

Identifying and Combating Sexism in EFL Textbooks

—with a case study into China

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【Abstract】 This paper explores methodologies of identifying and combating sexism in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks. The writer of this paper has found out there exists sexism or gender inequality in the Chinese high school EFL textbooks. The writer hopes that future EFL curriculum designers, EFL textbook writers, textbook censors in textbook censorship states, and evaluation panel members accumulate gender equality awareness in both substantive contents and linguistic forms and make every effort to minimize or avoid sex bias in EFL textbooks. In light of a review upon works in related fields, this paper discusses how to identify sexism in EFL textbooks with a case study into the EFL textbooks for China's senior high school students and hereafter recommends feasible strategies combating sexism in FFL textbooks.

【Key words】 EFL textbook, sexism, gender inequality, China

Introduction

One of the major issues in sociolinguistic research is the relationship between sex and language and how it is represented in language. The study of language and gender prevailed in 1975 with the publication of three books: *Male/Female Language* (Key 1975), *Language and Women's Place* (Lakoff 1975), and *Difference and Dominance* (Thorne & Henley 1975), which have continued to have exerted lasting influence upon later sociolinguistic works. Since then, sociolinguists have shown intense interest in sex and language relationship (Ansary & Babaii 2003).

Fennema (1990) defines gender equity as a set of behaviors and knowledge that permits educators to recognize inequality in educational opportunities, to carry out specific interventions that constitute equal educational treatment, and ensure equal

educational outcomes. Because curriculum materials that are biased in language, content, or illustrations reinforce the stereotyped idea that some fields are gender specific, EFL researchers and teachers need to learn to observe the usually subtle but powerful “cumulative impact” of EFL materials on learners’ understanding of sex roles. Due to deficiency in EFL resources and traditional exam-oriented classroom practice in some EFL countries, it is estimated that 95 per cent of EFL classroom time is related to textbooks which have hence been used and repeatedly studied as canonical EFL materials. In some countries, attention is mainly paid to females’ equal access to education whereas adequate attention to hidden sexism in educational micro-environment such as textbook development and classroom atmosphere is yet to be desired from various government and education administrations.

The status quo of gender inequality represented in EFL textbooks stimulates the writer to explore into gender inequality in textbooks and hope to highlight measures to forestall covert sexism in future EFL textbooks.

Literature review

The new wave of feminist campaigns in the western countries in the 1960s triggered research into gender inequality in textbooks in the early 1970s and since then relevant studies of sexism in ESL/EFL textbooks have become prevalent.

Hartman & Judd studied several popular TESOL textbooks and examined the images of women and men, firstness, 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" (Hartman & Judd 1978:390). They believe sexist attitudes and values “reinforce the second-place status of women and could, with only a little effort, be avoided” (ibid: 390).

Hellinger (1980), a native German, conducted a study of 131 passages from three ELT textbooks used in German schools. She found that men participated in over 93% of the passages, while less than 30% of the texts included women. In addition, it was mentioned that 80% of the speakers were males and that women were rarely engaged in any "demanding, interesting, or successful" activities, whilst male roles represented a broad range of occupational choice.

Porreca investigated how sexism existed in ESL textbooks and its consequences. In an analysis of 15 widely-used ESL textbooks, she focused on (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" (Porreca 1984: 718).

In his analysis of current Iranian high school EFL textbooks, Davoodi (1999) 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."

Research into textbook gender inequality in China lags behind that in western countries, with some Chinese research papers published as late as in the 1990s. Ma (1991) focused on the images and roles of fathers in Chinese-language and social studies textbooks at Hong Kong kindergarten and primary levels. Women in PRC Chinese-language textbooks (Nan 1992) are found to play less important work roles. In the textbooks that Nan examined, all scientists, artists, experts, and scholars are males, which are similar to overseas research results. Porreca (1984) found that most frequently mentioned occupations for male

characters were *president* (111 times), *writer* (59), *teacher* (43), *policeman* and *explorer* (41). The most frequently mentioned occupations for females were *teacher* (28), *actress* (22), *doctor* (16), and *secretary* (13).

