Representations of gender in a contemporary EFL textbook

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Abstract

This paper investigates representations of gender in a contemporary EFL textbook using content and linguistic analysis frameworks. Although there is evidence of progress, it is shown that even a relatively modern textbook can display regressive attitudes towards women in particular. This should hardly be surprising, as a review of the literature reveals prevailing gender-bias in EFL and ESL textbooks. However, it is argued that this type of textbook analysis, popular amongst researchers, may be an inadequate approach to raising awareness of gender-bias issues. Previous calls to focus on teacher and student mediation of the text have been overlooked in favour of more standard textual analysis. Ultimately, it is argued that a new approach is required, one which investigates how textbooks are used rather than their inherent qualities.

Introduction

This paper analyses the representation of men and women in a contemporary EFL textbook. It outlines previous research on the topic, isolating common instances of sexism and gender difference across cultures and books. Two analytical frameworks are used to investigate these features in the textbook *Get Ahead 3* (Wheeldon, Quinn, Falla and Davies, 2013). Despite displaying some progressive attitudes, an undercurrent of sexism and inauthentic representation is shown to exist. The case is made for more pro-active teacher involvement in raising gender issues in the classroom.

Literature review

Research into representations of the sexes in textbooks generally takes one (or both) of two approaches: *content analysis* or *linguistic analysis*. Content analyses are concerned with the visibility and non-linguistic behaviours of the sexes in the text and visuals. This approach commonly focuses on discrimination against women through analysis of sexism in the textbook(s). Sexism has been defined as 'behaviour which maintains social inequalities between men and women' (Holmes, 2013: 742). Hellinger (1980) identifies three categories of sexism in textbooks: *exclusion, subordination and distortion*, and *degradation*. This paper uses these terms to organise content analysis research findings in the literature.

Linguistic analyses centre on the textbook discourse; the language used *by* and *about* women and men in the textbook. Research has commonly focused on textbook dialogues, examining not only the language used by both sexes, but also patterns of interaction between female and male characters. Linguistic analysis engages with the understood characteristics of male and female speech. Consequently, it opens a space to explore sexism, in as far as these differences can be used to promote stereotypical or negative representations in textbooks.

A closer examination of content and linguistic analysis – and the research findings therein – provides the terms of reference and parameters of this paper.

Content analysis
Exclusion

Hellinger (1980) defines *exclusion* as 'the quantitative proportion of female and male referents in the textbooks, where the latter are significantly favoured' (268).

The under-representation of women has been consistent in EFL/ESL textbooks. Hartman and Judd's (1978) analysis found the number of male referents far outnumbered female referents by as much as 73% to 27% (385). Subsequent studies uncovered similar omission, across different cultures and in societies where gender demographics were far more balanced than the findings would suggest. Porreca's (1984) study of fifteen American textbooks found a female to male ratio of 1:1.77 (713). Selected state-endorsed school textbooks in Singapore (female population at the time, 51%) were found to consist of up to 71% male characters (Gupta and Yin, 1990: 32). Lee and Collins (2010) found that Australian and Hong Kong high school textbooks both had more male than female characters (57.5% and 53.2% respectively), despite greater gender balance in their populations (126). The trend of textbook gender bias has continued in countries such as Uganda (Barton and Sakwa, 2012), Japan (Lee, 2014) and Turkey (Aydinoglu, 2014).

Subordination and Distortion

Subordination involves the ranking of women 'on lower positions on most hierarchies associated with power or prestige' (Hellinger, 1980: 270). This is evidenced by the portrayal of women in low-paid jobs, having limited education, or dependent on men. Research into the occupational roles given to women in textbooks consistently finds evidence of female subordination. Women are associated with a narrower range of occupations than males (Porreca, 1984: 715) and the roles allotted are disproportionally associated with child or house-keeping (Hartman and Judd, 1978: 386). The trend has continued until recently; women are portrayed primarily in domestic roles (Lee and Collins, 2010) and less likely to work (Aydinoglu, 2014).

