

Analysis of Gender Portrayals in a Japanese High School English Textbook

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Analysis of Gender Portrayals in a Japanese High School English Textbook

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Abstract : Gender equality is an increasingly important issue for Japan. This is reflected in Japan's continued low rank in the 2022 World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report." The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has claimed that quality educational opportunities for women play a part in moving towards a more equitable society. This paper closely examines one popular high school English language textbook in terms of gender representations. The use of gender-neutral language, the balance of gendered individuals, and how men and women were portrayed in the text was analyzed. It was found that despite a large amount of gender-neutral language used, men and women were not depicted equally. There was a significant imbalance in the number of individual men and women in the text. In addition, the men in the text played diverse roles, but there were not enough individual women mentioned to draw firm conclusions about their representation. For this particular textbook, a more equitable inclusion of women is necessary if it is to reflect the values MEXT has espoused in terms of gender equality.

Keywords : Japan, gender, equality, English, textbooks

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that Japan struggles with issues surrounding gender equality. Despite voicing continued support for women's empowerment, Japan ranked 116 out of 146 countries rated by the 2022 World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report." In this report, Japan ranks below many other Asian countries, including China at 102, the Republic of Korea at 99, Viet Nam at 83, and New Zealand at 4, (WEF, 2022). Of the countries grouped in East Asia and the Pacific, Japan ranks the lowest in women's equality in the category of Economic Participation and Opportunity, with its score having suffered a recent decline (WEF, 2022). The cause of such systemic issues of inequality cannot be isolated to individuals or one particular factor but instead must be viewed in a wholistic way that includes the economic, governmental, social, and educational systems of Japan.

In response to the Japanese government's efforts to improve gender equality, the Ministry of Education,

Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has likewise stated that one of its priorities is "the provision and expansion of learning opportunities to meet the increasingly diverse and sophisticated learning needs of women" (MEXT, n.d.). As one of MEXT's jobs is to approve textbooks for public schools, one would expect approved textbooks to reflect the type of gender equality that MEXT aims to promote.

Foreign language English textbooks cover seemingly non-controversial topics, but can nevertheless convey important social messages such as those connected to gender equality. Researcher Jackie Lee stated that these textbooks can play a role in teaching students social values in addition to linguistic skills (2019). In fact, in terms of gender, foreign language textbooks may have an even larger impact on influencing students' image of gender roles. The social science researcher Sumie Matsuno claimed that some young Japanese women learn English in order to create identities that are disconnected from

the existing gender expectations in Japanese society (2002). It is therefore important to analyze the English language textbooks being used in schools to see how they address portrayals of gender and whether those portrayals support MEXT's goals of improving educational opportunities for women, or if they exacerbate existing inequalities present in Japanese society.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

There is a significant diversity of English language textbooks used in high schools in Japan, and this paper examines just one of these books. Of the MEXT approved textbooks, *My Way English Communication III* was the third most used English language textbook in Tokyo for the 2022 school year for the class English Communication 3 which is taught to high school seniors (Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education, 2021). Thus, *My Way* was chosen because of its popularity in the largest groupings of high schools in Japan. Published in 2019, *My Way* is primarily a reading skills textbook. It also includes short vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension activities, but the majority of its 151 pages is dedicated to discrete reading passages. Of the total 31 passages, three are fiction and 28 are nonfiction. This paper will focus exclusively on the gender representations in the nonfiction passages as they comprise the majority of the reading passages and are constructed in a manner that is distinct from the fiction passages. Specifically, the research questions that will be answered in this paper are:

- 1) How does the usage of gender-neutral language compare to gendered language in the nonfiction passages?
- 2) Is the inclusion of individual men and women equitable?
- 3) What, if any, are the differences in the manner men and women are portrayed?

To answer these questions, the nonfiction reading passages in *My Way* were manually examined and data gathered on the appearance of gender-neutral or gendered language. The context of these appearances was also analyzed. This study does not utilize computer assisted linguistic corpus tools, but it is

acknowledged that these would be useful in larger studies that compare similar textbooks. This study is smaller than previous studies that compare multiple English textbooks in high school or junior high schools in Japan, such as the studies by Lee (2018, 2019) and Tomoko Sakita (1995). However, by selecting a single textbook to examine closely, it is hoped that individual patterns in gender portrayals will be contextualized thoroughly.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that although this paper deals primarily with gender as "male" and "female," this does not match the lived experiences of many individuals. Using binary definitions of male and female to describe gender as a social construction of behaviors and expectations is limiting. This may not describe the reality for genderfluid, non-binary, transgender, or intersex people and leaves these and other communities invisible in the literature. *My Way* does not include the experiences of any of these groups of people, but it is necessary for future studies and textbooks to improve in reflecting the complexities of gender.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Gender-neutral language

