the qualitative analysis of the corpus.

Section A

Analysis of the data revealed that, based on the frequency of occurrence, women suffered most obviously from low visibility. The ratio of females to males in texts was, in fact, 1:1.4 and in illustrations 1:1.6. Table 1 below presents the frequencies of female/male visibility rates in specific texts and illustrations of both textbooks separately.

Table 1
Sex Visability in Individual Tests and Illustrations

	Male			Female		
	T	I	Total	T	I	Total
Textbook	284	365	649	224	210	434
I	44%	56%	60%	52%	48%	40%
Textbook	485	188	673	320	120	440
II	72%	28%	60%	73%	27%	40%

Note 1. T= Text, I= Illustrations

Note 2. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Due to the rounding, they may not add up to 100%.

However, the ratio of females to males in total was 1:1.5. Figure 1 shows the total visibility rates . Obviously, men seem to

enjoy a bigger slice of the pie.

FIGURE 1
Male/Female Visibility in ELT Textbooks

Pie Chart:

An examination of female/male-oriented topic presentation in dialogs and reading passages demonstrated that of the total 40 topics presented, 27 (67.5%) topics were male-dominated. However, in only one dialog (2.5%) an interaction between female/male characters was observed. Table 2 offers a detailed display of female/male-oriented topic presentation in both textbooks separately. It appears that women, in terms of female-oriented themes presented in textbooks, are clearly underrepresented although they comprise almost half the population of the world.

Table 2
Female/Male-Oriented Topic Presentation in Dialogs and Reading Passages

		<u>Male only.</u>	<u>Female only.</u>	<u>Male/Female.</u>	<u>Sex-neutral.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Textbook I	Dialog	9 (64%)	4 (29%)	1 (7%)	0	14
	Reading	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0	0	2
Textbook II	Dialog	8 (62%)	5 (38%)	0	0	13
	Reading	9 (82%)	1 (9%)	0	1 (9%)	11

note: All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Section B

A close qualitative look into sex-linked job possibilities indicated that the occupational capacities in which women were portrayed appeared to be mostly restricted to occupations such as student and nurse, in few cases including a job such as teacher or doctor. Interestingly, the latter was a doctor of same sex examining her female patient in a hospital inculcating in students the ideology of sex segregation. Men, nevertheless, enjoyed a diversity of jobs such as policemen, soldier, dentist, farmer, doctor, and teacher.

An inquiry into sex-related activity types revealed that females were fundamentally shunted into indoor passive activities such as sitting in the classroom, watching TV at home, reading, etc. The books, however, portrayed males chiefly in the outdoor active roles of playing football, driving a car, riding bicycle, washing a car,....

Another manifestation of pervasive sexism in the textbooks was the shunting of women towards more traditional stereotypical roles such as doing the dishes, cooking, serving food, setting the dinner table, and taking care of children. Few examples of firstness were also observed. That is to say, given two nouns paired for sex, such as uncle and aunt , brother and sister, boys and girls, the masculine word always came first.

There also appeared a confusion over masculine generic conception in texts and illustrations. 'Generic' items are basically intended to include both sexes. However, they did not seem to work the way they are supposed to. They mostly reflected males as the default or unmarked sex. That is, everyone is a male, unless specified otherwise. Even, pronouns such as we, I, and you which can be equally perceived as female or male subjects were illustrated by and associated with pictures portraying men. Furthermore, parts of the human body or objects that are often not restricted to one single sex such as arm, shoes, hands, hats, etc. were completely presented in association with the pictures of men's arm, shoes, hands, and so on.

Overall, results indicated that Right Path to English I and II can be considered sexist textbooks that present students, in their early exposure to the English language, with an unfair and inexcusable picture of women.

Discussion

And what about the women in social life? Examination of the treatment of women in currently used ESL/EFL textbooks revealed that in every category of this study, women often appeared less visible than men. Evidence was also found that English was basically taught through the presentation of male-orientated topics. In addition, a much closer look at the data demonstrated that male firstness was prevalent, females were more visible in indoor passive activities, and were placed in traditional stereotypical roles. In light of these findings, one may strongly claim that since the first study of sexism in

ESL/EFL materials in the 70's, little has changed over the past three decades (see also **Macaulay & Brice, 1997**). It is, in fact, remarkable that ESL/EFL teachers still, in the age of dot-coms, use materials which are loaded with a lot of male-as-norm elements and are fraught with the unfair and inexcusable language of a male-dominated society.

Why then is all this as it is? It is often assumed that recognition of a problem is the first step towards solving it. Some of us may be of the opinion that when one becomes conscious of the sex bias in materials s/he can get on with the business of making the text less biased by using sex-neutral terms.

It is suggested here that attempts to portray females in ESL/EFL textbooks in current use through one-sided role allocation, overt put-downs, and/or omissions like many other cultural aspects of a foreign language learning have been made, on the face of it, mostly at a subliminal level of knowledge. Indeed, language plays such an involuntary social function in our life and is so intertwined with culture that it is often quite difficult to stand back and take an objective look at one's own language. Perhaps, that is the reason why sexist status has not been essentially mitigated through the dissemination by LSA and TESOL organization of many official guidelines which encourage authors to minimize sexist language in their publications.

Furthermore, it is suggested that change will not come soon, and that any attempts to force a linguistic change, if possible at all, in the absence of its corresponding social change seem to be unworkable and futile. Because, for one thing, images are too ingrained in our unconscious minds to allow us to express nonsexist attitudes and for another, sexist values represented in language seem to merely reflect the institutionalized, unfair, and unreasonable sex discrimination and power relationship to the disadvantage of women in society. Therefore, it is reasonable if one assumes that to 'unsex' English a sociopolitical change with egalitarian causes seems inevitable, if desired at all. Until this happens, no one, not even the die-hard feminist, will be immune.

What to do about the problem is not immediately apparent. The most satisfactory solution may be a critical pedagogy after all: critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching and curriculum informed by critical social theory that "seeks to understand and critique the historical and sociopolitical context of schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but also the wider society" (**Pennycook, 1990, p. 24**). It is concerned about how language can effect personal and social change. In other words, "it results from personal and social choices that reflect a desire to understand both the word (i.e., language) and the world and to act upon these choices." In second language classrooms, therefore, "language can become a primary medium by which this may occur" (**Crookes & Lehner, 1998, p. 327**). Besides, **Fairclough (1992)** has argued that language teachers need to adopt a more critical stance towards traditional sociolinguistic studies which tend only to describe what happens in a speech community as appropriate. Language classrooms can thus provide a forum for critical analysis in which both students and teachers can question issues of language, power, discrimination, etc. However, the problem is that many language teachers believe in leaving their political proclivities and social ideologies outside the classroom. There are, we hope, few teachers who feel compelled to be neutral on the subject of sexism.

All said, it should be emphasized here that in this study we examined the problem of sexism in only two textbooks. Perhaps, further research on a wide range of current widely-used ESL/EFL textbooks may give us theoretically sound indications of how we may rank them on scales from the least to the most sexist texts. Then, based on such a ranking, we may choose those textbooks that have enough redeeming qualities to make up for their minor deficiencies, i.e., those that can be judged to be superior in avoiding sexist usage and may be considered the least sexist textbooks.

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