Similarly, research into female behaviour in textbooks has revealed consistent stereotyping. This *distortion* – 'the behaviour patterns which in our culture are interpreted as 'typically female' – frequently in a negative sense' (Hellinger, 1980: 272) – follows consistent tropes. Women are often portrayed as passive and dependent (Hartman and Judd, 1978), over-emotional (Poulou, 1997), concerned with gossip, appearance or trends (Lee and Collins, 2010), and better suited to the indoors than outdoors (Aydinoglu, 2014). This last example illustrates how distortion can equally be applied to men; do all men have an affinity with the outdoors and sports?

Degradation

Hellinger states that 'degradation is present if intellectual or other achievements of women are ignored, downplayed or described as exceptional' (1980: 273). Representations of women as dependent on men, stereotyped, or in low status jobs act as 'essential prerequisites' for conveying female lack of intellectualism (274), as they shift attention away from individual achievements. There is a fine line between *degradation* and *subordination and distortion*, even more so in contemporary textbooks where the more explicit sexism of older textbooks is largely absent. Although we are less likely to encounter the sexist jokes, slurs and jibes noted by Hartman and Judd (1978), stereotyping in all its more subtle forms can now be classified under *degradation*.

Linguistic analysis
Masculine generics

Masculine generic words such as 'man', 'mankind', or 'he' can be used to refer to people in general, where it is clear from the context that their use as a sex-specific word is not intended (Porreca, 1984: 708). This is problematic in two ways; not only can such intentions be unclear from the context, but exposure to masculine generics promotes the unconscious conceptualising of men rather than women, a privileging considered sexist (Lee and Collins, 2009: 356). While earlier research found use of masculine generics in EFL/ESL textbooks to be common (Hartman and Judd, 1978; Porreca, 1984), more recently they have been replaced by gender-neutral generics (Pauwels, 2001; Lee and Collins, 2009; Lee, 2014), with a few exceptions (textbooks in Hong Kong, as revealed by Lee and Collins, 2010). Use of the generic 'they' and dual pronoun expressions such as 'he/she' are now widespread, although the latter has been criticised for issues related to *firstness*.

Firstness

Firstness refers to the order of mention of two nouns or pronouns paired for sex (Porreca, 1984: 706). Masculine first word bias is a common feature of the English language (for example, 'Romeo and Juliet', 'Mr and Mrs', 'He and she'). Unsurprisingly, Hartman and Judd found a strong bias in favour of the male gendered term coming first in selected textbooks, a trend that needlessly 'reinforces the second-place status of women' (1979: 390). Subsequent studies have found this trend to be ingrained in textbooks. Porreca (1984) found an average female to male firstness ratio in selected textbooks to be 1: 2.96 (714). Lee's (2014) corpora-based study across two government-endorsed EFL books found 49 instances of paired gender terms. Of these, 42 presented the male gendered term first (50).

Firstness can also be approached in relation to dialogue initiation. Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) identify the three turn structure of exchanges in conversation: initiation, response, and feedback (IRF) (26). Turn-taking is negotiated through interruptions and questions, and depends on the understood 'power' balance between the parties. Generally speaking, in conversations where turns to speak are valued, it follows that the party who initiates is more likely to occupy the feedback role, thereby dominating and controlling the conversation. The initiating role in dialogues between male and female speakers can be tallied. If a disproportionate number of male characters are found to be performing this role, it can serve to underline female passivity, and deny female students the opportunities to initiate in dialogue practice.

Lakoff (1975) claims that the subordinate status of women is maintained in two ways: by the language used *about* them and *by* them (cited in Holmes, 2013: 692) The following sections outline how these claims can be explored in textbook analysis.

Language used *about* women and men in the textbooks
Titles of address

Earlier research into titles of address (Hartman and Judd, 1978: 389) found both widespread use of 'Mrs' and 'Miss' (terms indicating marital status, thereby defining women in relationship to men) and that men were commonly addressed by titles, but women by first name (reflecting their lower status in society). More recent research reveals that textbooks have embraced the neutral 'Ms'; Lee (2014: 48) finds no instances of 'Mrs' in her corpora study of Japanese EFL textbooks.