The 28 nonfiction passages in *My Way* can be further divided by content. Four of the passages focus on topics that do not involve people and thus are not a significant source of gender or gender-neutral representations of humans. The 24 remaining nonfiction passages deal directly with people. Of these passages, 16 contain solely gender-neutral terms (they, we, people, humans, experts...). Consequently, 66.6% of the nonfiction passages that include people use language that is completely gender-neutral. This is a significant portion of the textbook and shows an effort to be gender inclusive. In this respect, *My Way* matches earlier findings by Lee (2018, 2019) that English language textbooks in Japan are expanding the usage of gender-neutral terms in their texts. Based exclusively on this point, *My Way* could be seen as doing well in addressing a balance of gender representation. However, the picture becomes more complex when examining the gendered individuals that *My Way* does chose to include in its passages.

3.2 Gendered individuals

As can be seen in Table 1, which appears at the end of the paper, mentions of gendered individuals appear in eight of the nonfiction reading passages. There are a total of 22 gendered individuals mentioned in these passages. Of these 22 individuals, 20 are male and two are female. The most notable factor is the extremely low representation of individual women present. This ratio makes it clear that an effort was not made to ensure a balance of gender representation in individuals in the passages.

In addition to the numerical imbalance, it is valuable to more closely examine how these individuals are portrayed in the textbook. Looking again at the data in Table 1, the two women in the nonfiction passages both appear in the passage about Aung San Suu Kyi. The female individuals in this passage are Aung San Suu Kyi, who is the main focus, and “her mother,” who is mentioned a total of three times.

Aung San Suu Kyi is a significant choice for this textbook passage. According to the passage, Aung San Suu Kyi is a respected politician and leader of Myanmar who won the Nobel Peace Prize (Morizumi et al., 2019). Choosing a passage about a politically powerful woman is not a traditional choice of English language textbook topics. In an earlier study by Lee of four English textbooks for Japanese high schools, Lee found that women were still most often portrayed in specific jobs traditionally associated with women such as “teacher” or defined primarily by their familiar relationships with words such as “wife” (2018). Aung San Suu Kyi does not follow this trend as her political actions and achievements are the main focus of the passage.

On the other hand, the only other female individual in *My Way* is Aung San Suu Kyi’s mother who is described only by her familial relationship of “mother.” It is notable that while Aung San Suu Kyi’s mother remains nameless, Aung San Suu Kyi’s father, who is also mentioned in this passage, is named specifically as Aung San. Aung San’s occupation and familial relationship are also described. Therefore, despite the fact that *My Way* includes a female individual in a position of political power, Aung San

Suu Kyi’s mother does not reach the status of a named individual, and her inclusion appears to be primarily because of her familial importance. Thus, the representations of women remain mixed in terms of the contributing factors that most likely prompted their inclusion.

The 20 individual males mentioned in *My Way* exhibit more diverse roles in the passages. All of them are described in positive terms of accomplishments and have jobs that include: architect, athlete, artist, politician, scientist, scholar. This matches Lee’s research that found men in textbooks were more likely to be associated with success or mental and physical strength (2018). In the nonfiction passages of *My Way*, all of the men are described in terms of their jobs, and none are described solely in terms of familial relationships. Only two of the 20 are unnamed. The two unnamed men are Aung San Suu Kyi’s husband who is further described as a “British scholar” and the “emperors” of Rome. It is clear that the men in *My Way* are considered valuable because of their accomplishments and only highly skilled individuals are mentioned in the text.

Men in *My Way* play two main roles in the reading passages. First, these men are used as the main focus of the passages. Of the 20 individual men, eight of them are mentioned three or more times, indicating that they are the main focus or play a significant role in the passage. This is not inherently negative as focusing on accomplishments of individuals can be inspiring or engaging for students. However, when the examples of individuals deserving of focus are overwhelmingly men, the implication is that women have not or are unable to make respected contributions to society. Including more skilled women as the primary focus of the reading passages would improve the overall gender equality of this textbook.

The second way men are used in the *My Way* passages is as context examples to strengthen a point. For instance, on page 91 of *My Way*, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are mentioned as examples of influential leaders of peace to contextualize the importance of Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership (2019).

A total of 8 individual men are used throughout *My Way* in this manner.

