

'Let there be you. Let there be me: Gender balance in ELT materials.'

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Introduction

I chose the Nat King Cole song "Let there be love" as a way in to my session at the February 2000 MATSDA conference in Canterbury, Kent.

"Let there be....", the words of creation, are appropriate for a group interested in creating materials and creating lessons from materials. The line "Let there be you, let there be me" symbolizes, for me, the attempt to balance materials so that they are inclusive of both genders. "Let there be love" is a rather dramatic phrase for the spirit I wanted to feel in the session. No attacking, no defending. Just looking to see what is in published materials and then, if necessary, thinking what we can do to improve them and the lessons based on them.

Of course, I know that raising the subject of gender balance is often deeply unpopular. Some people in the session told me how they felt when asked to participate in session tasks on gender balance.

"I personally feel that "Class" is a much more important issue".

"There are so many other things we could consider.

"I felt a bit resentful at first but then I got interested."

"My heart sank. I thought 'Oh No! Not this again! Didn't we solve this in the seventies and eighties?'"

"I think it's a waste of time to do a task like this at a conference."

"I don't think this tells me anything."

"Don't you think this can go too far?"

What was the task?

'Working individually or with other people for 20 minutes please take some materials (best selling ELT reference, course and supplementary books, photocopies used by EFL teachers over the last week, authentic materials gathered at random) and, concentrating on the women and the men contained in them, please count, code, or qualitatively analyse the materials for gender balance.

What do you mean, "count"?

Some of the things you can count are the relative number of:

Women and men authors, women and men referred to in bibliographies, images of women and men, types of activity woman and men are engaged in, times the words *she/he*, *woman/man* are mentioned, turns in conversations, initiatory turns.....

Counting is considered fairly objective since it's likely that different people counting the same things in the same materials are likely to come up with roughly similar numbers.

The drawbacks to counting are that it plays down context and the reasons why imbalances occur.

Here's a published result of some counting.

"Walford's analysis of science text books is quite well-known. He found that of the illustrations in physics textbooks in use in schools, eighty percent showed males only. When females did feature, typically they were either partly-clothed or nursing or cleaning (Walford, 1980). In twenty three 'O' level chemistry books Walford

(1981) found 258 illustrations of only males and 26 of only females. Again, men were typically in science-active roles and women were typically not.”
(From Clark and Millard 1998 p74).

At the time of my workshop that data from science education was twenty years old. So I was interested to find out if the problem had been solved in our own field and in our own time?

One participant in the workshop analysed the latest issue of the “Folio” magazine itself. With a professional magazine, submissions are offered, then selected and edited rather than totally selected as by a text book writer. Our participant found that men far outnumbered women in the visual images, article authors, authors mentioned in the editorial, and in references throughout and in the freelance register at the back.

What do you mean by “code”?

Coding is when you define a category and then go through materials looking for it. Here are some categories you could define and look for:

Active vs passive characters, major vs minor characters, stereotyped vs unsteretyped images, areas valued or unvalued economically or intellectually in our society.

Because personal definitions are involved, coding raises more debate than counting. One participant in the session, having counted three or four times as many images of men as of women in a best-selling ELT course book, went back to check for “positive characteristics (such as smiling and looking friendly and polite) versus “negative “ characteristics (such as looking aggressive and unfriendly). He thus discovered that there was a much higher percentage of “positive” images in the women’s pictures than in the pictures of men.

What do you mean “qualitatively analyse”?

When you analyse materials qualitatively you try to arrive at a more complete picture of who a text seems to be aimed at and why. You look at juxtapositions of image and text, at plot types, at characters and how they are depicted, what they say and do. You look at vocabulary and topic choice. It is both very subjective and very revealing. It’s the sort of work that activists in any minority or marginalised social group can do in a flash. And which those in the majority or dominant social groups take a long time to understand.

I remember going to the cinema with some black colleagues some years ago and watching a film. “Ah look!” I said, “There’s a black character!” I was pleased. Things are getting better in the world, I thought. My colleagues were looking at their watches and making bets that the black character would be dead inside ten minutes. He was.

Some participants in the MATSDA session qualitatively analysed the ELT course book which they’d recently been using, quite happily, in their teaching at school. But when they looked at it from the point of view of gender balance their jaws dropped. After counting the number of images of women, the types of activity represented, use of pronouns, the topics and so on, they reported, “It’s appalling!” Another group looking at authentic materials laughed a lot while doing the analysis but declared at the end that they’d be canceling their subscriptions to the automobile associations whose membership magazines they’d just been analysing.

Why is this important?

If materials don't represent:

- you and me both
- women as able and capable of a full range of interests, traits and skills
- the actions and achievements of women, then this can:
 - affect the way people feel
 - affect performance on assessment tests
 - reinforce gender inequalities
 - influence perceptions of what is possible, normal and appropriate
 - influence the amount of practice students get in talking and turn-taking
 - suggests differences in cognitive and communicative empowerment.

A question I was asked in my session

"Here's a picture of a man in an apron on the front doorstep, kissing his wife goodbye in the morning, as she goes off to work. The students in my class could never relate to this. Don't you think it's going too far?"

After the session, a different participant came up to tell me that three men in her family had chosen to stay home to look after the children while their wives went out to work full time. We wondered how this could be represented pictorially in a course book. If the man in the picture did not wear such an obvious and unlikely 'pinny', readers would most likely take a quick look and assume that the picture represented a man leaving for work. Such is the power of the normal language and grammar of visual images that we tend to read them one way.

What was the most difficult question I was asked in my session?

One participant asked, "Why are some women so sensitive to this?"

Well, that's a hard one. Why ARE some people politically aware and others not? Why are some people more X (add an adjective) than some others? Some mixture of nature and nurture I suppose.

Three questions for the reader

The first question:

Do you have women in your classes, among your readership, in your clientele? If so, here's a more complex question.

Using counting, coding and qualitative analyses, what do you find about the representation of women and men in the reference materials, course books, testing materials, graded readers, authentic materials and student-generated materials you write and use?

And the other side of the coin is, for the men in your classes, among your readership, in your clientele, are their contributions to personal life and parenting and all sides of their personality fully represented?

One last question:

Shall we, as a profession, talk?

Some further reading, in chronological order

Guidelines for creating more sexual and racial images in educational materials (1975) Macmillan

Words and women (1977) Casey Miller and Kate Swift Gollancz

"Sexism and racism in teaching EFL" in Women's Report 6/2. Feb/March (1978)

The handbook of non-sexist writing for writers, editors and speakers (1980) Casey Miller and Kate Swift The Women's Press

Walford, G (1980) "Sex bias in physics textbooks" in School Science Review 62:219

IATEFL guidelines on the representation of women in ELT books in IATEFL Newsletter Oct 1991

IATEFL Newsletter (1991) Gender workshop reports by Cerezal, Carroll and Kowitz and Sunderland

Pugsley, Jenny (1991) "Language and gender in the EFL classroom" in The Teacher Trainer 5/1 pp27-29

"Gender in the EFL classroom" Jane Sunderland in ELTJ 46/1 p81. OUP

Girls, boys and language (1992) Joan Swann Blackwell esp chaps 5,6,7.

"Investigating teachers' concerns about gender issues in the EL classroom" Working paper series (1994) Centre for research in language education. Lancaster University

Feminist stylistics (1995) Sara Mills Routledge

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