

# **On Balance**

---

**Guidelines for the  
Representation of  
Women and Men in  
English Language Teaching  
Materials**

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

The Women in EFL Materials group grew out of Women in TEFL, established in 1986. It took as its objective a study of British materials currently in use for the teaching of English as a foreign language, and the ways in which women and men were differently represented in them. The group designed a questionnaire to investigate interest in sexist language and stereotyping, together with a set of guidelines on how to write materials that treated both sexes with equal dignity and gave them equal coverage. The aim was to present a potentially controversial and relatively undocumented topic to a mixed readership of female and male, native and non-native speakers. The questionnaire was sent to over 650 schools, colleges and university departments all over the world, as well as to British-based publishers, writers and examination boards. Over 400 responses were received, and a clear majority indicated their concern over the issues raised. The guidelines have been extensively revised and supplemented in the light of comments from a wide range of professionals, including teachers in Britain and overseas.

### **Purpose and rationale**

These guidelines have been compiled as a reminder to people involved in all aspects of ELT publishing to be aware of discriminatory language and stereotypical images and, wherever possible, to use inclusive language and images which reflect a more balanced and accurate view of the world and of the present state of English. Two issues are involved here:

1. The images and language which are used in teaching, and the extent to which learners can identify with them, have an important effect on how well people learn. If women are under-represented in teaching materials, or represented in demeaning ways, the women who are taught with these materials may learn less well.
2. Language change away from gender bias has been significant in the past few years, and it is important that the language presented to foreign learners of English should not present an outdated and discriminatory version of the language.

## Scope

1. The notes that follow are a starting point and are not meant to be exhaustive. They highlight and illustrate areas of concern, and suggest ways of approaching problems rather than trying to anticipate and solve all problems.
2. The points raised apply to illustrations, cartoons, jokes, recorded material and video material as well as to the printed word.
3. The guidelines assume publication for a worldwide audience; materials that are written for and set in another specific country with different cultural values and realities will have to take those factors into account. For example, in materials written for the Arab world, respect for cultural norms will be important; but the spirit of the guidelines can be kept in mind, and, for instance, it can be brought out that women are held in high esteem and often do respected jobs outside the home.
4. While these guidelines focus principally on sexist bias, the ultimate aim is to avoid discriminatory language and stereotypical images in whatever context (e.g. age, class, ethnic origin, disability etc) so that the books we produce are fair and balanced in their portrayal of all members of society.

## Guidelines

### 1. Images of women

The comments in this section concern all the situations where girls and women appear in EFL materials, and are meant to ensure that female learners are able to identify in a positive way with the characters, fictional and real, that they encounter while learning English.

#### 1.1 Visibility

Over half the population is female. This should be reflected in text, illustrations, and recordings. Impressions cannot be relied on - it is necessary to count the relative numbers of male and female characters over a whole book/video/cassette. This includes counting characters

- in illustrations
- in dialogues
- in lists of sentences
- in the voices specified for audio recordings
- in authentic recordings and texts

## 12 Stereotyping

For female learners to learn effectively, it is important not to present female characters in a demeaning way.

Avoiding stereotypes

Much can be done to *avoid* presenting people in a stereotyped way. Here are some checklists:

### PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

In illustrations and texts:

- Are people shown as belonging to a range of physical types, or for example, are women always shorter than men?
- Are both women and men shown dressed in a variety of ways, or for example are men usually in clothing appropriate to action while women are dressed in confining and decorative clothes?
- Are women described by their physical attributes ('the attractive brunette MP from Birmingham') in situations where men are described by professional status or mental attributes?

### CHARACTER

Are both women and men shown in texts, dialogues, recordings and illustrations:

- being bold and assertive?
- being weak, vulnerable or scared?
- instructing, leading, rescuing?
- being instructed, led, rescued?
- displaying self-control?
- responding emotionally?
- being strong, capable and logical?
- being uncertain and in need of reassurance?
- being powerful and able to deal with problems?
- being inept and defeated by problems?
- belonging to a range of emotional types?
- starting dialogues?
- making arrangements?

### VOCATIONAL

Vocational stereotyping can perpetuate the notion that if women work at all it is only for 'pin money' and that it is their job alone to keep house and raise children. In fact 54% of women in Britain work outside the home; 42% of mothers with children under five go out to work; 20% of the women who go out to work are the sole or major breadwinners for the family.

In texts, dialogues, recordings and illustrations, are both women and men shown:

- in managerial positions or as artisans?
- caring for children and competently completing household tasks?
- as principal or sole breadwinners for their families?
- occasionally in 'mould-breaking' occupations - e.g. women as lorry drivers or bankers, men as nurses or secretaries? Is it implied that these people's jobs conflict with their femininity/masculinity?

### **SOCIAL**

Many learners of English do not belong to nuclear families or take their sense of identity and self-worth from their marital status. Some things to consider:

- Do the materials show a variety of sorts of families, or do all families consist of dad, mum and 2.4 children?
- Are women and men described using the same parameters, or are women described by marital or familial status ('wife of ...', 'mother of four children') in situations where men are described by professional status or mental attributes?
- Are there some apparently happily unmarried women and men, or are all people over a certain age married?

