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Gender Bias in Singaporean Primary School English Coursebooks

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Schools can have an important effect on children's developing views of gender roles, and course-books form an important element of children's school experience. In 1996, we read an article by Anthea Fraser Gupta and Ameline Lee Su Yin that described gender bias in a 1980s primary school English coursebook series used in Singapore schools. We had carried out a previous study about gender and language (Ong, Zhuo & Jacobs 1997), and wondered whether more than ten years later, the present series, Primary English Thematic Series, or PETS for short, was an improvement on the past series, Primary English Programme or PEP? Both series were created by the CDIS (Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore), a branch of the Ministry of Education. In this article we describe how we set out to answer this question and what we found.

PETS comprises two coursebooks for each of the six levels in Singapore primary schools. We obtained these books, and then divided our main question into sub-questions. Following are the sub-questions and a comparison between what we found for PETS (the 1990s series) and what the previous researchers found for PEP (the 1980s series):

- 1. Is there a difference in the number of female and male characters?** Only about 30% of the characters in PETS are female and about 70% are male. This is roughly the same as it was in PEP.
- 2. Is there a difference in the number of female and male main characters?** About 25% of the main characters in the stories in PETS are female, while about 75% are male, a slight improvement from the 20:80 difference in PEP.
- 3. Is there a difference in the number of female or male speakers and the number of times each sex speaks?** About 36% of the characters who speak in the stories in PETS are female, while about 64% are male. Each female speaks an average of 3.9 times, while each male averages 4.3 speaking turns. This is fractionally better than PEP in which the females had 3.2 speaking turns to 3.9 for males.
- 4. Is there a difference in the average numbers of words used by females and males when they speak?** The first category in which females come out ahead in PETS is that females speak more words per speaking turn (13.6) than do males (12.3). In PEP, males led in this category: 12.0 to 11.6.

- 5. What sort of roles are filled by males and females in both texts and illustrations?** To answer this question, we looked at what females and males are doing in the PETS books. We found 22 economic roles engaged in by females only, including *professor*, *nurse*, and *ranch owner*; 76 economic roles engaged in by males only, including *hairstylist*, *truck driver*, and *farmer*; and 40 economic roles engaged in by females and males, including *doctor*, *inventor*, and *basketball coach*. The range of economic roles played by females is much wider than it was in PEP, but males are still shown in a wider range of jobs than females.

The same picture emerged in terms of non-economic roles, with females in PETS shown playing a wider range of roles than they did in PEP, but with males still participating in a wider range than females. In PETS, both females and males are shown involved in strenuous and vigorous outdoor activities, such as *trekking*, *camping*, and *mountain climbing*, although more males participate in these activities than females. Males are more often shown in such leisure activities as *playing games* and *sports*. Also, males only are shown *playing computer games* (with a child), *playing chess*, and *fishing*. In family care, both females and males are featured *sharing household tasks*, *caring for children*, and *shopping*. However, females continue to be more family oriented (e.g. shown being concerned about the safety of a child). Males continue to be more involved in aggressive acts (e.g. *cheating*, *mischief*, and *jeering at a loser*). Further, as was also the case in PEP, males ride a greater variety of modes of transportation. For instance, in Unit 12 of PETS Coursebook 5B (CDIS 1995), men are described riding on camels, boats, planes, elephant, train, steamer, and sledge.

- 6. In terms of kin relations, is there a difference between females and males as to who is the possessor and who is the possessed?** Power relations between the sexes can be revealed by the way kin ties are shown. For example, in *John's brother*, a male is possessed by a male; in *her father*, a male is possessed by a female. In PETS, 51% of those possessed are females and 49% are males, while 38% of possessors are females and 74% are males. This represents a slight improvement over PEP, in which females were 78% of the possessed and only 26% of the possessors.
- 7. Is non-sexist language used?** We looked at two areas in which non-sexist language is becoming increasingly common, not only in the West but in Singapore as well, as was shown in a study carried out with JC students by George Jacobs, Marti Sevier & Winnie Wee (1998). One area is alternatives to the use of *he*, *him*, and *his* to represent females and males. For example, instead of saying "A doctor should take care of his patients", we can use alternatives such as, "A doctor should take care of her/his patients" or "Doctors should take care of their patients". We found 50 examples on non-sexist alternatives and only one instance of a sexist form, "One duckling after another threw himself into the water".

