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Gender Representation in Graded Readers: A Comparative Content Analysis

Darren Elliott[1]
Nanzan University
Nagoya, Japan

Thomas E. Bieri
Nanzan University
Nagoya, Japan

Abstract

While Extensive Reading (ER) has emerged as an effective approach to developing language skills, ER research has largely focused on its impact on language acquisition, rather than the socio-cultural content of the materials used and any effect of those on the reader. Considering that ER programs tend to expect learners to read large volumes of text, the socio-cultural information (including the messages regarding gender representation and gender roles) that learners are absorbing appears worthy of attention and consideration from educators. While some studies have examined gender in educational materials more broadly, so far, there is a dearth of similar research focused on graded readers. This paper reports on the results of a pilot project using content analysis to examine aspects of gender representation in the text and images of sets of fiction and nonfiction readers, specifically the numbers of female, male, and unidentified characters, and their occupations.

Keywords: educational materials, language learning materials, graded readers, materials content analysis, content analysis, socio-cultural content of materials, gender representation, gender in educational materials, gender in language learning materials, gender in graded readers, content analysis literature review

Background

Extensive Reading

While definitions of extensive reading (ER) vary, the concept is that language learners who read freely and widely at a level just below their current level of attainment will develop and consolidate their foreign language skills in various ways (Bamford & Day, 2004; Day &

[1] Corresponding author

Bamford, 1998, 2002; Waring & McLean, 2015). Pioneering work by Clive Criper, first in Malaysia, then at the University of Edinburgh with the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading, promoted systems of class libraries and class readers in the 1970s and 1980s (Hill, 2013), and Krashen's (1993) concept of "free voluntary reading" is also notable in the development of ER (see Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990, for further examples). However, it seems that ER really began to capture the attention of teachers and researchers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from the late 1990s and early 2000s through the work of Julian Bamford and Richard Day who founded the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) in 2004 (Extensive Reading Foundation, n.d.-a) and published the easily digestible and oft-cited ten principles to describe ER (2004, pp. 1–3).

The body of research conducted and disseminated about extensive reading has also significantly expanded since the late 1990s. While the annotated bibliography published by Jacobs et al. (1999) contained 189 works related to extensive reading, as of early 2025 the one maintained by the ERF has over 800 works (Extensive Reading Foundation, n.d.-b). Research appears to bear out the assertions that ER assists with second language (L2) learning. In studies at Japanese universities, Robb and Susser (1989) found students making equal or better gains in several reading skills, including reading speed and guessing meaning from context, in comparison to those in a skills-based reading course; Robb and Kano (2013) found higher proficiency gains when ER was added to the curriculum; Lake and Holster (2014) also found proficiency gains in reading comprehension and, interestingly, listening test scores.

Regarding L2 vocabulary knowledge, Kweon and Kim's (2008) study shows evidence of gains in incidental vocabulary acquisition, and Iwata (2022) demonstrated greater improvements in sight word recognition in readers on an ER program (in comparison to those only engaged in intensive reading activities). According to McLean and Roualt (2017), ER is also more effective for increasing reading fluency than traditional grammar-translation methods. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 49 research studies published between 1980 and 2014 showed small to medium gains in reading comprehension, reading fluency, and vocabulary, for both pre-to-posttest and experimental versus control group research designs (Jeon & Day, 2016). This increasing body of research would suggest that ER is beneficial for language learning.

Graded Readers

As ER has grown in popularity, the range of commercial materials available has grown exponentially. Graded readers, defined by Hill as "extended texts, mostly fiction, written in language reduced in terms of structures and vocabulary" (Hill, 1997, p. 57) are used most frequently in ER programs. Individual publishers have their own guidelines, but in general authors are expected to exercise appropriate leveling of the language with regard to frequency of vocabulary, grammatical complexity, and narrative structure (Waring, 2003). Between 1997 and 2013, Hill (1997, 2001, 2008, 2013) published four surveys of English graded readers, which included 6597 titles across dozens of series primarily published in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Europe, with more than 90% of titles being fiction.