Zhu (1994), Zeng (1995), Jin (2000), Shi (2002), Yang & Lv (2002), Zhang & Yang (2003) in China continuously researched into gender inequality in Chinese primary school or secondary school textbooks and obtained similar results as foreign researchers did. The sexism-related researches carried out by Chinese scholars are mostly based on primary or secondary Chinese language textbooks.

Identifying sexism in EFL textbooks

—with a case study into China’s EFL textbooks

According to previous research into sexism in textbooks, in general, there are four primary aspects to be scrutinized pertaining to whether the EFL textbooks have violated the principle of gender equality in EFL textbooks. Here follows a case study into the China’s EFL textbooks designed for senior high school students in order to illustrate how to identify sexism in EFL textbooks. English is a compulsory subject for senior high school students and has been included in the high stakes college entrance examinations in China since 1983. This case study examines the five English textbooks designed for senior high school students in China (Senior English for China, hereafter abbreviated as SEFC) financed by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and published in succession from 1996 on and jointly compiled by Longman Group and the People’s Education Press of China which almost monopolizes the K-12 instruction materials from the founding of PRC until the commencement of the 21st century. The life of this series of SEFC lasted from September 1996 to June 2005 when the new national curriculum reform gained momentum. During the past approximately ten years, about 40 million students used the series of the textbooks

(calculated from statistics in *National Bureau of Statistics of China* 2003: 717. In 2002 senior high school student enrollment is 16.838 million). China National Population Census in 2000 indicated that male/female sex ratio is 106.74 (ibid: 99), which set the sex ratio in senior high school students accordingly.

SEFC contains 5 books, namely SEFC 1A and SEFC 1B for first graders, SEFC 2A and SEFC 2B for second graders and SEFC 3 for seniors, with 74 units in all, one text in each unit.

A. Visibility

Visibility refers to the frequency of female representation against male representation. Visibility is embedded in the following four facets: protagonists, historical figures assuming protagonists' roles or being mentioned, female /male appearance in unit titles and illustrations.

1 Protagonists: The protagonist is the central figure of a story, and is often referred as a story's main character. Frequently the story is told from the protagonist's point of view; even when not in first-person narration, the protagonist's attitudes and actions are made clear to the reader or listener to a larger extent than for any other character. Is there a balance between female and male protagonists? Data collected in 74 texts of SEFC have revealed that male protagonists with full names are 27. In contrast, 6 protagonists are females with one female protagonist bearing no name but hinted as female in a journal log, one labeled as Mrs. Cousins. Only 2 female figures really lived in history.

2 Historical figures assuming protagonists' roles or being mentioned

Historical figures in textbooks facilitate students' sex role socialization and act as role models for students. There are lots of social psychology studies that show learners' imaginations are limited by the models they are presented with through texts.

In her description of *omission*, Porreca (1984: 706) states that: ‘When females do not appear as often as males in the text, the implicit message is that women’s accomplishments ... are not enough to be included.’ She cites an earlier study by Hartman and Judd (1978) whose findings support this as well. ‘In several of the texts reviewed, women suffered most obviously from low visibility (p. 384).’ This has ill effects on learners. Sunderland (1992:86) notes that:

If female learners are conscious of the female characters in their course book as relatively few, with limited roles, and are offended, alienated, or made to feel marginalized by this and subsequently demotivated, this is more likely to hinder than facilitate their learning.

Therefore EFL textbooks should reflect both female and male historical figures and thus stimulate females’ enthusiasm to contribute to the development of society in future.

However, in SEFC, male historical figures dominate the series of textbooks with 18 male historical figures, i.e. Christopher Columbus, Carl Lewis, John Denver, Abraham Lincoln, Carl Marx, Jia Sixie (Chinese agriculturist), Bob Geldof, Walt Disney, Charlie Chaplin, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Stephen Hawking, Charlie Dickens, Shakespeare, Captain Cook (viz. Frederick Albert Cook), Francis Bacon, Mohandas Gandhi and Karl von Frisch.

Included in the texts are only 4 female historical figures, i.e. Madam Curie, Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller, and Florence Nightingale.

