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## Teaching English as a Sexist Language? Recommendations for Promoting Gender Equity

- It has been a quarter of a century since the passing of Title IX (1972) which barred sex discrimination in educational programs receiving federal funding. This federal action, combined with an interest in determining to what extent education reproduces gender inequality, prompted a number of studies and intervention programs. Ten years after Title IX, a disturbing report revealed how subtle and consistent acts by college faculty left women at a distinct disadvantage (Hall, 1982). This was further supported by the Sadkers' research, which found that the students least likely to receive attention were minority females (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). This suggests that female ESL students are potentially the most vulnerable to sexism in education. This paper provides a brief survey of research on sexism in education, reviews studies that focus on gender in ELT, and offers five recommendations to facilitate the recognition and reduction of sexism in ELT.

It has been over a quarter of a century since the passage of Title IX, the Education Amendment of 1972, stating that discrimination on the basis of sex is illegal in any educational program receiving federal funding. This federal action, combined with an interest in determining to what extent education reproduces gender inequality, prompted a number of studies and intervention programs to promote gender equity, which is defined by Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) as "a set of actions, attitudes and assumptions that provide opportunities and create

expectations about individuals, regardless of gender” (<http://www.edu.org/womensequity/genderdef.html>).

How has this legislation changed conditions in classrooms across the nation? What impact has this concern for gender equity had on research in ESL/EFL classrooms? What can language teachers do to recognize and reduce gender bias (i.e., the often unintentional behavior based on the assumption that one sex is better than the other is)? This paper discusses the research of the impact of Title IX and concludes with five recommendations for teachers interested in promoting gender equity.

### **What about the Boys?**

In the wake of the student shootings in Littleton, Colorado, it is important to note that gender equity is not “for girls only” and that eliminating gender bias and stereotyping benefits both male and female students. Sadker and Sadker (1994) state:

Gender bias is a two-edged sword. Girls are shortchanged, but males pay a price as well. Raised to be active, aggressive, and independent, boys enter schools that seem to want them to be quiet, passive, and conforming. In an uneasy compromise, many walk a tightrope between compliance and rebellion. (pp. 197-198)

These authors contend that boys “confront frozen boundaries of the male role at every turn of school life. They grow up learning lines and practicing moves from a timeworn script: Be cool, don’t show emotion, repress feelings, be aggressive, compete and win” (p. 220). Sadker and Sadker thus conclude that “until gender equity becomes a value promoted in every aspect of school, boys as victims of their own miseducation, [*sic*] will grow up to be troubled men” (p. 225).

Pollack (1998), author of *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, studied hundreds of adolescent boys and concludes that “perhaps the most traumatizing and dangerous injunction thrust on boys and men is the literal gender straightjacket that prohibits boys from expressing feelings or urges seen (mistakenly) as ‘feminine’—dependence, warmth, empathy” (p. 24). Pollack suggests we can help boys by consciously working to eliminate gender stereotypes from our thinking and language. Garbarino (1999), in his timely book *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, agrees and states that helping boys develop empathy is vital to preventing violence in young men.

## Gender (In)Equity in Education

With the passage of Title IX, many teachers, researchers, and parents looked forward to: the elimination of sexist language, materials, and curriculum; higher teacher expectations for females; less sex segregation in fields of study for males and females; and more substantial teacher interactions with female students. One decade after the passage of Title IX, an important document that has since been referred to as the “chilly climate report” (Hall & Sandler, 1982) revealed how subtle and consistent acts by college faculty were continuing to leave women at a distinct disadvantage. This report compiled data from empirical studies of post-secondary classrooms, reports, surveys, and individual responses to a “Call for Information” questionnaire. The researchers found that in numerous studies both male and female faculty were ignoring and interrupting female students, maintaining physical distance from them, avoiding eye contact with them, and offering little guidance or criticism to them.

Two decades after the passage of Title IX, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (1992) issued a report reviewing over 1,300 studies and found continuing evidence of gender bias in schools across the United States. One reason gender bias in classrooms persists despite federal legislation prohibiting it is that much of the bias is unintentional and goes unnoticed. The AAUW report demonstrated that teachers, quite unintentionally, give more and better attention to male students by calling on them more, waiting longer for their responses, and responding to them with more penetrating, less superficial remarks.

