RECOGNISING SEXIST LANGUAGE THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE [1]

Ramesh Nair
Universiti Teknologi MARA

ABSTRACT

We are constantly bombarded by gender-biased images in the media and give little thought to the way women and men are represented. However, the representation of gender through media and language contributes to the way in which we see our roles in society. In this paper, a language instructor shares his experience of using fairytales to raise the consciousness of his students on issues related to sexism in society. The fairytales were used to generate discussions on sexist attitudes that are evident in society today. It is hoped that the findings will be beneficial to educators who are interested in helping their students address the issue of sexism in society.

Introduction

Goddard and Patterson (2001: 6) submit that when we acquire a language, we acquire new ways of thinking. In view of this, it naturally follows that when non-native speakers of English learn the language, they also acquire new ways of thinking that are rooted in the language itself. For example, when Malaysians embrace the English language as their second or third language, they are not just learning to name objects with different words. Instead, they are learning to organise abstract ideas such as relationships between people, qualities that people have, and even how we treat each other and organise each other in society.

When something is realised in the form of a text, be it in the written or spoken form, the language used reflects choices, conscious or otherwise, that are made from different ways of saying the same thing and these differences carry ideological distinctions (Shakila, 2001: 34).

Perhaps one of the most researched issues in relation to language and power is the propagation of sexist ideologies through spoken and written discourse. With respect to the representation of women and men in texts, Spender (1993: 408) points

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to how men have shaped the English language to their own advantage, that is, to legitimate their own primacy and to create a world in which they are the central figures.

Sexism and Sexist Language

As a broad umbrella term, "linguistic sexism" covers a wide and diverse range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labelled and referred to, but also how language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants (Atkinson, 1993: 403).

Graddol and Swann (1989: 96) define *sexism* as any discrimination against women or men because of their sex, and made on irrelevant grounds. Ivy and Backlund (1994: 72) note that if *sexism* refers to attitudes and/or behaviours that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other, then it follows that *sexist language* would be verbal communication that conveys those attitudes or behaviours. Similarly, Cameron (1985: 72) defines *sexist language* as language that contains a lexicon and a grammatical structure that excludes, insults or trivialises women.

Goddard and Patterson (2001: 34) refer to the English language as a gendered language based on three facts:

1. It is a language that is made up of sex-exclusive vocabulary (*hunk* for man, *chick* for women).
2. The language contains linguistic items that remain the same but change in meaning when referring to a man or a woman (*tramp*).
3. It is a language that carries within it a shared understanding about how men and women are meant to behave and the characteristics they are meant to possess.

Awareness of Sexist Language

Elements of sexism in the English language have long been the focus of discussion among feminists and linguists alike. During the early stages, feminists were the brunt of jokes and insults for suggesting alternatives to sexism in language (Martyna, 1983: 27). Since then however, native speakers of English have begun to recognise the need for reform in language. Great strides have been made to correct age-old rules of communication that discriminated against women. However, this has occured predominantly in countries where English is the native language. As a result, the English language has undergone a transformation of sorts. Efforts by linguists and feminists such as Miller and Swift (1988) and Cameron (1985) have led to the reinvention of certain terms of reference and grammatical rules. Leading world-

class universities and large multinational companies have strict laws governing the use of gender-neutral language for all written and spoken communication.

Today, more than ever, the English language is seen as a vital tool that almost guarantees the progress of developing countries. Malaysia, for example, continues to reform its education policy to ensure that the nation has a continuous source of knowledgeable workers who are competent in the English language. A competent workforce is a crucial element that is needed to spearhead the nation towards development in the 21ˢᵗ century. While mastering the mechanics of the English language is without doubt important, ESL learners in countries such as Malaysia should also be aware that like any living language, English too constantly undergoes changes. One of the most significant changes in the use of English today is the growing demand for the use of gender-neutral language in communication.

It is unfair of me to assume that ESL learners in Malaysia have very little or no knowledge of what constitutes sexism in language. Such a conclusion would require a far more comprehensive study than what I have to offer in this paper. However, whenever I have randomly tested my own students on their knowledge of what constitutes sexist communication, I have found them to be rather oblivious to the issue. A simple test that I carry out is by asking my students what term of reference they would use for a woman who fights fire. Though they admit to having heard of a fireman, many do not have the faintest idea of how one would refer to a woman doing the same job.

