

Language and Gender in the EFL classroom

By Jenny Pugsley

What is sexist language and stereotyping?

How often have you asked your students to, “Find three other students in class who love or can’t stand..... or men/girls/people who.....”? Anything wrong? The terminology is taken from a well-known course-book. An otherwise excellent book on study skills comments as follows: “The student is encouraged to ask questions before he starts reading a passage.....The lecturettes may either be delivered by the tutor himself or.....” Another popular course book’s one-page section on comparisons includes seven illustrations of, and four references to, men/boys..... But find women/ girl/lady, if you can!

What is current, accepted English usage?

One of the dilemmas in drawing up a language syllabus is deciding when to teach everyday English as spoken and understood by millions of British citizens, and when to impose a model of correctness with reference to grammar, choice of vocabulary, register and pronunciation. Whether you veer towards the former or the latter, you will still need continually to make choices. Trawl the opinions of a dozen educated and articulate native speaker friends on a range of items and compare their various tenets with those expressed in a selection of contemporary grammars. I am here thinking of language study for EFL rather than the ESL (English as a Second Language) learner, given that in the case of the latter there is clearly a responsibility to take some account of the legitimate variety of English that the learner brings to the classroom, and the particular English-speaking community they return to at the end of the day.

Language and change

On the face of it, there would appear to be sufficient consensus of opinion on what is standard British English to give any teacher plenty of “ground” to cover before sweating over a split infinitive. But what happens when standard British English is found wanting? What does the teacher do when it has been demonstrated that words and collocations are not understood in the way that they are claimed to be? Research by De Stefano, Kuhner and Pipinsky (1978) showed that so-called inclusive terms like man, men and mankind evoked male rather than female images in people’s minds when they were asked to match pictures to statements including these terms. How do you take issue with what remains unsaid, as in the case of the non-existent female examples? Or take an example such as “Man can do several things which the animal cannot do.....Eventually his vital interests are not only life, food, access to females.....” (Spender, 1982 quoting Fromm). Is this even genuinely inclusive in intention, let alone effect?

The fact that language does change has, happily, been documented for those who look to the grammarians and applied linguistics for the final seal of approval. In Quirk et al (1985, p.343) we read: “The pronoun they is commonly used as a third person singular pronoun that is neutral between masculine and feminine. It is a convenient means of avoiding the dilemma of whether to use the he or sheWhat is clear is the feminist movement in language has made many language users aware of the problems of sexual bias which were overlooked by earlier generations.” In An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage 1987, Leech notes: “In the past, English has used the male pronoun to refer to both sexes.....But nowadays many (especially women) dislike this.....They prefer (inter alia) to use the Plural they for the Singular (in speech).....There is no “correct” choice.....” I am grateful to Jane Sunderland for bringing the above example to my attention: her own MA dissertation on this topic is listed in the bibliography.

Finding examples

A perusal of a large number of widely used EFL course books and reference books – with a few recent, notable exceptions – will reveal some interesting statistics. Ask your teachers to check for themselves. Take any ten consecutive pages, for example, of three or four course books and count up instances of all or some of the following:

- a) number of references to, and illustrations of, women – full stop! – compared to number of references to men;
- b) number of examples of use of the masculine pronoun after a neutral pronoun or noun (e.g. Every teacher should monitor his own use of English.);
- c) number of references to women and to men by physical characteristics;
- d) number of references to women and to men by their relationship with a partner or member of the family;
- e) number of references to women and to men by profession or occupation;
- f) number of references to women in the stereotypical female occupations – nurse, secretary, teacher, cleaner, “assistant”, etc.;
- g) number of references to women as having stereotypical characteristics – being unintelligent, unsystematic, easily upset, bad tempered in the home, “nagging”, “bitchy”, etc.

Talansky (1986) did a survey of some of the above examples across twelve textbooks used widely in English teaching in Italy and came up with useful findings. Women were still badly under-represented in the materials surveyed, and where they did make an appearance, it was almost always in one of the stereotyped roles. Such materials are at best unprofessional, at worse quite offensive.

What can teachers do?

Adapting materials

Initially, a teacher may feel that awareness of sexist language and stereotyping as described above is little more than a further constraint in the preparation of syllabus and materials. The use (or avoidance) of certain course books may well be dictated by the institution rather than left to the individual teacher's preference. Alterations to whole pages or chapters makes for an interesting exercise but is probably too time – and – paper consuming for the teacher to tackle on an individual basis: several teachers of a similar persuasion could, of course, undertake some re-writing on a cooperative basis. But there are more rewarding ways of approaching the issue of gender “loaded” text.

Contrastive analysis

One means of tapping a student's potential interest in this area is to contrast English usage with that of their mother-tongue and see how far their own terminology is “gender-loaded” – e.g. with such terms as chairman, manpower, and their equivalents in the foreign language. One could also compare their own systems of inflection and choice of vocabulary to indicate sex of speaker and listener.

Avoidance strategies

How would you re-write the following to avoid masculine terminology?

