

**Title:**

Title: Ethnic diversity and Gender bias in EFL textbooks.

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**Abstract:**

This paper discusses the importance of textbook selection for EFL students with regard to the portrayal of gender and the representation of the various ethnic groups in the targeted culture. Studies of the portrayal of women in EFL/ESL textbooks (Ansary and Babii 2003; Hartman and Judd 1978) have shown that the stereotypical role of women as mothers and homemakers is still being perpetuated in many current language textbooks. Furthermore, the ethnic make-up of many of the cultures depicted in these textbooks is not accurately represented. In many cases, substantial sections of the society presented in these textbooks are underrepresented, or at worse, ignored.

A current English language textbook used throughout Japan, Expressway A, was examined for (a) gender bias - the depiction of women in stereotypical roles, and (b) ethnic group portrayal - the visibility and depiction of ethnic groups in the text. The conversations and

illustrations in each chapter were examined with regard to the above criteria. The results showed that Expressway A, while better than many earlier EFL texts, still depicts women in roles that no longer accurately represent their role in society. The text also gives a very sanitized view of the ethnic make-up of the societies and, in one case, shows a large degree of cultural insensitivity. It is suggested that more detailed notes on the sociolinguistic usage of certain expressions, on the role of women in society, and on the cultural make-up of the targeted societies are needed if this textbook is to be effectively used by a nonnative teacher of English.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

For students who study in countries where English is a foreign language (EFL), it can be argued that the teacher and the textbook are the two most important and immediate cultural links between the student's native culture and the target foreign culture. If the influential roles of the teacher and the textbook are accepted, then the way the textbook portrays the various people in the target society and the way those people are shown to communicate will directly affect EFL students' choices of language when communicating with native speakers. This has important implications for the EFL teacher and for textbook selection. What textbook should teachers choose? Will it be appropriate for all students? Will the selected textbook fairly represent all the groups that make up the target society, and is the language appropriate for situations and for the students? Using these questions to evaluate the appropriateness of the textbook, this paper will consider a current textbook in Japan with regard to two specific areas, gender bias and the portrayal of ethnic diversity.

## 2. BACKGROUND

For language students, and especially EFL students who may have limited or no contact with native speakers, the textbook is one of the main learning and reference tools due to its pervasive use inside and outside the classroom as a guide to proper language use. Most of the language that students will acquire during their schooling in English will be from either their teacher and/or their textbook. For this reason taking into account gender bias, portrayal of ethnic diversity, and sociolinguistic appropriateness is of significant pedagogical importance when choosing a textbook. Lakoff (1973) argued that society is reflected in the language, with the values and assumptions held by society being mirrored in the language. Lakoff was concerned with the manner in which women were depicted in written and spoken English and what values were being unconsciously passed on because of this. This concern over the depiction of women also holds true for the depiction of the ethnic makeup of society and the depiction of the roles of minorities.

Halliday (1978) also suggests that society defines the language that is appropriate for certain situations: the context of the situation and the context of culture determine correct language for the situation. If textbooks present language that is not suited for certain situations or do not accurately represent society, the language learned may well be unsuitable and a cause of cross-cultural pragmatic failure (Thomas 1982). Skiero (1991:11) states teachers '... need to know on a daily basis how to evaluate the text in order to utilize its assets and compensate for its limitations in applying it to the needs of the

students and the objectives of the class.' Pierce (1995) makes the case that the role which learners make for themselves in society is governed by their use of English; therefore, the language and the social roles the learners are exposed to are crucial components of the language curriculum and as such, should be carefully monitored.

Recent writing on textbook content (Ansary and Babii 2003; Beebe 1998; Kanemaru 1998; Pierce 1990; Wolfson 1989) suggests textbooks should manifest a balanced view of the role of women in society and not perpetuate inaccurate generalizations about women and their roles. As Wolfson (1989:185) states:

'Teachers and curriculum writers need to be aware of sexist language usage and also of sexist bias in the materials they select for use in the classroom. The monitoring of classroom materials for bias toward sexism as well as racism and other linguistic manifestations of prejudice is very much the responsibility of teachers and administrators.'

Studies of the portrayal of women in ESL/EFL textbooks (Ansary and Babii 2003; Hartman and Judd 1978) have shown that there is a gross bias in the representation of women and men in textbooks. Further, the roles assigned to women in some textbooks are the stereotypical roles of mother and homemaker. This depiction of women in such stereotyped roles only helps to reinforce the outdated notion that 'women stay at home and men go out to work'. A study carried out by Ansary and Babii (2003) concluded that 'women often appeared less visible than men' and women 'were more visible in indoor passive activities and were placed in traditional roles.'

Students need to learn about the various roles women now have in society and about the linguistic debate on the grammatical terms of reference and lack of reference to women in texts. Pierce (1990:106) states, 'If we as English teachers wish to help our students to gain control over the language that we teach, we need to alert students to the current terrains of struggle that characterize that language and into which the students enter as they learn the language.'

