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Gender representation in Hong Kong English textbooks: An investigation of collocations of gendered terms in a small corpus

According to Hong Kong Federation of Women (2006), gender stereotyping and gender-based biases still exist in Hong Kong, and gender stereotyping is commonly found in teaching materials and textbooks. In the English lessons of many schools in Hong Kong, a large part of learner input is still provided by textbooks. Because of this reason, a small corpus of Hong Kong primary English textbooks was built and the collocations of gendered terms in the corpus were analysed in order to find out if gender stereotyping is still an issue in the recently published textbooks. Baker (2008) suggests that corpora are useful tools in language and gender research.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if gender bias and gender stereotyping still exist in the recently published textbooks in Hong Kong. To achieve the aim, a small corpus of textbooks (a series of twelve New Magic English textbooks for Primary One to Primary Six students) was compiled and the corpus software AntConc was used to analyse the collocations of gendered terms He/he, She/she, Man/man, Woman/woman/women, Boy/boy/Boys/boys, and Girl/Girls/girls in the corpus. From the results, it seems that the writers of this textbook series have become aware of the issue of gender equality and made attempts to avoid gender stereotyping. Therefore, females were no longer considered as delicate or weak but were described as even stronger than males. In domestic and occupational roles, females were no longer portrayed only as housewives who did all the household work, but they also worked in society as a doctor or a school principal who takes care of the whole school, and males did share the household work with females at home. Besides that, males and females engaged in different sports activities. Not only can males be good at sports, but also females, and a PE teacher can be a female.

However, the stereotyped images of males wearing shorts, Jeans or shirts and having big feet and females putting on skirts or dresses and having small hands still exist, and the masculine generic terms for occupation (fireman and postman) could still be found. In addition, while it was found that the male terms have more collocates and both males and females were attributed with positive characters, the female term (the node word She/she in this corpus) still has more positive collocates. It is impossible for the textbook writers to count the exact number of collocates of different semantic groups for the gendered terms in order to ensure that the textbooks are totally free of gender-bias. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the gender-neutral terms should be used to replace those masculine generic terms in the names of occupation, given the fact that textbook may have strong impact on children's development of values and attitudes.

References

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