3. Male/Female appearance in unit titles

Laid in prominent positions in the textbooks, unit titles are eye-catching. Is there also imbalance between the two sexes in unit titles?

The writer has found 7 males in 7 unit titles i.e. Abraham Lincoln, Karl Marx,

Charlie Chapin, Albert Einstein, Captain Cook, A Person of Great Determination and Gandhi. In sharp contrast, only 1 female is found in 1 unit title i.e. Madame Curie.

4 Illustrations

Illustrations with female subjects further reinforce the biased labor division, stereotyped family or work roles and activities in EFL textbooks. Two pictures in page 34 SEFC 1A, page 19 SEFC 3 reflect labor division bias—females acting as waiter, air ticket sales clerk. Two pictures (p5 SEFC 1B, p45 SEFC 2A) depict females cooking in the kitchen while none for males in the kitchen. As for activities, two pictures illustrate females shopping for clothes (p55 SEFC 2A, p28 SEFC 2B). One exception is a picture (p37 SEFC 1A) that shows females competing in a relay race and playing basketball. In contrast, males are illustrated being involving in outdoor activities which are adventurous and achievement-oriented or they are associated with respectable professions.

B. Occupational and family roles

1 Occupational roles

Male occupational roles cover a much wider range which are demanding, adventurous, high-paying, respectable, etc. such as explorer, physicist, politician, writer, poet, agriculturist, athlete, famous singer, film producer, musician, actor, etc. Conversely, female occupational roles are confined to such office-related clerks as typist, doctor, nurse, teacher, cook, cleaner, shop assistant, waiter, etc. In Unit 19 SEFC 1B the text describes a woman engineer who faces the risk of losing her job after her real sex is revealed in a medical operation. Also in the above mentioned unit's speaking task, students are required to discuss the work which men and women do in China. As follows:

Speaker A:

I'm sure		are better at making	
I think		computers.	
I guess		work harder	than
It seems	men	are better doctors	women.
I believe		are better teachers	
In my		are more interested	than men.
opinion	women	in science	
		are stronger	

Speaker B:

I agree. /D you think so? /I don't agree.

The above discussion task virtually intensifies the sex-biased occupation division. Emphasizing such differences (for example, the so-called "essentialists" believe that females are naturally more cooperative, nurturing, caring, and peace-loving than men) can perpetuate stereotypes and pose a threat to women's opportunities, giving ammunition to those who would exclude women from certain jobs, for instance (Haruhiko 1998:63).

2 Family roles

Sexism may be represented in family role distribution, for instance, the females are confined to family roles only as babysitter, dish washer, clothes washer, cook in the kitchen, etc.

Female cooking is somewhat over-represented in SEFC. Dialogues or texts in Unit 16 SEFC 1B, unit 8 SEFC 1A, Unit 8 SEFC 2A and Unit 10 SEFC 2A mention female's family role as cook. In the dialogue of Unit 8 SEFC 2A, a badly hurt girl cyclist says to Susan: "I ought to go home. I have to cook supper for my grandmother" although she is unable to move and lying on the road. This coincides

with the Japanese tradition when Hendry says, “the duty of care within the family falls almost automatically to women, whether it be in times of sickness, injury or senility” (Hendry 1987:5).

C. Attributions

Attributions refer to characteristics imposed upon females or males. Some feminine traits may appear as sexist attitudes against females, who are often described as incapable, dependent, gentle, effeminate, sissy, appearance sensitive, gossipy.

Firstly, in SEFC, females are described as motherly characters: kind, patient and caring in Unit 17 SEFC 3 (Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller’s tutor) and Unit 13 SEFC 1A (Lincoln’s mother). Secondly, females are imposed with inferiority or dependence on males, for instance, when learning difficulty occurs in a dialogue, the help or advice beggar is often a female English learner while males offer assistance (Unit 12 SEFC 1A, Unit 14 SEFC 1A, Unit 21 SEFC 1B). Thirdly, females’ excessive concern with appearance may be testified by the following 2 utterances from Mother and Mrs. White.

