

SEXISM AND RACISM IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE'

Every year thousands of people come to England for a short time to have a holiday and to learn English at the same time. Neither the Home Office, nor the DES nor the British Council knows the exact number of students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) since the majority are not sponsored by their governments but by their companies or they pay for themselves privately. Most students go to unrecognised schools i.e. schools which have not been inspected by the Association of Recognised English Language Schools (ARELS). Students come from all over the world but in especially large numbers from Europe, Iran and Arabian countries and from Japan. Whilst here they pay fees, live with a family or rent a flat and spend quite a lot of money on clothes, food and records etc. which may well be cheap compared to their own countries. These students are thus an important source of foreign exchange and "goodwill".

The language teachers themselves many of whom are women, belong (if unionised) to the International Language Teachers Branch (ILTB) of the Managerial Administrative, Technical and Supervisory Association (MATSA) which is in turn a part of the General Municipal Union (GMWU). Teachers come from many different backgrounds—some will have degrees, teaching diplomas and some have the Royal Society of Arts special diploma in EFL. Teachers will employ different techniques in class and will do varying amounts of preparation. Conditions in some schools are excellent, so that the number of hours teaching per week and the pay will allow teachers to be enthusiastic about their work, creating their own materials, discussing techniques with colleagues etc. Conditions in other schools are so bad that the teachers will be exhausted simply getting through their teaching load each week and trying to gain union recognition.

Although the overall financial and political implications of foreign students in Britain are fascinating and the conditions of the language teachers themselves obviously very important, perhaps an area of particular interest to women is that dealing with what is taught.

Those of us who are EFL teachers use ourselves, reading matters, tapes, and radios etc to try to cater for the real communicative needs of the students. We put words into the mouths and ears of students. We select a range of structures, patterns, notions etc to present to them. If the students are women or men endeavouring to be less sexist or racist then we should help them to do this (in English) too. If they are sexist or racist themselves then we should expose their attitudes and present them with alternatives by simply assuming a non-sexist and non-racist standpoint.

Language is important in producing unbiased women and men. Many philosophers, psychologists and of course ordinary people recognise the importance of language for transmitting social messages. "Language enables us to interpret and organise the world we experience through our senses and in that way provides structure and meaning to what would otherwise be a jumble of impressions". "A language is not merely a means of communication, it is also an expression of shared assumptions. Language transmits implicit values and behavioural models to all who use it." Taken from: Burr, Dunn, Farquahar. . . from "Words and Women" by Casey Miller and Kate Swift.

Educationalists and publishers generally have recognised the need for positive sexual and racial images in educational materials and for changes in curricula. Guidelines and working papers have been produced. More work needs to be done to incorporate these ideas into EFL teaching.

There are hundreds of EFL books on the market now. It has been a rapidly expanding section for the last ten years. Many staffrooms however, whilst acquiring new books, tend to use established names for course books.

Names like, "Kemel Lessons Intermediate", "Kemel Plus", "English in Situations", "Mainline" and "English in Mind" as well as the slightly newer books "Say what you mean", and "Strategies" etc. All of these books fall into the usual sexist mistakes common to educational material used in other subjects.

Girls and women are consistently assigned to subordinate, passive roles or, if active, are limited to participation in the areas least valued intellectually or economically in our society. Women are rarely the central protagonists in a story.

If they work, they are office or shop workers, nurses or teachers. They are often unpunctual. They are always either married or going steady with a boyfriend. They talk a lot and often nag men, especially about money and drinking. They use feminine wiles to get what they want—which is usually a fur coat. (As for minority groups—in most text books they simply do not exist).

There has been a slight improvement over the last few years. Many books now have a statutory chapter on "Women's Liberation" and there are slightly more unattached working women in evidence.

It must matter if women are misrepresented, denigrated and written out of most material. It's predictable, boring and insulting for women. It matters to men too if they are consistently represented as strong, competitive, reliable and brave. It is a lot to live up to. For men to be represented as conservative, unfeeling and undemonstrative is somewhat limiting, and destructive to them and us. It matters too if our multi-cultural society is consistently presented as being all-white.

This propaganda diminishes the ability of individuals to be what they want to be, what they feel capable of being, and encourages feelings of anxiety and a belief that one is somehow odd if one doesn't conform. In women and members of minority groups it can lead to a negative self-image, in men to a desperate attempt to be "masculine" and dominant.

Whilst stereotypes are sometimes employed for malicious reasons, deliberately to oppress or ridicule, very often they are based on assumptions which run so deep in our culture that they can slip by unnoticed unless our awareness is continually sharpened and refined.