When I ask my fellow ESL instructors about what their desired goal is for their students, they talk about effective communication. When I ask them what effective communication entails, they generally talk about their students' ability to construct grammatically correct sentences and their ability to pronounce words correctly. These are indeed crucial elements for effective communication. However, I would argue that communicative competence also involves being aware of culturally suitable communication. English language instructors need to be aware that their ESL students will be going into a world where organisations have strict policies against any form of discrimination, including the use of sexist language. Therefore, educating ESL learners to recognise sexist language will contribute towards helping them achieve the kind of communicative competence that allows them to recognise the discriminatory nature of the English language.

A variety of instructional methods may be applied in the ESL classroom to address the use of sexist language. Teaching students gender-neutral language does not demand that instructors take time out of their regular lessons. In Malaysian secondary schools for example, teaching the popularly recurring topics on *Occupations* or on

Describing People may be an excellent time to discuss sexist language.

The rest of this paper will outline a series of related lessons that were designed to create awareness among a group of ESL students about what constitutes sexist language, the discriminatory nature of sexist communication and alternatives for such language.

Using Fairytales

I teach a group of young adult ESL learners at a public university. When I decided to introduce the concept of sexist communication in my English language class, my first concern was about the selection of material that would act as an effective stimulus for the teaching of sexism. In looking for material, I found several research papers on children's literature that pointed to a strong presence of gender bias. Numerous studies analysing children's literature show that the majority of books are dominated by male figures, and girls are portrayed as acted upon rather than active (Singh, 1998). Studies indicate that not only are girls portrayed less often than boys in children's books, but both groups are frequently presented in stereotypical terms. Sugino (1998) found that in American and Japanese children's books, girls are usually described as tentative, careful, decision-makers, sweet, unfortunate and dependent, and boys as adventurous risk takers.

The next question I pondered was related to the suitability of children's literature in an adult ESL classroom. Again, research showed that several language instructors reported success in using children's literature in an adult classroom. Articles by Bruti (1999), Randolph (2001) and Fox (2001) all point to the immense success they have had with the use of children's literature in the classroom. Fox (2001) for example, contends that the use of Chinese folktales in his EFL classroom contributed to the development of important intellectual skills among his students. Randolph (2001) justified the use of folktales for her adult EFL learners in China thus:

1. To provide a unified theme for classroom talk;
2. To activate prior knowledge; and
3. To encapsulate 4000 years of history and culture.

The Lessons

With proof that the use of fairytales is indeed effective for adult language learners and with the knowledge that fairytales from the west are rich in elements of sexism, I set out to introduce the concept of sexist language to my students.

I chose what I felt were some of the most popular fairytales to come from the

west: *Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Every title indicates that the main character is female. However, those of us who are familiar with these tales know that each one of these characters play very passive roles in the stories. Every one of these characters, for example, need a 'Prince Charming' to save them from misery or death.

Stage One
Prior to actually reading the fairytales, I divided my class of students (14 female and 3 male) into four groups. I then set them the task of carrying out an Internet search for information on the topics of sexism, stereotyping, sexist language and sexist attitudes. I asked them to focus on examples that would give them an idea of what these terms meant, and to see the link between these concepts.

Stage Two
After this, the groups shared the results of their search with the rest of the class. Definitions and examples provided by the students generated a lot of classroom discussion. Alternatives to sexist language were of particular interest to students as they had the opportunity to learn about gender-neutral language. The presentations helped students formulate a framework for recognising sexist communication and alternatives for such communication. The framework was made up of the various definitions of stereotyping, sexist language and sexist attitudes, the alternatives for sexist terminology and examples of stereotyping. Students would later depend on this framework for the ensuing activities in stages three and four.

After the discussion, the students were divided into four groups again. This time, each group had at least one member who had researched one of the four topics on the Internet. Each group was then given one fairytale to read. I anticipated that I would need to explain the move from the more familiar articles on the environment and health, to fairytales. Randolph (2001: 9) for example, found that sharing fairytales was initially not well received by her class of low oral-fluency adult students. However, in my class, an opportunity to switch to fairytales was received with a fair amount of enthusiasm. In fact, some of my students said that they had never read the fairytales before. They were asked to take the stories back with them to read for the next lesson.

Stage Three
During my next lesson with the students, I got the students to analyse and discuss elements that they felt reflected sexist attitudes in the story. I asked them to keep in mind that the stories were aimed at children and they therefore needed to think about the messages these stories contained. These were some of their observations:

1. There is a lot of emphasis on the physical beauty of female characters. For example, the repeated use of adjectives such as *beautiful*, suggests that being physically beautiful is very important.
2. The stepmother is typically stereotyped as evil.
3. There is always a prince (male figure) to rescue the beautiful princess, suggesting that women depend on men for protection and security. Would the prince save the princess if she were not beautiful?
4. The stories end with a marriage just before they live *happily ever after*, suggesting that finding a man is the key to a lifetime of happiness.
5. Although the female characters are supposed to be the main characters, they play a very passive role in the stories. They are never in control of the situation and prefer to just let others determine their destiny.