Mother: “Look at your clothes! Where have you been?”(Quoted: p61 Unit 11 SEFC 2A)

Mrs. White: “You’d better take a hat. The sunshine will burn you if you’re not careful.”(Quoted: p33 unit 23 SEFC 1B)

The above accords with the conclusion drawn by a Hong Kong scholar (Ma, 1991). Female concern for appearance may help to explain why females enjoy shopping for clothes.

In addition, the text in Unit 18 SEFC *The necklace* written by French writer Guy de Maupassant satirizes the peacockish female character Mathilde.

One exception occurs in the text of Unit 11 SEFC 3 *The Merchant of Venice*, originally written by Shakespeare; a female character Portia is bestowed with wittiness when arguing with cruel and greedy Shylock at court.

D. Linguistic analysis

1 Firstness: A perspective introduced by Porreca that relates to the avoidance of the use of the masculine generic is firstness. By placing the masculine pronoun in front of the female, male dominance is again displayed. This “reinforces the second place status of women and could, with only a little effort, be avoided by mixing the order” (Hartman and Judd 1975: 390). In Unit 8 SEFC 2A males are always mentioned first: himself/herself, he/she, and he/she.

Other examples of firstness were also observed in bi-sex-related noun pairs, such as uncle and aunt, brother and sister, boys and girls.

2 Marked for females while unmarked for males

Professional titles mostly reflect males as the default or unmarked sex but are marked for females, for instance, woman driver is a marked professional title. Unit 19, SEFC 1B contains some of such marked professional titles such as women doctors, women police officers.

3 Masculine generic conception: Examine whether male-marked compound words are employed when referring to both sexes. On page 48 SEFC 2B “man-made” is suggested to be replaced by “artificial” to avoid lexical sexism.

Combating sexism in EFL textbooks

Sexism results in considerable negative consequences, which may contribute to inappropriate attribution according to attribution theory in psychology. Fortunately, some countries or districts have taken fruitful action to minimize or avoid gender inequality in EFL textbooks and to further ameliorate education microenvironment in

terms of gender equality.

In the United States, Title IX, an amendment to *The Higher Education Act* in 1972, bars discrimination “under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” Because most K-12 schools benefit from US government aid in some form, Title IX applies to them as well. Consequently, schools began offering more athletic programs for girls, selected textbooks and other materials that promoted gender equality, and opened up enrollment in traditionally male-oriented vocational programs (Lewis, 2000).

In Asia, the Japanese government enacted *The Japanese Gender-Equal Society Law* in 1999.

In practice, some TEFL textbook writers have tried to better balance both sexes in TEFL textbooks, for instance, Master candidate Liliana M. Dominguez (2003) in University of Birmingham examined how *New Interchange Intro* (Student Book), written by Jack C. Richards, (Cambridge University Press, 2000) represents men and women. The researcher discussed gender representation in the series of TEFL textbooks in four aspects: Male and Female characters, occupational roles, amount of talk, male and female in illustrations, and concluded that the author of this text, Jack C. Richards does not appear to present any sexist bias throughout the book.

In order to obliterate sexism in EFL textbooks the writer suggests the following measures to be jointly and comprehensively implemented by the government, EFL textbook experts, EFL practitioners, and others from various walks of life in society.

Firstly, the legislature should enact laws to defend gender equality in micro-education environment including EFL textbook compiling, censoring (if there exists such textbook censorship as in China) and selecting.

Secondly, the awareness of gender equality should be nurtured and valued from government to education practitioners. When a textbook writer is focusing on the EFL content, gender imbalance might subconsciously “sneak in”. Only with gender equality awareness can such subconscious sexism be probably hedged.

Thirdly, in practice, the principle of gender equality should be taken into

consideration in EFL curriculum planning and designing, EFL textbook designing, censoring (if censorship exists) and selecting. Government-appointed or private textbook editing board and censorship (if any) are strongly suggested to appoint some female experts or sociolinguists to ensure gender equality in EFL textbooks.

Though this paper focuses upon sexism in EFL textbooks, de facto there does exist sexism in EFL classrooms and EFL testing. The writer hopes each positive action can be taken so that sexism will be eliminated in EFL education microenvironment with a fair and impartial attitude to each individual regardless of sex.

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