Adjectives

Adjectives can be classified under different headings; for example, *strong* can be categorised under 'Physical State/Condition'. Porreca (1984) found that adjectives used to describe women commonly fell under the category of 'Physical Appearance', while adjectives for males dominated the 'Rapport/Reputation' and 'Intellect/Education' categories (718). More recent research has found some progress in this area. Soylemez (2010) found that female-related adjectives tend to emphasise more positive characteristics than those describing men (749). However, some stereotypes were propagated by adjectives amplifying female emotionality and passivity, while strongly associating men with intellectualism and financial success (719).

Language used *by* women and men in textbooks

Language used by the sexes in textbook dialogues has been a focus of recent research. It has revealed trends that, it is claimed, reinforce notions of female passivity and dependence. Poulou's (1997) study of Greek (as a foreign language) textbooks found that – in conversations between non-experts - female

characters are more likely to ask for information and make requests than males, who performed the role of information-givers through the use of directives (71). These findings are mirrored in selected EFL textbooks; Aydinoglu (2014) found that male characters give more instructions, initiate turns more often, and ask more questions. Lee's (2014) corpora study found that the collocates of the pronoun *he* tended to be 'saying' verbs (such as *insisted, commanded, promised*) suggesting that men were more likely to be the speakers in texts, and information-givers (48).

These findings suggest that there is an underlying sexism at play in textbook dialogues. However, there is a tension between these readings and our understanding of the characteristics of male and female speech in reality. The following section addresses the findings of Lakoff (1975) in relation to textbook representations.

Linguistic features of female speech

Women and men often speak and use language in different ways, for complex reasons. Research has shown that across all social classes women use standard forms of a language while men use more vernacular forms (Holmes, 2013: 388). Other tendencies have been claimed; in mixed-gender conversations men speak more, interrupt more often, control topic and ask fewer questions (Wardaugh, 2010: 725). This may be a reflection of 'the power relationship that exists in society, with men dominant and women subservient' (Wardaugh, 2010: 725). It may also interact with other factors such as social class, women's role as guardian of social values, and the prestige values of vernacular/standard forms for both sexes (Holmes, 2013: 393).

Lakoff (1975, cited in Holmes, 2013:694) identifies ten linguistic features of female speech. They are:

(a)   Lexical hedges or fillers
(b)   Tag questions
(c)   Rising intonation on declaratives
(d)   'Empty' adjectives
(e)   Precise colour terms
(f)   Intensifiers such as *just* and *so*
(g)   'Hypercorrect' grammar
(h)   'Superpolite' forms, e.g. indirect forms
(i)   Avoidance of strong swear words
(j)   Emphatic stress

These features can be categorised into two groups; those that *reduce* the force of an utterance (hedges, tags, intonation, politeness, indirect forms and avoidance of swear words) and those that *intensify* a proposition's force (empty adjectives, precision, intensifiers, hypercorrectness, and emphatic stress) (Holmes, 2013: 696). Lakoff (1975) argues the former group reveals the speaker's lack of confidence, while intensifiers overcompensate for this lack. All of these linguistic features betray uncertainty and tentativeness and are acts of collusion through which women contribute to their subordinate status.

Subsequent research found that women do in fact use hedging and boosting more than men (Holmes, 2013: 699). This challenges the claims of sexism in language textbooks; from Lakoff"s perspective the textbook representations of female passivity accurately reflect reality. However, subsequent analyses – while accepting the linguistic features – challenge the assertion that they always express uncertainty. Holmes (1984: 54; 2013: 704) finds that women's use of tag questions primarily serves a facilitative

function, and that men are more likely to express uncertainty through tags. Holmes concludes that these linguistic features could have many complex functions, and suggests that 'women are facilitative and supportive conversationalists, rather than unconfident, tentative talkers' (2013: 706). Whilst women may take the role of questioner and listener more readily than men, their motivations may be unrelated to passivity or dependence.