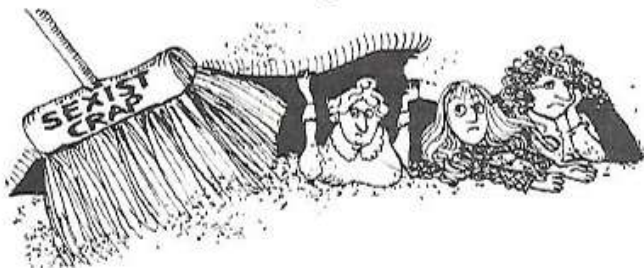
What can we do about this? We cannot re-write all the dictionaries, course books and test materials, re-draw all the cartoons and re-read all the tapes. Even if we did, our understanding continues to develop so they would probably be obsolete as soon as they were finished. We would hope that books appearing in the future will be less sexist and racist by including the actions and achievements of women and black people without using patronising language but giving everyone the full range of interests, traits and capabilities.

TROUBLES

There is concern that by portraying oppressed groups in an unoppressed way that we are creating similarly unreal stereotypes to those existing today, albeit in a positive direction. We would not, however, wish women and people from minority groups always to be the central figures and always to be glowing with virtue. Of course women sometimes make mistakes or drive badly, but they certainly do not have the corner on these or other negative attributes. By writing non-racist and non-sexist material one is redressing an imbalance which *already* exists.

Some people feel that, whilst this is important for children and in a first language, it is not a priority for adults learning a second or third language. An imbalance which oppresses people is always wrong. In a second language it re-inforces the damage done in the first and limits the development of new cultural insights which can often be the spur to personal and social change.

Some people reject the idea of making the language in educational materials less sexist or racist by saying that language would be "unsexed" and "unraced", that sex and race difference would be confused with inequality. Far from implying 'sameness', however, a language of sex or race equality *emphasises* differentiation by making women and minorities visible. By including women and oppressed groups in educational materials and allowing them to show the full range of human traits we all can feel that a publication is directed at us. We need not feel excluded or ignored.



To return then to the question of "what to do?". Whilst expecting books produced in the future to be more enlightened, we have expressed doubts about the practicality or wisdom of annotating or re-writing existing books.

The most important teaching aid in the classroom is the teacher. If the teacher is sexist or racist any material which is not, will either be rejected, ignored or ridiculed. If the teacher is more enlightened, then even biased material can be handled in such a way as to reduce bias or to make it explicit, and to treat it as it deserves to be treated. Many teachers use their own ideas drawings and writing in class and, with the will to change, this material can contain positive racial and sexual images.

Deborah leads an easy life. "Do you want your breakfast now?", her maid is saying.

Carol plays the piano and tennis very well. She's a good cook and swimmer too. She speaks French and German perfectly. She's beautiful too. That's why she was Miss Europe last year.

If you're an EFL teacher then use as many women as men for your central character when presenting a new structure or idea and give them too, as much energy and initiative as you would male characters. Do not always present a family as comprising of Dad, Mum and two kids. It is no longer the statistical average. Beware of your black board drawings. To draw a perm and skirt is a quick way to show that a figure is supposed to be a woman. But how many of your friends have perms and wear skirts?

A good source of pictures of natural women is women's movement calendars and publications. When you are drilling give as much practice with "she" and "Jane" as you do with "he" and "John". Be careful when giving spelling or vocabulary that you do not give the male version of words only (eg chairman *and* chairwoman or chairperson) or give a masculine slant to your definitions.

Fred spends most of his time in pubs. This is his wife "I wonder where Fred is", she is saying.

Arthur is a businessman. He earns a lot of money. His wife is very young. They are very happy. His first wife died in 1963. His sister had to come and live with him. She had to look after the children.

The old millionaire has just asked the young blonde to marry him. "Will you give me all your money if I marry you?", she's asking him.

Student: "What means 'brave'?"

Teacher: "Well, imagine a man climbing a telegraph pole."

Why not "Well imagine a woman rescuing a cat from the roof of a house."

When dividing your class up into pairs or groups for work on their own, don't let the men use the women next to them as secretaries to write down dialogues, take notes etc. Don't let the atmosphere in a class make it difficult for women to contribute ideas in discussion. Show interest in their contributions, however tentative they might be. Choose discussion topics carefully too, so nobody feels excluded or highlighted eg. *not* "The Problems of Immigration", "Football".

Don't feel guilty about using non-sexist language or situations in a class full of Arabs or Japanese etc. We don't change our behaviours when we are with them, by dressing in purdah or professing enormous love for the monarchy if we do not feel it, or by declaring a hate for the State of Israel, so let us be positive in these respects too.

Although the Principals of most language schools are men, many language teachers are women, and many students are women. We can thus, by being more aware of the content of our own teaching, start to influence our colleagues. Why not leave a copy of this Women's Report in your staffroom and be ready to chat about it if anyone expresses interest? Show other teachers work you have produced if you feel it is positive and could help them to make their work less racist and sexist. And, of course, let us know how you get on!