### Confronting stereotypes

A second way of dealing with stereotypes is to face rather than avoid them.

### **PORTRAYING STEREOTYPED ATTITUDES**

Authentic materials, for example, may well contain examples of stereotyped attitudes. Some questions to ask here:

- Is it clear that the stereotyped attitudes are not those of the author(s)?
- Are students invited to discuss the attitudes?
- Is there a balance between reading/listening/video passages where stereotyped attitudes are exemplified and those where other, more open attitudes exist?

### **CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPE**

Another way of facing stereotypes is to introduce characters, fictional or (perhaps preferably) real, who have successfully challenged a common stereotype. Depicting women or men in occupations typically supposed to be the domain of the other sex is the most obvious example. However, note:

- Tokenism is a danger, and this is why it might be preferable, where possible, to choose a real character rather than a fictional one.
- Another danger is overdoing it - it would be an unrealistic picture of British or American society if all the secretaries in the book were men, and students would be baffled rather than enlightened.

## 2. Women in language

As with stereotypes, language which excludes women can be dealt with 1) by avoiding its use and 2) by dealing sensitively with exclusive language that comes up in, for example, authentic recordings. In the second case it is often enough to suggest that teachers point out that a particular usage may offend many women, and to ensure that other authentic recordings demonstrate inclusive language.

### 2.1 False generics

Studies of native English-speaking college students and school children have shown that the generic use of words like *man* (ostensibly to include all humans), does not elicit mental images of both sexes. When told that 'man needs food and shelter to survive', the great majority of the people in the studies visualised only men. Even with a conscious effort, few people would be comfortable with the sentence 'Like all mammals, man breastfeeds his young.' But the following genuine example demonstrates how ostensibly generic words 'slide' towards a masculine meaning: 'Man's vital interests include life, food and access to females.' Foreign language learners who perceive the word *man* as a term for males will thus be echoing the feelings of native speakers. Building towards a native-like language competence for foreign learners of English will mean either avoiding the use of false generics in teaching materials (for productive use), or confronting them when they appear (for receptive use).

#### Avoiding false generic 'man'

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Use</b>
mankind	people, humans, humanity
manpower	work force, staff
man-made	artificial, synthetic, manufactured
man-to-man	person-to-person, personally
prehistoric man	prehistoric people
manned by	staffed by

When occupations are being discussed in general terms, job titles

incorporating the word *man* can be avoided where another natural alternative exists. Of course if an individual is being discussed it may be reasonable to refer to that individual as, for instance, *a policewoman* or *a policeman*. Note that *chairwoman* is attested in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as being in use since 1699, and it is becoming increasingly unacceptable to call a woman a *chairman*.

<b>Instead of generic</b>	<b>Use</b>
businessman	executive
cameraman	camera operator
chairman	chairperson, chair
fireman	fire fighter
foreman	supervisor
policeman	police officer
statesman	leader, politician

### Avoiding false generic 'he' and other masculine pronouns

This is a problem that most often occurs in exercise instructions and teacher's books. Note that it is *not* desirable to present material with the disclaimer that masculine pronouns are to be taken as referring to both females and males. Some suggestions:

- Change the pronoun to a plural, so that 'A person generally learns what he uses and forgets what he doesn't use' becomes 'People generally learn what they use...'
- Use *they* as a singular pronoun, as in 'Ask each person in your group to say their sentence.' Although this is considered incorrect by some people, it is common in spoken English and has a long history of use in written English (cf. William Caxton, 1470: 'Each of them should make themselves ready'; Shakespeare: 'God send everyone their heart's desire'). It is now becoming increasingly common in Britain in formal English (speeches, forms etc.), so use in EFL texts would reflect authentic usage. The major British grammar and usage books confirm this. (In the US, while spoken usage is roughly the same, singular *they* is still often felt to be incorrect in formal spoken or written use.)
- Use the second person, so that 'Each student should write his answer at the top of a piece of paper' becomes 'Write your answer at the top of a piece of paper.'
- Use an article instead of a pronominal determiner, so that 'Try to make sure that everyone in the group gives his opinion' becomes '... gives an opinion.'
- Replace the pronoun with a noun, perhaps a synonym for a noun used earlier, so that 'Work with another student. Say five things

about your family and ask five questions about his family' becomes '...and ask five question about your partner's family.'

- Avoid the need for a pronoun by recasting, so that 'Ask a bright student. If he can't answer...' becomes '...if the question is too difficult...' or '... if the question can't be answered...'
- Use expressions like *the other*, so that 'You then stand back to back, and each student says what his partner is wearing' becomes '...each says what the other is wearing.'
- Use *she and he*, *he and she* or *hers and his*, *his and hers*, but not when you have to do it repetitively.
- When referring to an animal whose sex is unknown use *it*.
- There are mixed views, and sometimes strong feelings, over the use of *s/he*; it is neat and economical in writing, but unpronounceable. There may be some argument for it, for instance, in teacher's books that are not meant to be spoken anyway.

