

Teaching EFL Students about the Use of Non-Biased Language

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Abstract

In this article, I make an argument that language educators have a duty to teach their students about how to avoid using biased language. I also present a pedagogical structure for teaching about language bias, summarize current language bias guidelines, and provide a short language bias quiz that can be used to activate and evaluate student learning.

Language bias, language that perpetuates injustice or demeaning attitudes or assumptions about people, is embedded deeply in the English language. For example, bias can be found in the language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, in the language of the Canadian national anthem (Ontario Women's Directorate, 1993), and in the language of many newspapers (Hawes & Thomas, 1995). It is institutionalized into daily life.

The depth of language bias in the English-speaking world is troublesome in light of many modern sociolinguistic theories. One such theory is the theory of linguistic relativity. Proponents of linguistic relativity theory, which is sometimes referred to as the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*, argue, basically, that language determines thought. Zhifang (2002) writes that

The notion of linguistic relativity is the suggestion that one's life has been tricked by the structure of language into a certain way of perceiving reality, with the implication that awareness of this trickery will enable one to see the world with fresh insight. (p. 162)

Because of linguistic relativity, and the well-established relationships between language bias and stereotypes (Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner, & Sherman, 1992; Maass & Arcuri, 1992), language bias is expected to have serious, negative sociocultural effects in terms of power relations. The logic of this argument is that if language determines perceptions of reality, then biased and unjust language will cause biased and unjust perceptions of reality. In turn, biased and unjust perceptions of reality tend to lead to biased and unjust realities. The beneficiaries of the biased and unjust reality promote the

discourse of power and a vicious cycle of language bias and biased realities ensues. As Foucault suggests, “discourse transmits and produces power” (as cited in Luke, 2001).

As trusted agents of social change, educators have the power and responsibility to reduce oppression and demeaning language by teaching students how to become responsible language users. Teachers of English as a foreign language, especially, are empowered to reduce language bias because they are influential moderators of the correct use of the English language.

Besides the long-term social benefits of teaching guidelines for reducing language bias, there are practical benefits for EFL students. Nonbiased language is expected in business and academic situations. Using biased language in business, besides its potential for alienating clients, is considered inappropriate and unprofessional. In some cases, in the U.S., using strongly sexist or discriminatory language can lead to termination or even civil suits. In academia, using nonbiased language is a criterion for publication in almost all professional journals.

The rest of this article provides pedagogical guidelines for teaching advanced and mature EFL students about using nonbiased language. The guidelines include (1) defining vocabulary, (2) activating knowledge, (3) giving instruction, (4) group and individual practice, and (5) reflection. The rules for reducing language bias presented in this article are based on the American Psychological Association’s guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2001).

Introducing Vocabulary

To give students a syntactical framework for discussing bias, I suggest introducing them to ten words or phrases that have to do with social justice and bias. Some vocabulary suggestions are listed below:

1. *Bias*
2. *Disability*
3. *Discrimination*
4. *Oppression*
5. *Ethnicity*
6. *Equality*
7. *Equity*
8. *Gender*
9. *Race*
10. *Social Justice*

Activating Knowledge

To activate knowledge and draw students' interest, I have found it useful to give out a language bias quiz in which students are asked to find and correct the instances of language bias in several sentences. An example of a language bias quiz that addresses language bias in terms of gender and disability is included below.

Language Bias Quiz: Gender and Disability

Each sentence below uses biased language in some way. Suggest a nonbiased alternative.

1. *That's one small leap for a man, one giant leap for mankind.* - Neil Armstrong
2. *The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and fight it – at no matter what risk.* – James Baldwin
3. *I signed a piece of civil rights legislation . . . that put disabled people, 50 million of them, into the mainstream. . .* – George Bush, Sr.
4. *The art of mothering is to teach the art of living to children.* – Elaine Heffner
5. *On the other hand, "workaholics" are so driven by their work that they neglect their wives, children and spiritual obligations.* - Gene Taylor

Instruction

After activating knowledge, I suggest giving instruction on the guidelines for reducing language bias. I summarize some of the guidelines that concern language bias in gender, disability, and sexual orientation below. For more-specific guidelines, more-current guidelines, or for guidelines that concern age bias or the appropriate designations for U.S. racial and ethnic groups, I suggest consulting the latest edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2001). Other useful guidelines, which may be downloaded free of charge from

<www.eric.ed.gov>, include *Words that Count Women Out/In* (Ontario Women's Directorate, 1993), *Language Bias: A Training Module. Equity in Education: The Alaska Project* (Alaska State Dept. of Education, 1987)

Gendered pronouns

Avoid using gendered pronouns or noun combinations that can logically refer to either gender. For example, it would be considered biased to write

A student needs to study vocabulary often if he wants to be a fluent speaker of English.