Society is more complicated than some earlier ESL/EFL textbooks showed. Students should be able to expect that the materials they study from will enable them to use the language to promote a positive image of themselves, will let them understand the underlying debate of language current in society, and will provide them with gender-appropriate language and roles.

### **3. COURSE BOOK**

The course book *Expressways A* was developed to fill a pedagogical gap in the English language program for junior and senior high school students in Japan. During the 1980's the Ministry of Education pushed for the introduction of oral English into the curriculum of all national schools to rectify the apparent failure of the then current English language curriculum to produce students with a reasonable level of communicative English ability. One result of the promotion of oral English was the introduction of the 'Assistant English Teacher' (AET). The role of the AET was to help the nonnative teachers of English (NNT)

in their English classes, providing native pronunciation models, partners for dialogues, references for problems with the text or language to be used in class, and, in many cases, a source of inspiration for ideas on how to teach communicative English. As a result of the AET program and the promotion of oral English, there arose, and still remains, a need for a textbook that can complement the aims and objectives of the new communicative curriculum and the role of the AET in the classroom. The textbook evaluated here, Expressways A, was a response to this need.

The textbook consists of 85 pages, divided into three parts: part one, functions of English expressions; part two, situational English for an exchange student; and the appendix. Part one has 15 units with each unit consisting of two adjoining pages. The units are based on functional language , starting from greetings, introductions, and permission through to guessing, offering, desire, and good-bye expressions. Part two has twenty units, also consisting of two adjoining pages, on situational English for an exchange student traveling to either the United Kingdom or the United States.

The situations start from airport arrival, taking a taxi, and first day at school through to invitation to a party, overnight stay, and leaving for home. The appendix contains three chapters on classroom English, useful phrases and expressions, and proper nouns. These three units are in both English and Japanese while the remaining chapters have no Japanese explanations or translations. The text has been designed for upper junior high school and first year senior high school students who have had little or no exposure to oral English. The level of the text is quite low if, as in this case, it is used as a first year senior high

school oral communicative text. There are few extended conversations with most dialogues consisting of one or at the most two exchanges.

The evaluated text book is used in a first year agricultural senior high school in one of Japan's more remote and educationally disadvantaged prefectures. The school is situated in a farming area more than two and half hours from the capital city and, correspondingly, far from contact with a NS of English. It is reasonable to assume that the students who graduate from this high school will probably have a very limited need for English once they enter their chosen profession of farming. It is also reasonable to assume that they have had very limited exposure to English and to NSs until the time when an AET visits their school once every two weeks for oral communication classes. With this limited exposure to English and NSs, the English classes the students attend at school are their sole exposure to the language other than what they may experience through the media.

#### **4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

It would be difficult to imagine textbook authors and publishers having an agenda to publish books with an inherent gender or racial bias, an agenda designed to promote the ideas of male supremacy or a particular racial superiority. However, what a number of textbooks, and especially textbooks published in Japan, fail to do (Kanemaru 1998) is to represent accurately the substantial role women and minorities play in the makeup and workforce of the modern societies of the United Kingdom and the United States. They also fail to explain how certain language can be sexist and demeaning to women or racist and

condescending to minorities. The examined textbook did fail to give a realistic representation of the ethnic makeup of society in both countries and continued the promulgation of the image of women as homemakers and mothers.

Gender bias:

In regard to gender bias, the most noticeable failing is the lack of depiction of women in roles other than those of homemakers and mothers. There were seventeen illustrations depicting working situations and of these twelve were of men and only five were of women. Out of the five situations, only one was of a profession other than a teacher. Although the authors seem to have included this photograph of a female doctor for variation, when compared to the other illustrations and pictures, it is not enough to dispel the pervasive image of the homemaking role of women. In all scripts that deal with domestic issues such as the laundry, the kitchen, shopping. women are used to model the conversations; when on the other hand, in situations outside the home the dialogues are mostly modeled by males. An example of this is when Michi asks Mrs. Brown where she can put the empty bottle -

"Mrs. Brown - No, but there's a bottle bank in our local supermarket.

Michi - Maybe I should take this bottle there.

Mrs. Brown - Yes, on Saturday, when we do our shopping."

The implication of this dialogue is that both Michi and Mrs. Brown will go and do the shopping on Saturday; the sociolinguistic meaning being women do the shopping. This is in direct contrast to Ken when he asks Mrs. Hunt how he can help.

"Ken - What shall I do to with my dirty laundry, Kate?

Mrs. Hunt - Oh, that's okay, Ken. Just put it over there.

Ken - Thank you, but I'd like to help somehow.

Mrs. Hunt, - Well, my husband would appreciate it if you could mow the lawn on  
Sunday."