Stage Four
The next challenge that I posed to the students was to come up with their own version of these fairytales in their respective groups. Their task was to come up with versions that would appeal to children while portraying the characters in a gender-neutral manner by eliminating sexist language.

As a result, I found that not only did the students consider gender related elements when rewriting the fairytales, but they also took their task one step further. They decided to consider the cultural appropriateness of the fairytales by keeping in mind that their versions were for the Malaysian audience. Therefore, they created characters from a multiracial background and made references to Malaysia's geographical features when naming villages and far away lands. Details on some of these rewritten stories follow.

The Non-sexist Fairytales

Adaptation of Snow White
In the rewritten version of *Snow White*, now called *Puteri Melor*, the stepmother is transformed into a loving mother and a well-liked Queen. Upon the death of the

King, Melor's stepmother rules the country and is loved by her subjects. While Snow White's vain stepmother would ask her magic mirror," Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most beautiful of all?", Puteri Melor's stepmother would ask "Mirror, mirror on the Wall, are my people safe from all?"

In this way, the students succeeded in removing the stereotypical role of the evil stepmother and replaced it with the portrayal of a loving mother and a respected queen. Furthermore, Puteri Melor is portrayed as a brave woman who leads her army into war when enemies confront them. She finds herself in the company of the dwarfs after she is injured in war. She does not cook and clean for the seven dwarfs but instead, defends them from a terrible monster. The element of magic is not left out and the evil monster turns out to be a prince under the spell of an evil wizard. Rather than have the story end with a marriage, the prince and Princess Melor part as friends. It is also important to note that no reference is made to the physical appearance of Princess Melor throughout the story.

Adaptation of Rapunzel

In *Rapunzel*, the tables are turned and it is a Prince who is imprisoned by an evil warlock. A prince with a long beard replaces Rapunzel in this tale. The students draw attention to the fact that the woman who saves the prince – Chempaka – may not be considered beautiful but possesses a heart of gold and is loved by everyone. The element of magic is also added to the story. Chempaka has a gift for communicating with animals. With the help of the jungle animals, Chempaka saves the Prince. The prince is badly injured and is nursed by Chempaka. It is during this time that the prince gets to know the woman and falls in love with her. He asks for her hand in marriage and reveals his true identity to her. She accepts his proposal much to the envy of all the pretty girls in the village.

Adaptation of Cinderella

The adapted version of *Cinderella* bore close resemblance to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In the students' version, a rich merchant wants to marry off his three daughters to rich, powerful men who are notorious for their wickedness. While the older two agree, Balqis, the youngest daughter, refuses saying that she has already fallen in love with a poor and kind farmer. Furious, her father disowns her. The tale focuses on Balqis' efforts to expand her husband's farm. She soon becomes rich and successful because of her hard work. Meanwhile her father loses everything and is turned away by his two older daughters. He learns a bitter lesson about wealth and is reunited with Balqis.

Adaptation of Sleeping Beauty

The students' version of *Sleeping Beauty* bore no resemblance to the original story. The story centres on Kamil, a physically challenged man who has the gift to heal people. The father of Lela, the prettiest girl in the village, approaches him. A prince has asked for Lela's hand in marriage without realising that she is blind. Wanting his daughter to marry the Prince, the father seeks Kamil's help to treat his daughter. While being treated by Kamil, Lela falls in love with Kamil, not knowing of his physical condition. When she regains her sight, she is unperturbed by Kamil's appearance and wisely chooses Kamil over the Prince. The village folk are aghast at Lela's decision to marry the physically challenged Kamil. Lela's decision to marry Kamil helps to reflect the strength of a female character, an element that is almost always missing in traditional western fairytales.

Conclusion

The lessons did help create awareness among the students of what constituted sexist language. The fact that it is present in children's stories drove home the fact that language had the potential to subtly spread sexist ideology. Besides creating awareness, the lessons also proved to be both challenging and interesting. The lessons provided the students with practice in the various language skills. The research done on the Internet provided students with opportunities to read, while discussions during the second stage allowed for opportunities to speak in English.

Connell (2001:536) contends that educational goals such as maximising the range of pupils' knowledge, eliminating barriers to their awareness and tolerance, and widening the range of their life choices cannot be pursued if gender is not made an object of enquiry and learning. Keeping this in mind, this paper has illustrated how an ESL lesson can educate language learners about sexist language.

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