## 2.2 Female diminutives of job titles

Female diminutives of job titles are unnecessary, and becoming increasingly rare in general usage.

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Use</b>
conductress	conductor
authoress	author
manageress	manager
poetess	poet

## 2.3 The terms girl and lady

Referring to a woman beyond her middle or late teens as a 'girl' can be patronising and demeaning. Beware of using this term in situations where men would not be referred to as 'lads', 'chaps' or 'boys.'

Likewise, use *lady/ladies* only when you use (or would use) *gentleman/gentlemen*.

## 2.4 Letters

The use of *Dear Sir/s* as the salutation for an unknown person or group of people is becoming more and more uncommon and unacceptable. Use *Dear Sir or Madam* or *Dear Madam or Sir*.

It is becoming increasingly common to use *Dear Jane/Joe Bloggs* rather than *Dear Ms/Mrs/Miss/Mr Bloggs*.

Both these forms of salutation are considered correct by the major EFL examining bodies.



## Conclusion

British EFL materials deserve the excellent reputation they enjoy throughout the world. Writers, illustrators, designers and publishers take justified pride in the talent and effort they put into producing materials for effective and enjoyable learning. The guidelines were written as an aid to this end, and are not intended to voice a criticism or to impose a handicap. We hope that they will be of use.

## Acknowledgements

Women in EFL Materials was a voluntary group consisting of Jill Florent, Kathryn Fuller, Jenny Pugsley, Catherine Walter and Annemarie Young, with occasional help and advice from Ann Arscott, Wendy Coleby, Benita Cruickshank, Louise Elkins, Eleanor Gibson, Sue Griffin, Jean Hindmarch and Brenda Sandilands. We would like to express our thanks for help with this project to the hundreds of teachers and others all over the world who took the time to answer the questionnaires that led to the guidelines, and particularly to those who offered further comments and suggestions. We should also like to thank the following institutions and individuals for their help and support: The Bell Educational Trust; The British Council; Cambridge University Press; Collins ELT; The Equal Opportunities Commission; Heinemann International; International House; Longman Group Limited; Oxford University Press; Prentice Hall; The Publishers Association; School of English and Linguistics, Macquarie University; Brian Abbs; Christopher Candlin; Ingrid Freebairn; Judy Garton-Sprenger; Simon Greenall; Kaye Greenleaf; Chris Jones; Leo Jones; Alan Maley; Ray Murphy; Nick Newton; John Soars; Liz Soars; Jane Sunderland; Michael Swan; Peter Viney.

For those who wish to read further, a short bibliography follows.

## Bibliography

- AAUP Taskforce on Gender-Free Language, *Bias-free communication: a select bibliography*, University of California Press, 1988.
- Barnes, D., *From communication to curriculum*, Penguin Books, 1976.
- Cameron, D., *Feminism and linguistic theory*, Macmillan, 1985.
- Cheshire, J., 'A question of masculine bias', in *English Today*, January 1985, Cambridge University Press.
- Educational Publishers Council, The Publishers Association, *Sex stereotyping in school and children's books*, 1981.
- Freire, P., *Education. The practice of freedom*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, 1976.
- Goldberg, P., 'Are women prejudiced against men?', in Stacey, J. et al, editors, *And Jill came tumbling after: sexism in American Education*, Dell Publishing, 1976.
- Gumperz, J., *Language and social identity*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Leech, G., in collaboration with B. Cruickshank and R. Ivanic, *An A-Z of English grammar and usage*, Edward Arnold, 1987.
- Maggio, R., *The non-sexist word finder, a dictionary of gender-free usage*, Beacon Press, 1988.
- Martyna, W., 'Beyond the he/man approach', in *Signs* 5, 1980.
- Martyna, W., 'What does 'he' mean? Use of the generic masculine', in *Journal of Communication* 1978, Vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 131-138.
- Miller, C. and K. Swift, *The handbook of non-sexist writing*, The Women's Press, 1980, 1988.
- NUJ Book Branch, *Non-sexist code of practice for book publishing*, 1982.
- Porreca, K., 'Sexism in current ESL textbooks', in *TESOL Quarterly* 18:4, 1984.
- Poynton, C., *Language and gender: making the difference*, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Pugsley, J., 'Teaching English as a foreign language: the female protagonist in EFL literature', unpublished essay, 1988.
- Russ, J., *How to suppress women's writing*, The Women's Press, 1983.
- Silveira, J., 'Generic masculine words and thinking', in *Women's Studies International Quarterly* Vol 3, 1980.
- Spender, D., *Invisible women*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, 1982.
- Spender, D., *Man made language*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980;

Sunderland, J., 'The grammar book and the invisible woman',  
Dissertation submitted for MA in English Language Teaching,  
University of Lancaster, 1986.

Talansky, S. B., 'Sex role stereotyping in TEFL teaching materials', in  
*Perspectives*, Vol XI, no. 3, 1986.

Women in EFL Materials  
c/o Place Farm House  
Chilton nr Didcot  
Oxfordshire OX11 0SF  
England