More publishers have entered the market in the decade since Hill's most recent review and some smaller publishers are putting out books written specifically for their local markets, a category

which Hill (2001, 2008, 2013) has previously acknowledged without reviewing. The range of titles available is also increasing, from adapted classics and movie tie-ins to contemporary fiction and non-fiction. The Extensive Reading Foundation maintains an open-access database of graded readers, numbering more than 7200 titles, from 35 publishers as of March 2025, and including detailed information such as word counts, number of headwords, and Common European Framework (CEFR) level (Extensive Reading Foundation, n.d.-c).

Importance of Content

It is clear, then, that there is a wide range of material being published for use in extensive reading for English language education, and Hill (1997, 2001, 2008, 2013) has reviewed a large number of these graded readers for suitability. Others, such as Furukawa et al. (2010), have produced other reviews giving similar information related to level, length, genre and general appropriateness for language learning. However, these reviews primarily focused on the content from the perspective of how engaging it may be for learners. Yet, as Leather and Uden (2021) point out, narrative fiction affects the reader in other ways. Stories carry information about the world, as it is, and as it should be, and there are implicit cultural and moral messages contained within educational materials. There is a wider body of literature examining how language textbooks do not merely reflect societal norms, but also play a role in organizing the knowledge systems and consolidating dominant discourses of society (Pardesi, 2019). As Mishan (2022) puts it, "language teaching materials (the combination of content and pedagogy) constitute cultural artefacts, imbued with cultural values and ideologies" (p. 490).

Our conjecture is that whilst the linguistic benefits of graded readers are becoming clear, there is a need for research into their cultural content (and effect on the reader). Given that language learners in ER programs are expected to read many thousands of words in the target language (Nishizawa et al., 2010; Nation, 2014), and largely unsupervised, it seems worthwhile to explore what kind of worldview is being presented.

Gender in Readers and Adjacent Research

Cultural content of graded readers is a currently under-researched area, and we are interested in gender representation in particular. A specific domain search in the online open-access journals *Reading in a Foreign Language* and *Reading Matrix* produced no articles directly related to gender representation in graded readers. More generally, only one article examining gender representation in graded readers was identified (Muto-Humphrey, 2008), and it analyzed the content of only two readers, which the author actually referred to as a type of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook. Even within Hill's detailed graded reader reviews (1997, 2001, 2008, 2013), gender representation is addressed only in passing, through a single comment regarding the increasing percentage of female protagonists appearing post-1980 (Hill, 1997, pp. 61–62).

Broadening the search to take in educational materials in general, by running combinations of search terms including *educational materials*, *textbooks*, *gender*, and *gender representation* through Google Scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and JSTOR, we were able to locate a number of pertinent studies from other fields (including music education, fashion

education and social studies), as well as analyses of language textbooks, which offered us a wider perspective. A further search through the reference sections of these studies added a number of historically important papers, producing a list which was not exhaustive but can be considered representative. We feel the studies discussed here can not only illuminate the gap in research to date but can also clarify which frameworks and methods from adjacent research literature could be utilized in the analysis of gender representation in graded readers.

Common Assumptions. It is important to note that the underlying assumptions, explicitly or implicitly stated in the abstract or introduction to each of the articles under review, appear to be that gender stereotyping or discrimination exists in educational materials, that this is a problem, that educational materials can be a force for change, and that research is required in order to address the problem. For example, in the abstract to Aoumeur's (2014) paper on primary school Arabic language textbooks in Algeria, it is suggested that "male and female representations are still problematic […] gender is still represented in a way that supports the status quo" (p. 13). In this case, Aoumeur's intent as a transformative researcher is in direct opposition to the clearly stated beliefs of the male textbook writers, who claimed that they had selected contents which will activate the learners' schemata and take "the existing reality into account" (p. 16). Goyal and Rose (2020), in the first line of their abstract, stated that "[…] appropriate gender representation in textbooks is crucial for socially educating professionals who use English for work-related education" (p. 1). Barton and Sakwa (2012) argued that the content of English language textbooks in Uganda "[…] undermine[s] the Ugandan government's commitment to equity and inclusion" (p. 173), which forefronts the idea that there is an interplay between society as it is, and the vision of society which those in authority wish to promote. This is perhaps best exemplified in Sarvarzade and Wotipika's (2017) study of Afghan language textbooks over time, where differences and themes emerge in conjunction with the dominant values of the ruling regime of the period: books from the Soviet-backed 1978–1992 era emphasize labor equality, collective ownership and women's liberation, whilst the books used post-1996 during the Taliban regime excluded women almost entirely and focused on religious rituals and "boys as fighters" (p. 588).