The other area of sexism and language that we investigated was the use of *man* and compound words formed with *man*, such as *chairman*, to represent females and males. For instance, nowadays, instead of *chairman*, many people use *chairperson* or *chair*. In PETS, we found 19 instances of the use of *man* to refer to all people, such as *Wheels enable man to move over long distances*, and eight instances of alternatives, such as *Long ago people rode in wagons*, and *fire-fighters*. We found no instances of the use of *woman* as a generic term for females and males.

The previous study did not investigate the issue of non-sexist language in PEP, so we cannot do a comparison, but it is likely that PETS represents an improvement in this regard. For instance, the following appears in PEP Basic Reader 6A (CDIS, 1985: 28), "[I]f you hear someone say that he has only a foggy idea about something, he means that he does not understand that subject at all."

Interviews

In addition to studying the course-books, interviews were conducted with two of the key people involved in creating PETS. Betsy Lim was head of the CDIS team that wrote the PETS series, and Anthea Fraser Gupta, who along with Ameline Lee Su Yin had done the study of PEP, acted as language consultant for PETS. Here are a few of the insights gained from talking with them.

1. The PETS team paid attention to gender balance, as well as to other issues, such as national values, race, and religion.
2. Gupta gave a workshop on gender representation to the materials writers and supplied style sheets that she had used in other workshops in Singapore, including a workshop she, along with Phyllis Chew, did for AWARE (Gupta & Chew 1995).
3. A major difficulty encountered in striving for a balanced representation of the sexes lay in the fact that more existing stories (as opposed to specially written material) had males as central characters, thus providing a potential source of imbalance. Had the PETS team written more of their own material, gender balance would have been easier, but the writing had to be lively and interesting, and writing of this quality was easier gathered than created. One tactic they did use was to change the gender of a character. For instance, in a story about a talking computer, its sex was changed from male to female, thereby supplying an additional female protagonist. It was easier to do this for fiction than for non-fiction. In dealing with historical information the writers were faced with the invisibility of women in public life in the past.
4. According to Lim, society is heading in the direction of the technological age. This, she felt, is a potential factor affecting how coursebooks will be written. As the pace of modern technology grows, roles for men and

women will be more equal, with intellectual and technological skills emphasised more than physical strength.

The Future

As we write this in 1999, new curriculum documents are being written and trialled. New primary school English language coursebooks will be written based upon these documents. In a move toward privatisation, CDIS has been dissolved; so, the new coursebooks will be written by authors working for private publishers. Schools will then choose the books they want their students to use. Parents and community organisations such as AWARE can request to have input into these choices.

PETS represents a step in the right direction, and we hope that current materials writers will build on the improvements in PETS and work toward even greater gender balance in new coursebooks. Based on our study and other work in this area, here are some criteria that can be used by those writing educational materials and by those deciding on which materials to purchase.

1. Are there roughly equal numbers of female and male characters?
2. Are there roughly equal numbers of female and male main characters?
3. Are females and males roughly equal in terms of the number of speakers, the number of times each speaker talks, and the number of words uttered by speakers of the two sexes?
4. Are both females and males shown in a wide range of occupational and non-occupational roles?
5. Are females and males roughly equal as to who is the possessor and who is the possessed in kin relational ties?
6. Is non-sexist language used?
7. Are females and males roughly equal in terms of playing both active and passive roles?

It may seem to be too much to ask that either coursebook writers or potential purchasers do a detailed analysis of each of these points for every book in a series. However, it may be essential to quantify the bias -- otherwise even well-intentioned writers may not realise it is there.

Further, children (and we adults) need to learn how to read with a critical eye. We all need to know how to recognise bias of whatever type. Such bias appears in any writing, but in terms of gender bias it may seem particularly blatant in writing done many years ago. Finally, coursebooks must to some extent reflect reality, but at the same time we can look for them to suggest a vision of how society can be. Although it is still striking that the textbooks represent women in a more limited way than they indeed operate in Singapore at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, if we wish for greater gender balance in coursebooks and in other types of writing, we must work, as

AWARE members have for so long done, to change reality, to move society toward greater gender balance and greater opportunity for all.

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