Summary

The literature suggests that representations of men and women continue to be stereotyped. Although some progress has been made regarding the masculine generic, titles of address and the use of adjectives, sexism is prevalent in terms of female exclusion and occupational visibility, behavioural stereotyping and firstness. There is also space to explore further how male and female speech are represented in EFL textbooks. Exploring all of these points is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a contemporary EFL textbook was analysed with five questions in mind:

1. Is there evidence of female exclusion in the textbook?
2. Are men and women stereotyped in terms of their occupation?
3. Is male-firstness prevalent in the textbook?
4. Is there evidence of women and men *reducing* utterance force in written dialogues?
5. Is there evidence of men and women *intensifying* utterance force in written dialogues?

The present study
Method

The textbook *Get Ahead 3* was chosen for this study. It is a lower-intermediate book aimed at East Asian English-language learners, and is representative of the kinds of textbooks used in my own teaching context, a private women's university in Japan.

Content and linguistic analysis of the textbook was performed in the following ways: To examine female exclusion across the textbook as a whole (question 1) the numbers of male and female characters were recorded and tabulated (each character was recorded once, disregarding subsequent appearances). In addition, each individual chapter was separately analysed in the same way, allowing for re-appearances in other chapters. Occupational visibility (question 2) was approached by tallying the number of jobs assigned to men and women in the text and visuals. These occupations were analysed qualitatively to identify stereotyping. To examine firstness (question 3), instances where two nouns are paired for sex were counted. This included not only dialogues and stories, but also textbook instructions and exercises (where there is a clear ordering). The sex of initiating characters in written dialogues was also tallied and tabulated. Force reduction strategies (question 4) were approached by examining tag questions and lexical hedges in the written dialogues. Instances were tallied by sex and their functions examined. The same process was used to examine intensifiers and empty adjectives (question 5).

Results
Exclusion

Table 1 shows that male characters outnumber female characters in the textbook as a whole. Although the number of female to male characters is more balanced than in previous research (Hartmann and Judd, 1978; Porreca, 1984), the figures fail to reflect the 2013 gender demographics of its students' countries: Japan, 51.3% female; South Korea 50.3% female; China 48.2% female (Source: The World Bank, 2015).

Table 1

Characters

Characters	
Men	Women
56 (54.4%)	47 (45.6%)

Furthermore, the distribution of male and female characters is uneven. Analysis of the distribution of characters by chapter reveals pervasive gender stereotyping (Table 2).

Table 2

Male and female characters in each chapter

Chapter / Theme	Men	Women
1. Fashion, appearance	2	10
2. Describing personality	14	15
3. Town and countryside	9	4
4. Illness and injuries; diet and health	6	8
5. Friendship	12	8
6. Crime	12	10
7. Jobs	8	9
8. Environmental problems	7	8
9. Money	4	8
10. Food	5	3
11. Invention / mechanisms	11	5
12. The internet	14	10

Female and male characters each dominate six of the twelve chapters. However, cross-referencing tallies with chapter theme reveals the textbook's gender stereotyping. The tallies for chapter 1 suggest that fashion and appearance are primarily a female concern. This is reinforced by the chapter content; two of the three chapter dialogues feature sole female clothes shoppers. In the dialogue featuring male and female friends, their attitudes are clear: Mika (the woman) loves shopping, but Jin hates it (7).

The statistics for chapter 11 imply that the world of invention, mechanics and engineering belongs to men. Not only do male referents greatly outnumber female but, of the seven references to famous inventors (such as Henry Ford and Bill Gates), only one is female (Grace Murray Hopper). Furthermore, the chapter's centrepiece dialogue between a man and woman involves the female character requesting that her friend fix a TV remote control (73). These content features subtly show women as passive and unsuited to such practical matters, while men are creative thinkers and fixers.

The most explicit gender stereotyping can be found in chapter 6 (crime). Although the numbers of female and male referents is quite even, a closer examination reveals the consistent portrayal of men as criminals and women as victims. Of the eleven pictures used in the chapter, all five criminals are

recognisably male. All three victims are female, one picture is of a male police officer, and two pictures are characterless crime scenes images. In two of the three dialogues, the victims are women.