Commercial textbooks. Although ideological influences may be more obviously apparent in national or state-mandated school textbooks, commercial textbooks produced in the West (specifically the UK) for the global market are not immune from such pressures. Either through self-censorship or direction from publishers, textbook writers for the international market tend to avoid "PARSNIPs" (Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, -isms, Pork) (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). According to Claridge (2012), major UK publishers Macmillan and Penguin avoid "sensitive topics such as strong religion or homosexuality" (p. 111). This is indicative of the possible tensions between the intentions of creators of educational materials and the needs of those who use such materials.

Looking beyond content, textbook use as a resource was explored in studies by Sunderland et al. (2000) and Canale and Furtado (2021), both of which considered how texts are used in the classroom with a focus on textbook discourse and teacher talk. Whilst Sunderland et al. (2000) found, in their small-scale UK based study, that novice teachers had a tendency to endorse or pass over traditionally gendered representations, and to undermine progressive texts (p. 252),

Canale and Furtado (2021) saw more evidence of subversion of heteronormative images in classroom interactions (p. 66).

It is important to recognize that textbooks are mediated by users, and studies like these, which consider the effects of teaching on texts, are valuable. Of course, as teachers affect texts, texts affect teachers. As Gouvias and Alexopoulos (2018) pointed out, "textbooks are the main means of instruction and the main tool for the organization of the teachers 'pedagogic practices" (p. 642). In conjunction with their analysis of sexist stereotypes in the third-grade textbooks of a Greek primary school, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with instructors about how the textbooks were actually used. Their conclusion was that further evaluation of textbooks is required, with a view towards "promoting a more gender-balanced learning material", as is teacher training to support teachers in developing a "compensatory teaching approach" to mitigate problematic material (p. 658). Such work strays into the realms of critical pedagogy, "a notion of critique that also carries with it a sense of responsibility for transformation, and an exploration of the nature of and relationship between culture, knowledge and power" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 307), which denies positivist, structuralist views of language education in favor of praxis (theory in action) and social constructivist ideas.

Textbooks into graded readers. Research that focuses on transformative uses of textbooks may not easily transfer to research on graded readers, however. Graded readers are not generally meant to be, nor used as, textbooks. Unlike textbooks, they are usually self-selected by the learner and read alone, although some post-reading activities like book reports may form a part of an ER program. They are not equivalent to regular textbooks used in shared class experiences, which can be negotiated and mediated by teachers and other members of the learning community. Neither do graded readers form a curriculum in the same way that the scope and sequence of a textbook do. Yet Karniol and Gal-Disegni's (2009) experiment with gender-fair versus gender stereotyped basal readers gives us a hint that these materials can impact learners.

Basal readers, like graded readers, are short books written with carefully adjusted language for learners. However, unlike graded readers, they are designed for children learning to read in their first language. Karniol and Gal-Disegni (2009) selected two series of basal readers in Hebrew, one considered more gender-fair (with male and female characters shown engaging in the same activities), and the other more gender-stereotyped (for example, higher incidences of female characters in the kitchen). According to the researchers, children who read the gender stereotyped basal reader series were more likely to allocate certain activities as male-only or female-only. Given the similarities between basal readers and graded readers, it seems that there is potential for similar impacts on language learners.