The implication within this dialogue is that it is women's work to do the laundry and domestic chores while the role of the man is outside the house. The use of Ken and Michi in both of these situations seems to be deliberate and therefore has important social implications for language learners who might find themselves in these situations in either foreign culture.

An area where the textbook may cause some cross-cultural communicative problems, is the use of language terms that are mainly used by women. If these terms are used by a male speaker, not only would they be pragmatic errors, they may cause some considerable confusion and misunderstanding. In lesson 30 Michi is lost and asks an elderly woman for help.

" Michi - Excuse me. Could you help me?

Woman - What's wrong, dear?"

The use of 'dear' by males is a marked expression and one which if used by someone younger to someone older, would be sociolinguistically wrong. The textbook then uses this expression in the pair practice drill without any reference, in either the textbook or the teacher's book, to the societal rules that govern this term's use. This is just one of several gender specific terms used in the textbook which lack the sociolinguistic background information needed for the learner to make the correct decision as to whether the term is appropriate for both male and female speakers.

The textbook does use the reference terms of 'Mr.', 'Mrs.', and 'Ms.' but in a sociolinguistically inappropriate manner. From the examples given, young or presumably unmarried women are given the title 'Ms.' while all other women are referred to as 'Mrs.'. This is not how these terms are currently used in either the United States or the United Kingdom. This usage is just another discriminatory use of language to differentiate between married and unmarried women, a usage that is blatantly sexually biased. The common usage of 'Ms.' by women who are both married and unmarried is neither explained or discussed in either the textbook or the teacher's manual leaving another avenue open to a possible cross-cultural misunderstanding. Another expression which is presented without any caveats for use is 'Oh, it's lovely!'. If this is an expression that both male and female students are expected to learn, then it should be noted that this expression is not a common expression for men, and if it is used by a man, then there is a possibility of misrepresenting oneself to the listener.

### Racial Bias:

The main concern about this textbook with regard to racial bias is the lack of representation of minorities throughout the text. Out of more than a hundred illustrations and pictures in the textbook, there are only four that depict someone who may not be 'white'. Even in the pictures showing classrooms in both the United Kingdom and the USA, all the students are white and, from the appearance of the classrooms and the students' dress, come from upper-middle class families. Of the four pictures, two were of students and two were of working male adults.

This is not a fair representation of the make-up of society in either the USA or the United Kingdom. Wajnryb (1996:291) says students are not helped by textbooks that '... model a world that is safe, clean, harmonious, benevolent, undisturbed, and PG-rated.' It is not being fair to the students to selectively show life in either country as the values of a white upper-middle class family. Students should be prepared to expect they will meet a variety of people who have a variety of ethnic backgrounds and are still regarded as American or British. For students who come from a predominantly racially homogeneous nation, it is all the more important to show the ethnic diversity of other nations to foster an awareness of other national groups that they may not receive elsewhere.

The portrayal of Australia in this textbook is limited to three pages: one a color photograph of Sydney Harbor and some aboriginal souvenir T-shirts, and the other two pages, a short discussion of 'Australian Ethnic Crafts'. This page seems to be a throw-back to the dark

ages of ESL/EFL textbooks where racial stereotypes were the norm. It is difficult to believe that this page was included to introduce Japanese students to Australia and its indigenous people without any thought to the racial bias and cultural insensitivity presented by the accompanying image. This picture is offensive in that it not only belittles indigenous Australian art by equating it with souvenir T-shirts, but it also depicts none of the achievements the aboriginal community has made over the years.

It can only leave the language student with a very racially biased impression. This paper concurs with what some educators have said (Kang 1989:120): 'At the very least, stereotypes and racial caricatures have no place in teaching materials.' Without any support in the text itself and without any notes in the teacher's book, it would be very difficult for any nonnative speaker teacher using the textbook to discuss this topic with the amount of sensitivity it deserves.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

There are some major oversights in the textbook, *Expressways A*, that with selective re-writing could easily be corrected. The main failings are not only in the presented language but also in the stereotyped portrayal of women as homemakers and mothers, the lack of representation of minorities, and the culturally insensitive presentation of Australia's indigenous people and their cultural heritage. It is not acceptable in this day and age to perpetuate the image of women as homemakers when women make up such an integral part of the workforce in both the United States and the United Kingdom. The lack

of minority representation in the text also presents a bias that needs to be addressed if students are to be socially prepared for interaction with minority members of the target society.

The lesson on Australia should be removed or completely re-written to show a more positive and culturally correct image of Australian indigenous art and its people. Studies (Ariew:18) have found that the nonnative teacher is more comfortable with a text that provides a wealth of examples and explanations. More detailed notes on the sociolinguistic usage of certain expressions, on the role of women in society, on the debate on the terms of reference for women, and on the indigenous people of Australia are needed if this textbook is to be effectively used by a nonnative teacher of English and if culturally marked language is to be avoided.

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