One might ask, “If this is true, why are so many boys not achieving in school?” *Failing at Fairness* (Sadker & Sadker, 1994) contains accounts from ten years of research and thousands of observations in schools all over the nation; it finds that although many boys get the lion’s share of teacher attention and rise to the top of the class, many others also land on the bottom and are more likely to fail, miss promotion, or drop out.

In an earlier article in *Phi Delta Kappan* (1986), Sadker and Sadker report on field research conducted in 46 classrooms of academic and professional disciplines at American University. Using data collected from the post-secondary version of the INTEREST Observation system, the authors demonstrated that the same behavior that was found in primary and secondary classrooms was also found in colleges and universities, i.e., male students receive significantly more attention, and sex bias persists. Sadker and Sadker state four conclusions of their research: (1) Male students receive more attention from teachers and are given more time to talk in classrooms. Educators are generally unaware of the presence or the impact of this bias. (2) Brief but focused training can reduce or eliminate sex bias from class-

room interaction. (3) Increasing equity in classroom interaction increases the effectiveness of the teacher as well. (4) Equity and effectiveness are not competing concerns: they are complementary (p. 512).

The continued inequitable nature of schools was the subject of a 1997 report, "Title IX at 25: Report Card on Gender Equity," issued by the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE). This report gave schools a "C" average ("C" meaning "some progress: some barriers addressed, but more improvement necessary"). Specifically, the grades awarded in this report were:

Access to higher education	B-	Athletics	C
Career education	C	Employment	C-
Learning environment	C-	Math and Science	C+
Sexual harassment	D+	Standardized testing	C
Treatment of pregnant and parenting students	C+		(p. 1)

Under each category, the report lists problems before Title IX, progress to date, and improvements needed. Under "Learning Environment," it states:

Still, female students typically get less attention, encouragement, praise, and criticism, than male students do. Congress should reinstate federal efforts to provide schools with materials and strategies to improve the classroom climate. Educators should continue receiving training to overcome bias and discriminatory practices in classrooms. (p. 3)

Stromquist (1993) examines and discusses federal legislation on gender inequalities. She examines the impact of three pieces of legislation: Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 (*United States at Large 1972, 1973*); the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) passed in 1974 (*U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative News 1974, 1975*); and parts of the Vocational Education Act (VEA) of 1976 (*U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative News 1976, 1977*). Stromquist focuses on six elements of the educational system that are key to attaining sex equity: (1) access to schooling; (2) school textbooks; (3) curriculum content; (4) provision of pre- and in-service training to teachers; (5) presence of women as administrators and professors in educational institutions; and (6) provision of incentives and supportive measures for girls.

Stromquist identifies Title IX, "the most comprehensive educational legislation to date," (p.381) as a coercive component of sex equity legislation in that it acts in punitive ways, cutting federal funds if discrimination is revealed. The other two pieces of legislation (WEEA, VEA) are supportive

components in that they offer financial and technical assistance to increase gender equity in education. Stromquist's (1993) evaluation goes beyond the recommendations made in the NCWGE (1997) report and looks at problems of implementation such as "limited funding, weak enforcement, and reliance on voluntary efforts by educational institutions," concluding that these factors reveal "the federal government has played a reluctant and primarily symbolic role in efforts to attain gender equity" (p. 379).

It has been demonstrated that pre- and in-service teacher training programs can be effective in reducing gender bias (AAUW, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Crawford (1989) reported that an informational awareness session lasting only one hour was not enough to reduce gender bias in K-12 teachers; however, Long (1986) found that a two-and-a-half day workshop produced significant changes in college teacher-student interactions. Bonder (1992) found some degree of attitudinal change in the post in-service questionnaires as well as the in-depth interviews conducted eight months after an in-service in Argentina. This in-service consisted of eight group meetings in which teachers discussed how gender related to research findings, myths, stereotypes, statistical data, laws, images in the mass media, the process of socialization, and educational outcomes. Bonder concludes that teachers play a key role in transmitting gender ideologies.