- Everyone should review his life-plan at least once a month.
- Primitive man relied on his dreams to predict the future
- Menstrual pain accounts for large loss of man hours

Exploring vocabulary

Ask students to list (or track down in dictionary) derogatory/flattering words to apply to women and to men. Ask them to consider the contexts of such terms as:

Hero – heroine
 Bachelor – spinster
 Man and wife (as in a marriage ceremony):

Are these genuine opposites? Also note the order in which they appear. Is left, or syntactic first, dominant?

Is there a form of the following words that could be applied to the opposite sex? With the same connotations?

a nag	a villain
a bitch	a lad ("a bit of a —")
bossy	masterful
loose	thug
(morally)	
waitress	waiter



Can we find alternatives to the following to avoid terminology relating to gender: manpower, workmanlike, sportsmanlike, mankind, forefathers, over-/undermanned, etc.

What do we think of the following so-called feminine forms, some of which include the gratuitous modifier lady or woman:

Actress, authoress, sculptress, woman doctor, lady barrister, usherette. Is the sex emphasized at the expense of the (implied) professional competence?

What can trainers do?

Language awareness and skills development

A study of the above examples is clearly relevant to the development of reading and listening skills, and would seem to be an essential component of any serious teacher training programme. Similar exercises could be done to identify racist terms and expressions, and terms that are derogatory about the elderly, for example.

Trainees could be given a range of authentic texts, such as newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, instructional material, academic texts (e.g. teacher training!). They could be required to analyse them for anaphoric and cataphoric reference, including nouns and pronouns that are distinctly masculine in form. They could be given a text referring to man/mankind/humanity etc. and be asked to replace all the so-called inclusive, masculine forms of pronouns and possessives with feminine forms: would it work? Would other changes be necessary? What would the effect be on the reader/listener? A simple diary-keeping exercise of one's own experiences is the most convincing evidence. When I recently asked a management trainer whether he ever had applications from women for his courses, he replied: "Oh yes, we had a young girl of 28 only last month....."

Teachers are often anxious that the teaching of their, for example, after a singular noun or pronoun may be ruled as incorrect by an examiner. Despite the pronouncements of Quirk et al and Leech as quoted above, there is no doubt that not all official examiners take the same view on this. Teachers may wish to sensitise their trainees to the implications of the unvarying he/him without prejudicing their students' chances in examinations: alternatives can often be found, e.g. every student should.....becoming...all students should.....; no-one will be penalized for their poor spelling.....becoming.....none of you will be penalized for your.....; the changes can be syntactic as well as simple word-for-word replacements.

Class Management

The above is not without relevance to the issue of class management. Do your teachers treat their female and male students equally? Do both sexes get equal talking time? Are questions and interruptions accepted from both sexes? Do you use the same language with both sexes? Are the girls/women told to stop chattering or gossiping, and the boys/men told to stop talking? Is your threshold of tolerance of errors the same for both sexes? Do you let the women get away with more errors, because you want to encourage them, or fewer errors, because you have higher expectations of their ability in the first place? (This is not to suggest that levels of tolerance should be the same for all students: there may be sound reasons for differentiating between them, but not on grounds of sex alone.)

In other educational fields there has been research to show that students often behave in the way that they believe teachers wish them to behave: teachers who treat all girls as giggly and flirtatious, and all

boys as competitive and headstrong, may well inhibit their pupils from showing other qualities. (See Barnes, 1976.)

Two can play at this game

Women are not the only ones to suffer from loaded language. There are men who do not want to be described as "one of the boys" and who would like to see a more flexible image of the average male: one who can admit to fear, ignorance, physical weakness, lack of confidence, for example, and show emotion without being labelled as "effeminate", a term that is equally derogatory to both sexes. They feel equally discriminated against when the words thug (see earlier section on vocabulary), brute, criminal, thief, murderer, convict, are invariably assumed to refer to men!

Against Sexism in EFL Materials: the group

The Women in TEFL Conference is an informal organization of some seventy women working in TEFL: teaching, training, writing, publishing, administration. It has met six times since its inception in 1986. The Material sub-group was formed in 1987. Our ultimate objective is to put to the Publishers' Association suggested guidelines that would assist their member organizations to emphasise the need for non-sexist language and stereotyping in EFL publications. (Most publishers do have in-house guidelines of some kind but these vary considerably in terms of editorial policy.)

In order to make the case, we have put together guidelines for teachers on how to identify and avoid this kind of stereotyping, and these, together with a questionnaire, were sent to some 650 English teaching centers and examination boards in Britain and overseas. Over 350 questionnaires have been returned, mostly indicating a strong interest in the subject, and putting forward useful examples of sexist language and stereotyping.

Conclusion

Looking at language and gender in materials and class management should not be a fat-reducing exercise that takes the richness and variety from the text, oral or written. On the contrary, it is a process that should add to the context, imaginative and realistic dimensions that may previously have been absent. Some of you may well have seen the guidelines and questionnaire already. If you have not, further details and copies can be obtained from me, Jenny Pugsley, at 25 Hillbrow, Richmond Hill, Surrey TW10 6BH, England.

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