Since *a student* can be a male student or a female student, the use of the masculine personal pronoun, *he*, is inappropriate. The best solutions are to use a plural pronoun and plural referent:

Students need to study vocabulary often if they want to be fluent speakers of English,

or to avoid using the gendered pronoun altogether:

A student needs to study vocabulary often to be a fluent speaker of English.

The use of gendered pronoun combinations such as *he/she*, or *he or she*, or alternating the use of *he* or *she* are discouraged. In general, do not bring gender into a sentence unless it is an issue in that sentence.

Gender-loaded nouns and verbs

The many nouns and verbs that have gender bias loaded into them should be avoided. For example, the whole set of words based on the masculine root - *man* - (e.g., *mankind*, *chairman*, *to man*) are inappropriate since they logically exclude women from the definition. Alternatives to *mankind*, *chairman*, and *to man* are *humankind*, *chairperson*, and *to staff*, respectively. Other types of words and phrases have more subtle language bias. For example, words or phrases like *mothering*, and *being a*

housewife linguistically exclude men from participating in these activities; alternatives like *parenting* or *being a housekeeper* are more appropriate.

Disability

Put the person first and the disability second. For example, instead of writing *a disabled person*, write *a person with disabilities*. Also, avoid using words or phrases with negative connotations that handicap people. For example, instead of writing *she is a heart attack victim*, write *she had a heart attack*. The sentence - *She is a heart attack victim*. - is handicapping because it communicates that the person not only had a heart attack, it also communicates that that person is a victim as well. If the person did not feel like a victim before hearing the sentence, that person might feel like a victim after hearing it.

Sexual identity and sexual activity

Sexual orientation, as a designator of sexual identity, is preferred to the term *sexual preference* unless the writer wants to emphasize that choice is involved. Avoid using the term *homosexuals*, *homosexual*, or *homosexuality*. When referring to groups of people, it is best to be specific and use the terms *gay men* or *lesbians*. Since some people engage in sexual activities with the same sex yet do not consider themselves to be gay men, lesbians, bisexual men, or bisexual women, do not equate sexual activity with sexual identity. When referring to people that engage in same-gender sexual behaviour, regardless of sexual identity, it appropriate to use *men who have sex with men* or *women who have sex with women*. The terms *heterosexual* and *bisexual* currently refer to both sexual identity and sexual activity. These terms should be used as adjectives (e.g., bisexual men and women) rather than nouns (e.g., bisexuals).

Group and individual practice

After instruction, the class could generate suggestions for appropriate revisions of the sentences in the language bias quiz. Quiz answers may vary. Listed below is an example of an appropriate answer to each item.

1. *That's one small leap for a man, one giant leap for humankind.*
2. *The obligation of individuals who think of themselves as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and fight it – at no matter what risk.*
3. *I signed a piece of civil rights legislation . . . that put people with disabilities, 50 million of them, into the mainstream. . .*
4. *The art of parenting is to teach the art of living to children.*
5. *On the other hand, "workaholics" are so driven by their work that they neglect their spouses, children and spiritual obligations.*

For individual practice, I suggest that students collect examples of language bias that they read or hear on TV and bring them to class for discussion. Alternately, the students could do a reviewing exercise where they correct the language bias in an authentic document.

Reflection

To conclude the activity and to bring it into the students' own context, it would be useful to have an activity where students reflect on their thoughts about language bias. For example, in groups, students could discuss how language bias applies to their own lives, whether they think that it is useful to concentrate on language bias, and how language bias is treated in their native language. Be prepared for a heated discussion.

In conclusion, by giving a lesson on language bias, EFL teachers help stop the vicious circle that results from language bias and they help prepare students for participation in professional arenas where language bias is inappropriate. Perhaps, though, the most important lesson from teaching about language bias is a meta-lesson; at the most fundamental level, it is a lesson in respect.

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