How gender is tacitly understood. While we understand gender as complex and multidimensional, and something that is socially influenced rather than determined exclusively by biology, the papers discussed here appear to share a tacit understanding that gender is binary. Gray (2013) pointed out that in UK-produced English Language materials for the global market, there is a "blanket avoidance of any representation of clearly identified LGBT characters" (p. 49). Akay Sahin and Acikalin (2021) at least recognized the idea of a distinction between biological sex and culturally determined gender, but their content analysis of Turkish social studies textbooks does not factor in the possibility of trans or non-binary characters in the text.

Schiemann (2022) does find evidence of a trans character "in a way that does not exoticize transgenderism but shows it as one identity feature among others" (p. 28). However, the studies described here generally take the gender of the characters at normative face value—in text, pronouns and titles indicate one of two genders, and illustrations tend to have visual markers of apparent biological femaleness or maleness.

Ultimately, our own analyses focus on differences between representations of females and males, and we use the former term to refer to individuals who we have identified as women and girls and the latter for those identified as men and boys. However, focus on female versus male differences and use of that biological-focused terminology is a function of the overall rarity of any explicit or apparent transgender representation in these materials rather than intended to assert or support a belief that these are the only two categories of gender or that biological sex is equivalent to gender.

Analytical Approaches in Adjacent Research

When considering which approach to take in our analysis of graded readers, there were a number of analytical frameworks employed within the literature we reviewed. One way of appraising gender representation in graded readers is reception aesthetics (Hohendahl & Silberman, 1977), which puts the reader squarely at the center of the analysis, focusing on the response of the learner rather than researcher interpretations of the (intended) meaning of the text. In Shabangu et al.'s (2022) investigation of South African fashion magazines, they claimed that "a text must be experienced by a reader, and not just seen as a mere object" (p. 2), and to that end they conducted semi-structured interviews with readers and journalists around the topic of visual and textual portrayals of women. More directly related to language education, Sunderland et al. (2000) combined reception aesthetics with classroom observation to better understand negotiations between teacher, text, and learner.

Because ER is generally expected to be a private, self-monitored learning activity, the instant reactions and negotiations of meaning that take place in a classroom with a language textbook are absent. Therefore, teachers may be unaware of how graded readers are being received, and we believe that it would be an illuminating area to investigate. However, in this study, we have chosen to focus on what is presented, rather than how it is interpreted by the reader. Several of the papers examined used some form of critical discourse analysis (CDA), either alone or in conjunction with other methods (e.g., Aoumeur, 2014; Fairclough, 2012; Giaschi, 2000). A CDA approach may have value in a study of graded readers, given that the stories constructed within are often loaded with the cultural and ideological values of their producers. However, we were at the first stage of inquiry and planned to analyze thousands of words and hundreds of images, so CDA was set aside in favor of frameworks emphasizing breadth rather than depth of analysis.

Among the number of ways to approach the analysis of texts and images found in educational materials, the majority of studies we found used some form or forms of content analysis. Sarantakos (2013) listed the identifying features of content analysis thus (p. 314);

> It is a documentary method (analyzing written or visual texts).

> It can be quantitative (measuring objectively specific attributes), or qualitative (interpreting meaning).
> It is replicable (it can be repeated by other researchers, provided they follow the method).
> It is unobtrusive (the author of the text should be unaffected).
> It can be longitudinal or comparative (or neither).

Cohen et al. (2011) also emphasized the perceived objectivity of content analysis (p. 588). However, Krippendorf (2013) struck a note of caution in advising that texts do not have single meanings, and that any meanings uncovered by one reader may not be shared by another (p. 30).

We found that three studies in particular were frequently cited and used as frameworks for coding and analyzing data amongst the research reviewed. The earliest, Schmitz (1975), looked at sexism in French language textbooks. Schmitz grouped (what she considered to be) sexist data into four categories: (a) exclusion, (b) subordination, (c) distortion, and (d) degradation. The first category presents researchers with a simple counting exercise, to tally ratios of male to female speakers in dialogues, the genders of central figures, or even sections of the text with no characters of one gender at all—noted as "omission" (p. 121). Subordination refers to female characters portrayed in occupations deemed 'lesser 'than those of male characters (by dint of social cachet, salary, or authority), or to female characters tied to domestic settings. The third category, distortion, entails some interpretation, but is intended to assess the portrayal of stereotypical female behavior (passive, emotional), a lack of variety in the activities, interests, or traits of women (shopping, make-up). Finally, Schmitz looked for "degradation"—examples of "degrading or condescending statements or generalizations made about women" (p. 126), such as the dismissal of female characters as too stupid, too intelligent, or too troublesome, or an overemphasis on the physical appearance of female characters.