Despite the literally thousands of grants and programs available and the large amount of material produced in the last two decades (see Stitt, 1994 for an annotated bibliography), there still appears to be a widespread lack of awareness of gender equity issues in education. Sanders (1996) laments this situation and notes that "We have been concentrating on increasing the supply of materials, but the demand for them has not grown correspondingly" (p. 215). She further hypothesizes that workshops over the past two decades may not have been as successful as they could have been may be due to the inadequate length of the workshops, (as was seen in Crawford's study), the lack of concentration on solutions in the workshops, and the lack of follow up. Sanders admits however, that the question of whether gender equity in education can be improved by changing the attitudes and behaviors of educators while not addressing the cause of male dominance in the larger society is one that needs to be addressed.

### **Gender Equity in ESL/EFL Classrooms**

Sadker and Sadker (1994) found that the students least likely to receive attention were minority females, which suggests that female ESL students are particularly vulnerable to gender bias. In spite of this, only a few studies have been conducted on gender bias in English language teaching. A few studies in the 1970s and 1980s analyzed textbooks for sexist content and

language (Hartman & Judd, 1978; Porreca, 1984). In the 1990s, a few studies were conducted on gender bias in student-teacher and teacher-student interaction in both ESL classrooms (Yepez 1994, 1990) and second language classrooms (Sunderland 1998). Sunderland (1994), the editor of *Exploring Gender: Questions and Implications for English Language Education* (the only collection of articles that deals specifically with gender and English language teaching [ELT]) raises the question of the possible negative effect that current ESL communicative methodology may have on female ESL students. She posits that asymmetry of gender roles in discourse (in this case the situation where males monopolize the conversation) may occur more when communicative or learner-centered methodology is used (p. 7). Thus, the female ESL student may be vulnerable to gender bias in the ESL classroom in part due to current pedagogy. Sunderland states that it is unclear whether differential treatment exists in EFL classes, because so few studies have been conducted on this population. She goes on to say that quantitative approaches (i.e., counting and categorizing the responses of teachers and students) may not be sufficient to establish the causes or effects of gender bias and that such studies should be complemented by more qualitative analysis.

Vandrick (1999a), in her article "The Case for More Research on Female Students in the ESL/EFL Classroom," states that "fairness dictates that it is time for the field of ESL/EFL to further explore these issues" (p. 16). She quotes Willet (1996), who notes the dearth of research on gender in ELT and asks:

If gender is so ubiquitous [in negotiating social relations] why has the TESOL profession taken so long to examine gender?...Is it that TESOL theorists are merely interested in other topics, having conceptualized language use and language learning as primarily cognitive processes rather than social processes...? Do some researchers avoid topics such as gender, race, ethnicity and class in order to stay out of identity politics? (p. 344)

### **Recommendations for Recognizing and Reducing Gender Bias**

Although gender issues have largely been ignored in ESL/EFL classrooms, the good news is that we can rectify the situation. I am recommending the following five suggestions gleaned from the literature on gender equity and my own experience.

As a cautionary note, being culturally sensitive while trying to become gender-sensitive is a difficult but necessary balancing act. Consider the ramifications these recommendations may have of the lives of your students and their families. To avoid imposing my own cultural

preconceptions on my students, I have found it helpful to create activities that allow students to discover gender inequalities for themselves. I then elicit from them how gender equity in education can benefit both female and male students. The following recommendations for recognizing and reducing gender bias may also prove helpful.

### ***Read the Research***

Become familiar with research on gender equity in education. Hundreds of articles and several books that can help teachers create a more gender-equitable environment are available (See AAUW, 1992; Acker, 1994; Gabriel & Smithson, 1990; McCracken & Appleby, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Wilkinson & Marrett, 1985). Many of the suggestions for non-ELT classrooms may also prove to be relevant for the second language classroom (for resources related to ELT see Sunderland, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998; Tannen, 1996; Vandrick, 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999a, 1999b). For a list of almost 200 Web sites related to gender equity in education, see <http://www.edc.org/WomensEquity/links/bestdone.html>.

Attend conferences and workshops and go to sessions focusing on gender or arrange for gender equity workshops to be conducted on your campus.

Subscribe to the Educational Equity Discussion List (EDEQUITY), a forum for teachers and researchers to share information on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.edc.org/WomensEquity/edequity/index.html>.

