

Teaching ESL/EFL Students to Recognize Gender Bias in Children's Literature

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Introduction

Children's literature, in addition to being one of the favorite choices for reading among students as they are growing up, is commonly used in the context of reading practices in ESL/EFL classrooms (Lazar, 1993). A great number of teachers tend to employ picture books, chapter books, and fairy tales because they think these teaching materials can help students build a repertoire of narratives and create a world of their own while improving their literacy. However, many researchers point out that gender bias is still prevalent in contemporary children's and young adult literature and continues to fuel hot debate (Christensen, 2001; Evans, 1998; Garner, 1994; Louie, 2001). As a result, Mem Fox(1993) argues that teachers need to be sensitive to their teaching materials or they will easily fall into "a passive acceptance of everything literature presents to us" (p. 86).

The purpose of the paper is to provide a review of children's literature in view of gender stereotypes, which will help teachers better understand the issue and problem of stereotyped female roles in their teaching sources. What follows are suggestions that teachers can consider as their teaching principles or strategies to be implemented in the context or reading practices in ESL/EFL classrooms. It is hoped that the discussion of such a controversial issue can stimulate teachers to rethink what and how they should teach in the 21st century classroom. Ultimately, the topic of gender issues can help students foster critical thinking and literacy and empower them with a further understanding of gender notions in their lives.

Literature Review

Studies on gender stereotypes in children's literature appeared as a consequence of the women's movement in the early 1970s (Louie, 2001). At that juncture, even a number of books awarded with Newberry Award or Caldecott Award Honors were still replete with traditional and passive female roles (Feminists on Children's Literature, 1971; Women on Words and Images, 1975). These children's books, investigated from feminist perspectives, fall into two categories. The first category is sexist books, in which female characters are largely recognized and accepted through "their domestic accomplishments, their timidity of soul, [and] their gentle appearance and manners" (20). The second category is comprised of "cop-out" books which implicitly express gender biases only by a crucial line, a paragraph, or the last chapter.

It should be noted that many of these books are still popular and commonly used in the contemporary classroom. More importantly, after three decades of research studies since the 1970s, such an insensitive mentality toward sexual imbalance is still present in contemporary children's literature (Ernst, 1995; Evans, 1998; Fox, 1993; Louie, 2001; Tepper & Cassidy, 1999). Under such circumstances, a great many writers have become more aware of the gender issues in their books. For example, Mem Fox (1993) attempts to increase the number of female characters in her books, and points out that many of her books are intentionally "dominated by main characters who are either girls, female animals, or dynamic elderly women" (85). However, Ernst (1995) explicitly indicates that the purposeful treatment and balance of female/male characters in a story, while admirable, are not a realistic standard for all children's literature, and in fact, is impossible to maintain given to the volume and variety of books in the trade book market every year. Nevertheless, she suggests that books like Fox's can be used and considered in the classroom to offer teachers different perspectives on gender issues and help them enrich their reading materials and discussions. From Ernst's viewpoint, it would be more realistic and especially important to come up with "more books with strong female characters who are active, inventive, and in charge of their own destinies" (p. 75), thus placing more emphasis on the quality of female roles.

The persistent imbalance of gender representation in children's literature highlights the importance of children's literature in greatly shaping many children's minds and consistently influencing different cultures in the world. For example, numerous children in many countries grow up exposed to American culture, which, to many children, is mostly composed of various fairy tales, such as *Snow*

White, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, and Sleeping Beauty, none of which is American in ultimate origin (Christensen, 2001). These fairy tales are also the main source of the animated movies that have been present in our lives for so many decades. Therefore, if we accept that fairy tales are one of the major categories in children's literature, we will agree that children's literature is probably the most influential genre read among students of different levels. Children's literature has become part of our culture that frames, or even dictates, the consciousness of our children and young people because they hear the stories and watch the movies again and again. In sum, children and young people receive a “secret education” (Dorfman, 1983, Preface ix), in which children's literature and popular culture share power in society and work to undermine the possibilities for greater democracy and equality in the classroom.