Occupations

Table 3 shows that female characters have relatively little occupational visibility in the textbook. There are more than twice as many references to working men (textual and visual), and the variety of male-associated jobs is much wider. Occupations assigned to female characters conform to narrow stereotypes (store sales clerk, nurse, 'waitress'), rarely offering a more progressive attitude (a female character in chapter 7 wants to be an engineer). Men are often similarly stereotyped (factory worker, construction worker) but are portrayed as having available to them a wide occupational field.

Table 3

Occupational visibility (text and visuals)

	Occupation	Total
Men	Factory worker (x2), farmer, doctor, waiting staff, gym instructor, scientist, police officer, pop star, movie star, teacher, surgeon, construction worker, office worker, island caretaker, bank teller, sumo wrestler, inventor (x7), teacher, news reporter	26
Women	Sales clerk (x 4), doctor, magazine agony aunt, school principal, engineer, nurse, office worker, 'waitress', inventor	12

Firstness

Table 4 shows the instances of firstness, where two nouns are paired for sex in the same sentence or exercise. (There are no instances of dual pronoun expressions).

Table 4

Instances of nouns paired for sex in the same sentence or exercise

Page	Instance	Type
13	Lily, Larry and Lisa	Comprehension question
14	Tim and Jenny	Instruction
15	1.Mark 2. Tina 3. Sue	Listening exercise
24	1.Matt 2. Kathy 3.Emma	Listening exercise
33	Emma, Mika or Yoon	Comprehension question
35	Chi and Jenny	Comprehension question
38	1.Keigo 2.Tina3.Peter	Listening exercise
43	1. Jun 2. Lalita	Listening exercise
43	Jun or Lalita	Discussion question
44	Tom and Sara	Instruction

53	Sue and Bob	Character dialogue (male speaker)
54	1. Kim 2. Bob	Listening exercise
54	1. Mary 2. Paul	Listening exercise
54	1. Kathy 2. Dan	Listening exercise
69	1. Ed 2. Sumalee	Listening exercise
71	a) Grace MurrayHopper	Listening exercise
	b)Bill Gates	
79	Emi and Akira	Character dialogue (male speaker)

Of the sixteen instances of gendered noun pairs, men and women are mentioned an equal number of times. This compares favourably with previous research by Porreca (1984) and Lee and Collins (2009), which found prevalent male-firstness. Although there are only two instances to be found in dialogues, both feature female-first mentions uttered by male characters. This may indicate the authors' promoting of progressive attitudes.

In addition, of the fourteen mixed-gender dialogues, the initiating role is distributed equally (table 5). This is important because it recognises women as non-passive conversation partners, and equally allows female and male students to initiate conversation in the classroom (when practicing these dialogues). It is important to note the absence of any interruptions or similar negotiation of turns. Dialogues progress along basic IRF lines, indicative perhaps of a desire for equality of student talk time.

Table 5

Initiating dialogues

Characters	Dialogues
Woman first	7
Man first	7

Tag questions and lexical hedges

Tag questions are a common feature of informal conversation, and function to soften an utterance, establish a shared view or negotiate meanings (Carter and McCarthy, 1997: 17). Tag questions are introduced early as a grammar point (Chapter 1). However, in the subsequent twenty-two written dialogues, there are only four instances of tags, three of these by women (table 6).

Table 6

Tag questions in dialogues

	Instance	Function	Total
Women	*It's very nice, **isn't it?*** (p.9)	Shared view	
	This is the button which turns on the TV, ***isn't it?*** (p. 73)	Checking information	3
	*You know how to download files, **don't you?*** (p. 77)	Softening?	
Men	*You're Sue, **aren't you?*** (p. 35)	Checking information	1

Lexical hedges are words or phrases that allow the speaker to soften what they say and avoid speaking directly, for a variety of reasons, often to do with sensitivity to 'face' (their own or the interlocutor's) (Carter and McCarthy, 1997: 16). Hedges can include vague language (e.g. kind of), modal verbs and adverbs. In the fourteen written dialogues there are eight instances of hedges, six by women. Three of these instances occur in the same dialogue.