### ***Revise Your Materials***

Inspect the books and class handouts you are using for: (1) sexist language such as masculine pronouns and nouns that are intended generically; (2) male firstness such as his and her, male and female, husband and wife; (3) invisibility of women, (i.e., fewer female than male characters in the content and pictures); (4) occupational stereotyping in terms of type and range of jobs for females and males; (5) relationship stereotyping such as women being portrayed mostly in their relation to others (e.g., wives or mothers) while men are mostly portrayed as individuals; (6) characteristic stereotyping such as having emotional female characters and stoic male characters. Include students in finding sexist language or stereotyping, writing the publishers and complaining, and rewriting the sexist portions in a nonsexist manner. If women or men are invisible, find materials to compensate for the invisibility.

### ***Reflect on Classroom Practices***

Consider changes that may help students participate equally by looking at the use of classroom time. Devise a system to call on students equally.



One method is to put students' names on cards and call out names as they appear in the stack. Waiting longer for responses may increase gender equity if female students need longer to respond.

Videotape the class or have a student or colleague keep track of the number of times you speak to males and females. Determine whether your responses to males and females correspond to the ratio of male and females in the class. When analyzing verbal responses, you may consider the number of times students are called on, the length of time in discussion, and the depth and type of content. Be aware of how the class handles student contributions. Was one group of students interrupted, ignored, dismissed, and not called on by name more than another? Also, consider the learning style preferences of all your students.

Try to use a variety of methods such as collaborative work or group quizzes. When the students are in small groups, ensure that females and males take turns at leadership positions and experiment with same-sex and mixed-sex small groups. Finally, ask your students to be on the lookout for sexism in the class. Periodically have students give you anonymous written feedback pointing out sexist language in your lectures, students responses, classroom materials, and ways nonverbal responses may favor males or females.

### ***Reach Beyond the Classroom***

Encourage students to continue their investigation outside the classroom. Have students evaluate other classrooms, textbooks, and conversations for sexism. Ask them to recall the entrance test they took, the counseling they received, the financial aid opportunities they were offered, and scrutinize these experiences for sexist practices. Suggest that students look into how jobs are divided along male and female lines on campus and in their homes. Assign different groups to look at television, radio, newspaper, the cinema, music, stores, and businesses for examples of sexism.

### ***Research Gender Yourself***

Conduct action research with your colleagues and/or students in order to answer some of the questions raised in the preliminary investigations of your textbooks, classrooms, and campus. Action research is the systematic collection and analysis of data conducted by classroom teachers on an area of their own teaching that they would like to investigate and improve. It is often collaborative and involves a continuing cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Learn more about action research and read several case studies (see Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993; Atweh, Kemmis & Weeks, 1998; Hollingsworth, 1997; Hopkins, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996; McTaggart, 1997;

Noffke & Stevenson, 1995; Wallace, 1998). Query colleagues to determine whether there is interest in forming an action research support group and begin to develop a community of researchers committed to investigating classroom practices and teacher effectiveness. Ask about funding for the project, as education equity grants may be available.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the federal legislation of Title IX, research has shown that far from being neutral sites of learning, schools (from preschool to graduate school) reinforce and reproduce male dominance in numerous subtle practices that can be detrimental to both male and female students. The specific incidents of gender inequity found in K-12 and college classrooms in the United States are: sexist language, materials, and curriculum; lower teacher expectations for girls and women; sex segregation in fields of study; and fewer and less substantial teacher-student interactions with girls and women.

In ESL classrooms, if male students coming from male-dominated cultures use turn-taking and attention-getting devices to dominate the teacher's time, the female students' opportunities to speak may be further reduced. This may be exacerbated by current communicative methodology, which relies on student-centered activities. However, this tendency remains undocumented as few studies on gender equity have been conducted in ESL/EFL classrooms.

In summation, ESL teachers can promote gender equity in their classes and on their campuses by reviewing research on gender equity, revising their materials to be more gender inclusive, reflecting on their classroom practices to insure that they are equitable, and reaching beyond the classroom by having students investigate sexist practices in society. Finally, ESL teachers can develop research communities on their campuses by forming action research support groups where colleagues can collaborate, encourage, and challenge one another in their quest for gender equity.

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