The stereotypes and worldview embedded in children's books have become accepted knowledge, and such deep-seated socialized thinking has created barriers that prevent authors or teachers from implementing their democratic and egalitarian beliefs, whether it be writing or teaching. According to Louie (2001), coping with relentless gender stereotyping requires increasing awareness of gender issues on the part of authors and teachers. Authors should devote their attention to the representation of female and male roles in their writing process, while teachers should attempt to empower their students with critical thinking and alternative reading. What follows in the next section are some instructional principles or strategies that teachers can incorporate into their classroom teaching.

Coping with Gender Biases in Reading

Dominant Reading Practices

In a democratic and anti-bias classroom, teachers need to be extremely aware of the fact that dominant reading practices will make students accustomed to mainstream texts and as a result students will passively identify themselves with the characters in many stories. As Moon (1999) indicates, female protagonists in such stories have merely become the obstacles or prizes which the male characters encounter in the narratives. While men are always elevated as the characters who matter, women are reduced to being tokens of male status. Teachers should help students develop critical thinking through learning processes such as reading against the grain, in which teachers equip students with a certain stance that deliberately challenges the text and helps students uncover the gender inequalities present in the text. In brief, teachers should adopt resistant or oppositional reading practices rather than dominant or conventional reading practices.

Resistant Reading Practices

To implement the notion of resistant reading practices, teachers should encourage students to approach a text critically by making sense of the text without applying traditional gender concepts. One useful strategy is to read and discuss the text through feminist perspectives that are based on women's positions in patriarchal society and discourse.

Three of these relevant perspectives are:

- the history of subordination and marginalization of women (women as the second sex);
- women's absence from mainstream discourse; and
- the objectification of women, which usually places women in one of the following four positions/categories:
 - nurturing mothers/caregivers
 - dutiful daughters
 - sexual/passionate women
 - mad/bad women

These four categories represent different female positions in Western cultures (Moon, 1999, p. 58). The first two categories are symbolic of legitimate positions in a male dominated society. The third position can be a projection of male desire or need, while the last status is a nonconforming position. In most cases, these different female roles are defined according to what men want from them. Often in the course of a story female roles move from one category to another, or they can portray different identities simultaneously— such as being a dutiful daughter and a passionate girl (e.g. *Cinderella*). Through the conceptual perspectives mentioned above, teachers can stimulate students to analyze different books and construct new meanings out of them.

Example

Examples of female stereotyped representations can be seen in the fairy tales of *Snow White, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Sleeping*

Beauty, and *The Little Mermaid*. While using these texts in the classroom, a teacher can implement the following activities in an attempt to develop students' critical thinking and help them become alert to gender issues through resistant reading practices:

Before Reading

- Have students write the beginning of an original children's book and read it to the class.
- Raise the issue of gender bias/fairness by examining how many students have chosen to make their main character male/female.
- Provide students with the four categories of female stereotyped characters mentioned above.

During Reading

- Ask students to pay attention while reading the text to the transition of the female role in relation to these four categories.

• After Reading

- Divide students into groups and have them identify into which categories the female characters fall.
- Have students locate to which of the four categories the counter-female roles belong if there are counter-female roles in the story (such as stepmothers, stepsisters, or witches).
- Invite students to participate in critical conversations by offering controversial questions:

1. Do the women in the text represent obstacles or prizes? How?
2. Would this text normally be read as supporting or challenging the patriarchal oppression of women?
3. How would changing the gender of the main character impact the story?

- Encourage students to compare and contrast their ideas through charts, webs, and Venn diagrams.
- Have students evaluate and assess their understanding of gender issues by comparing their chart/web/diagram with their personal experiences.

Conclusion

As Short (2001) observes, teaching resembles a political agenda. There are no such things as politically innocent books for students. Moreover, it should be noted that a classroom is always laden with different values and perspectives introduced by teachers, students, and the texts. On entering a classroom and beginning a discussion, we have no choice but to become political. Teachers should empower students with critical thinking by utilizing resistant or oppositional reading practices. Teachers and students should claim their own stances, and their values and ideas should then be investigated and challenged. As a result, when students access any text that is problematically gender-biased, teachers can help them make better sense of the text by approaching the text from multiple perspectives and with alternative attitudes.

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