Table 7

Hedges in dialogues

	Instance	Total
Women	***Well**, I don't really need new boots.* (p.7)	
	***Well**, the sweaters are over here* (p.9)	
	*Really? He seems a **little** moody to me.* (p.13)	
	***Well**, you're the most organized member of the team.* (p.15)	6
	*We **could** write a brochure explaining the issue.* (p. 51)	
	*Then we **could** say that animals are losing their natural habitats.* (p. 51)	
Men	*We **could** hand out the brochures at lunch* (p. 51)	
	***Not quite**. Could you tell me what this one is?* (p. 67)	2

The small number of tags and hedges suggests a disinterest on the part of the authors to portray authentic speech. This is typical of low level textbooks, where scripted dialogues serve as vehicles to

present and practice basic grammatical structures, rather than more advanced discourse strategies. Given so few instances, no firm conclusions can be made about representations of the sexes regarding tags and hedges. However, even in this small sample female characters tend to be the primary users of these linguistic features, even if their functions vary or are unclear.

Intensifiers and empty adjectives

Out of twenty-three dialogues in the textbook, there are sixteen instances of intensifiers (including *very, such, so, too* and *enough*). As table 8 shows, female characters are twice as likely to use them than men. From Lakoff's perspective, this is evidence of female overcompensation, masking lack of confidence. Alternatively, the textbook could be said to be portraying women as more emotional than men, and more inclined to use extravagant language. However, there are no instances of empty adjectives in the textbook, which might be explained by the low level.

Table 8

Intensifiers in written dialogues

	Intensifiers
Women	11
Men	5

Discussion

A content analysis reveals the underlying sexism in *Get Ahead 3*. The *exclusion* that is so widespread in EFL textbooks is present here, too; women are simply less visible than men. Female *subordination* is a striking feature; there is a strong bias towards men regarding the quantity and variety of occupations with which they are associated. Compounding these issues is a prevalent *distortion* of female and male behaviour. Familiar stereotypes are in place; women as image-obsessed, victims, or dependent; men as workers, aggressors, or fixers.

A linguistic analysis of the textbook finds a progressive attitude towards firstness, in both its senses. This is a real improvement on many contemporary textbooks. Analyses of the written dialogues indicate a tendency for female characters to both soften and intensify their utterances. But for reasons to do with student level or authorial intent, there is no consistent use of linguistic features that would characterise male and female speech. The textbook is simply uninterested in realistic representations of male and female speech.

We cannot say that this textbook offers a progressive ('prescriptive') attitude towards representations of men and women. It can be argued that the textbook's sexism is simply a reflection of the real world, that it is 'descriptive'. But this claim to authenticity is undermined by its failure to fully acknowledge gender differences in discourse. In this textbook female and male speech bears little resemblance to reality. In the debate as to whether textbooks should be 'prescriptive or descriptive' (Hartman and Judd, 1978: 390), *Get Ahead 3* takes neither side, forfeiting the opportunity to engage with issues of gender representation in EFL.

Many claims are made about the effect of such textbook sexism on learners; that it influences the worldview of students (Lee and Collins, 2010: 124), affects the acquisition process (Crawford and English, 1984) or damages self-esteem (Aydinoglu, 2014: 238). Sunderland (2000b) rejects these claims as 'hard if not impossible to prove' (153). Much research on sexism on textbooks fails to acknowledge two important factors; firstly, the individuality of the student and their response to the textbook; secondly, the role of the teacher as mediator between book and student, with the ability to draw attention to, repair or exacerbate textbook bias (Sunderland, 2000a: 212).

Conclusion

This study illustrates how sexism can be found in even the most contemporary EFL textbooks, underlining the need for teachers to examine the text and pictures carefully before choosing which book to use. Improving teacher awareness of the issues is a necessary pre-requisite, and this can be one of the functions served by gender-focused research. The literature shows that we cannot rely on textbook authors and publishers to represent men and women responsibly, and so researchers should ask how we can better engage teachers in fairer representations of gender. Given that decades of content and linguistic research has failed to halt gender-biased textbooks from being published, a shift in approach is necessary. Research into how textbooks are mediated by teachers and students could empower these stakeholders to take greater responsibility for how they use and respond to textbooks. This may lead to a situation whereby knowledgeable classroom participants demand from authors and publishers more progressive textbooks.

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