Context is certainly important to language learners. Listing individuals with similar accomplishments increases the probability that a learner is able to link their own background knowledge with the new information presented. As applied linguistics researcher Paul Nation stated, connecting readings to students' background knowledge can be a part of language-focused learning for reading (2009). An argument could be made that male individuals such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are more well-known than females in similar positions, and therefore the men are more appropriate as context examples. However, this is a circular logic. If women are excluded from textbooks on the basis of their supposed obscurity, information about their accomplishments cannot be studied by students, further promoting the narrative that men are the main contributors to society. The cycle must be broken at one point if progress in gender equality is to be made. Familiarizing students with skilled and powerful women would be one step to making that change.

4. Conclusion

When analyzing *My Way English Communication III*, it is apparent that men and women are not depicted equally. The strong imbalance between the number of individual men and women mentioned in the nonfiction reading passages of *My Way* is remarkable. There are not enough mentions of individual women to draw strong conclusions about their depictions. However, the individual men in this textbook appear to have been chosen because of their accomplishments and physical and mental strength. In order to have a more balanced representation of gender, it would be beneficial for *My Way* to include a similar group of accomplished women.

While there are a significant number of passages that only use gender-neutral language, this can still be problematic when contextualized. For example, women may be technically included in gender-neutral terms such as "experts," but the lack of individual representation in the textbook weakens their

connection to this assumed gender-neutral term. Students' default image of an expert may be a man if that is the traditional representation of an expert and examples of female experts are not included in the text. Thus, gender-neutral words are not enough on their own if they are being applied in a social context that considers that word highly associated with a particular gender. This is especially relevant in Japan where many jobs are still highly stratified by gender (WEF, 2022). For *My Way* to be improved in terms of equal gender representation, attention must be given to not only using gender-neutral language, but also the individuals mentioned in the text and the reasons they were chosen for inclusion.

Since this paper focuses on one English language textbook for high schools in Japan, it is not enough to draw generalizations about equality in gender representation in textbooks. However, by analyzing the portrayals of gendered individuals in textbooks, we can determine whether the textbooks are reflecting gender representations in a manner that matches our current societal values. Without conscious attention paid to gender representations, textbooks can continue to display to students outdated and alienating stereotypes. Thus, it is essential that further studies force conversations about the overt and implicit messages that are given to students through material that appears in media such as English language textbooks.

Table 1 – analysis of gendered individuals appearing in *My Way English Communication III*

Passages with Gendered Individuals	Males Appearing 1-2 Times	Males Appearing 3+ times	Females Appearing 1-2 Times	Females Appearing 3+ Times
“A paper architect: Shigeru Ban” (p. 14)		Shigeru Ban		
“How fast can humans run?” (p. 28)	Jim Hines Carl Lewis Maurice Greene	Usain Bolt		
“Thirty-six views of the Eiffel Tower” (p.38)	Van Gogh Monet Manet Katsushika Hokusai	Henri Riviere		
“A mayor of Machu Picchu village” (pp. 54-55)	Urashima Taro	Nouchi Yokichi		
“iPS cells” (pp. 58-59)		Yamanaka Shinya		
“Roman baths” (p. 62-63)	“emperors” Caracalla			
“Aung San Suu Kyi” (pp. 88-91)	Gandhi Martin Luther King Jr.	Aung San “her husband”		Aung San Suu Kyi “her mother”
“Obama’s speech in Hiroshima” (pp. 114-117)		Barack Obama		
Total:	12	8	0	2

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日本の高校英語教科書におけるジェンダー描写の分析

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要 旨

ジェンダーの平等は日本において増々重要な課題であり、世界経済フォーラム発表の世界男女格差レポート（2022年）において、日本の順位が引き続き低いことにも表れている。文部科学省は女性への質の高い教育が、より公平な社会への移行に重要であると述べている。この論文では、高校で使用される英語の教科書をジェンダー表現の観点から考察した。ジェンダーニュートラルな言葉の使用、ジェンダー化された個々の均衡、及び女性の描写方法を分析した。文章中、性別に中立な言葉が多く使用されているにもかかわらず、男性と女性が平等に描かれておらず、男性と女性の数には顕著な不均衡がみられた。さらに、男性は多様な役割と共に明記されていたが、女性の役割については決定的に言及するには十分ではなかった。今回考察したこの教科書において、文部科学省が提案した男女平等への価値観を反映するためには、女性をより公平に教科書に含める必要がある。

キーワード：日本、ジェンダー、平等、英語、教科書