

SEXIST LANGUAGE PERSISTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

“In my future I want to have a husband/wife and three boys.”

DURING MY FIRST SEMESTER OF TEACHING INTERMEDIATE LEVEL ENGLISH COURSES at a Colombian University, I must have read variations of this sentence 100 times. I admit, at first, I was taken aback and a little disappointed. The university was the premier private university on the north Caribbean Coast, and the students often bragged about their social awareness and progressiveness. Yet, machismo appeared to be more than just a stereotype and the women seemed to promote it as much as the men. I quickly figured out, however, that the students were simply translating from Spanish to English. The problem was that, while *niños* can include both boys and girls in Spanish, *boys* in English refers specifically to the male gender.

**Gender-biased language
a common classroom problem**

The next semester, the textbook for the courses I was teaching had a unit on crime. The students seemed to enjoy learning the legal vocabulary and were very talkative about the subject. Riding their wave of enthusiasm (not always easy to come by), I asked them to write their own crime stories using the new vocabulary they had learned. The characters in many of these stories were identified using sexist terms in that the words or phrases paired gender with a title, such as *policeman*, *fireman*, and *actress*. The characters would be better identified using gender-neutral terms, such as *police officers*, *firefighters*, and *actors*. The chart below provides additional examples of sexist terms and gender-neutral terms that can be substituted for them.

These sexist words had never come up in class, so I was surprised to find them so preva-

lent in the stories. Another intermediate-level teacher related that he had had the same experience with the same assignment. We decided to give our students a pop quiz on vocabulary the next day. The quiz had twenty questions such as, “What do you call a person who arrests people?” The students were to supply the correct word. We used the quiz as a springboard to discuss the correct way to describe the people on the list.

As expected, none of the 36 students gave a response to every question. The answers they did give, however, were consistently sexist. Of the 26 students who attempted to answer at least 10 of the questions in English, only one used no sexist language. The other 25 students answered a minimum of two questions with a gender-biased noun and a maximum of 11. The majority, 60 percent, used five to seven sexist terms.

Comparison of Sexist and Gender-Neutral Terms

Sexist Term

actress
ballerina
businessman
chairman
fireman
fisherman
mailman/postman
male nurse
policeman
stewardess
waitress
he (to mean men and women)

Example

If a student wants to do well, he must study.

Gender-Neutral Term

actor
ballet dancer
businessperson
chairperson
firefighter
fisher
mail/letter carrier
nurse
police officer
flight attendant
server
he or she he/she they

Example

If a student wants to do well, he or she must study.
If students want to do well, they must study.

Textbooks not to blame

I could explain the translation error of *niños* to *boys* instead of to *children*, but I could not explain why students had learned the biased forms of so many simple vocabulary items. This question led me to review some of the texts used at the university (see appendix). I evaluated 15 textbooks and workbooks ranging in content from general language instruction to academic writing and business communication. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine if authors used gender-biased vocabulary such as *policeman* or *stewardess* and how they addressed people in third person. I examined the index (if one was available) and the table of contents for specific lessons on avoiding gender-biased language. It should be noted that I did not evaluate the content or the illustrations of the books to see if the authors created scenarios in which people played stereotypical parts.

Except for a few, mostly justifiable, situations, the books were consistent in their use of gender-neutral language. None of the books used the male pronoun exclusively; rather, they either alternated between feminine and masculine pronouns or used the third person plural. Three of the books (Hartman, Folse et al, English and Lynn) contained examples of gender-specific terms, such as *businessman* (Folse et al, 44), *businesswoman* (English and Lynn, 74; Hartmann, 12), and *chairmen* (English and Lynn, 74), but only when it was necessary to identify the gender of the people involved in a situation. For example, English and Lynn discuss the different roles men and women play in business in various cultures and provide hypothetical scenarios in order to prepare students for interaction in the respective countries. Folse and colleagues used the term *fisherman* (23) to describe a person who fishes, but this biased word form appears to be an aberration in the book. Only one book, Smith (80-83, 107), offered lessons on avoiding gender-biased language.

The question these findings raise is why sexist terms are so prevalent in EFL students' everyday vocabularies. One possible answer is that limited resources may prevent some EFL institutions from purchasing modern materials that reflect changes in the English language. Another is that television programs, movies, and music, which do not always use

politically correct language, are broadcast in English in many countries. Regardless of the reasons, EFL teachers must try to rectify the problem. As native English-speaking cultures have striven to become egalitarian, recognizing the value and contributions of both sexes to society, the language has evolved to reflect their progress. It is not enough for these changes in language to stay within the walls of native English and ESL classrooms. EFL teachers also have a responsibility to teach non-biased English vocabulary and pronoun usage in order to enable our students to skillfully and tactfully interact in authentic situations. This is important for several reasons discussed below.

Why teaching gender-neutral language is important

Teaching gender-neutral language is important if we are to meet the expressed needs of students. Kyriacou and Kobori (1998, 347) found that Slovenian students were studying English primarily to help them in advanced study and in their future careers. Colombian students frequently express these same reasons. Many students have entered the business world and are now returning to the classroom to learn English or to improve their proficiency in it in order to conduct business with companies in English-speaking countries. Others are undergraduate students who aspire to work or study abroad.

Neither of these settings tolerates sexist language. Many native English-speaking countries have passed strict laws prohibiting discrimination, including discrimination based on gender. Academic and professional organizations, including the American Psychological Association, the Modern Language Association, the American Medical Association, the American Marketing Association, and the Association of American University Presses, have joined the effort to eradicate discrimination by prohibiting gender-biased language in their printed materials (Madson and Hessling 1999, 559-560). Governing bodies have taken a very visible stand against biased language, and this stance has extended as well to the education and business worlds. Educators ranging from elementary school teachers to university business communication instructors have studied gender bias, proposed meth-

ods for avoiding it, and created curriculums which demand gender-neutral language (Check 2002, 46-52; Murranka and Lynch 1999, 9-23; Parks and Robertson 1998, 445-461; Evans and Davies 2000, 255-270).

These actions demonstrate the importance of gender equality in English-speaking cultures. Most students seem to be telling us they have to be able to function in English-speaking academic and business settings. Therefore, as EFL teachers, we need to equip our students with an understanding of sexist language and appropriate substitutions for such language.

Another reason we should teach gender-neutral language is that it allows speakers and writers to communicate more clearly. Using the male pronoun to describe men and women can lead to confusion, especially in writing. Griffith (1994) persuasively argues that gender-neutral language is vital to clear and accurate writing: "If we follow traditional generic-male rules in our writing, we will construct sentences which do not fully express what we mean to say. For example, 'If an ophthalmologist suspects glaucoma, he should administer the proper tests,' suggests that any person in the group of ophthalmologists will be male."

Griffith goes on to point out that eliminating generic-male language can make writing more specific, easier to understand, more accurate and more interesting. She gives the following examples to demonstrate her point: "Stone-age man found ways to tame his environment," versus the gender-neutral sentence, "Stone-age agriculturists and hunters used their survival skills to tame their environment."

Perhaps the most fundamental reason for teaching gender-neutral language is that language is a reflection of culture, and cultural awareness can facilitate communication, not just between non-native and native English speakers, but also among non-native English speakers. Kramsch (1993, 236) argues that the L2 classroom is a place in which a third culture can be born, one developed on the sociolinguistic boarder of the native culture of the learners and the culture of the L2.

Based on Kramsch's theory, we can extrapolate that even EFL students who have never lived in or visited a foreign country can become bicultural in that they are able to function in their native culture as well as that of the second language classroom. It seems

reasonable to conclude that students who develop the ability to adjust their speech and behavior to avoid sexist language will be better able to adapt to cultural settings they may enter in the future.

Alptekin (2002, 61) points out that these intercultural communication skills are especially important for English learners now that English has become the international business and academic language. Since much of the world's business will probably be carried out in English among non-native English speakers, equipping them with ways to avoid sexist language in their transactions and academic pursuits is of obvious importance.

Zaid argues that promoting culture is inappropriate in EFL settings. However, teaching students accepted linguistic norms is not promoting culture; rather, it is giving students insight into the culture behind the language they are learning. Students can analyze sexist language and learn how to avoid it without compromising their own beliefs. For instance, by drawing students' attention to neutral terms to describe professions, teachers can help their students gain insight into English-speaking cultures without being asked to adopt, even temporarily, the ways of those cultures. Brown (1994, 442) asserts that teachers have a responsibility to give students the skills to "speak tactfully, to negotiate meaning harmoniously, to read critically, and to write persuasively" without preaching a certain philosophy or morality in the classroom. Teaching gender-biased language prevents students from fully acquiring the skills Brown outlines. His admonition to offer these skills without advocating one's own or another's beliefs can easily be accomplished through modeling gender-neutral language or informing students who use gender-biased language that the term in question has been replaced by the non-sexist equivalent.

Conclusion

As we have seen, studies suggest that many EFL students are studying English to enhance their opportunities for success in the English-speaking academic and business worlds. Gender-biased language, so common in many EFL classrooms, can be offensive; it also reduces the students' chances of succeeding in English-speaking settings, diminishes the clarity of

their writing, and, in some jurisdictions, may be illegal. To meet students' needs, teachers must equip them with skills to interact successfully, diplomatically, and harmoniously. A major step in reaching this goal is teaching them gender-neutral language.

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APPENDIX | MATERIALS REVIEWED

Sexist Language Persists in the EFL Classroom • Chantelle Ferguson

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