Subsequently, Porreca (1984) analyzed sexism in 15 of the most widely used English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks at the time. Porreca's study is perhaps a prototypical content analysis of this nature, mixing quantitative (number of male and female characters, firstness) and qualitative analysis (adjective coding) to great effect, and it is cited by Bahman and Rahimi (2010), Barton and Sakwa (2012), and Nagatomo (2010), amongst others.

Thirdly, Rifkin's (1998) study of gender representation in Russian language textbooks was able to draw on previous literature and thus presents a comprehensive and thorough framework for future researchers to utilize. Rifkin looked at a combination of visual data and written text in a largely quantitative study, incorporating elements from Porreca (1984) and Schmitz (1975), amongst others. Rifkin's analysis was more granular—rather than merely counting the number of male and female characters, he calculated ratios of male and female characters foregrounded and backgrounded in images, the percentage of female images named in captions, and the ratio of females to males depicted in motion (p. 235). Further data included instances of references to famous females and famous males, the uses of diminutives and professional titles, and excerpts from authentic texts by female and male writers (p. 236).

Although this paper was less frequently cited by the other studies under review here, Sano et al. (2001), Mineshima (2008), and Khalid and Ghania (2019) are amongst those who referenced Rifkin's (1998) work. We would finally like to point out that although both Porreca (1984) and

Schmitz (1975) used the term sexism, more recent studies tend to align with Rifkin (1998) in using gender representation and similar terms, as a perusal of the titles in the reference list for this article will reveal.

Amongst the most commonly collected data, such as ratios of male to female characters, firstness, and occupational and domestic roles, some studies were more adventurous. Kotek et al. (2020) tabulated instances of male violence or criminality amongst the 15,826 example sentences they sourced from linguistics textbooks, perhaps as a useful reminder that negative stereotypes can also be applied to men. Bahman and Rahimi (2010) assessed the genders of animals depicted in Iranian English texts, anthropomorphic or otherwise. Although occupational positions (including subordinate and leadership roles) were commonly analyzed, Hunter and Chik (2005) went as far as to estimate respective salaries for female and male characters, finding that although more males were employed, "their proportional assignment to higher salary occupations […] was similar to that of females" (p. 71).

Studies with coding instruments. Generally, the studies we looked at employed rigorous coding instruments, which are imperative for successful content analyses. The implementation of existing frameworks (in their original or adapted forms), such as those proposed by Schmitz (1975) or Porreca (1984), supplied researchers with a robust deductive coding model. For quantitative analysis of relatively short texts, it is possible for a single researcher to do a manual analysis fairly comfortably. In a typical example, Nagatomo (2010) adopted Porreca's (1984) framework to assess illustrations, dialogues, and readings in an EFL textbook for Japanese learners for visibility, gender firstness, gender neutral and gender specific nouns, and gender stereotypes. However, when working on larger data sets, researchers may require a coding team. In one example, after training the coders for calibration, Hunter and Chik (2005) assigned 47 basal readers to 42 research assistants for a quantitative content analysis of visibility (in both text and illustrations) and occupations (p. 68). Kotek et al. (2020) offer us another example, training 24 undergraduate students to code more than 15,000 example sentences extracted from linguistics journals, finding that males are represented at a ratio of 2:1 to females, and are more likely to be the subject of sentences, whilst females are more likely to be referred to in relation to others (e.g. Mum, wife of).

Other researchers took an inductive approach, albeit to reach similar conclusions. Garnet Russell et al. (2021) looked for key themes that emerged in the text and images of history textbooks used in Rwanda, Kenya, and Uganda, "developing a coding protocol from an initial round of coding" to account for visibility, activities, and themes, the division of domestic labor and childcare, and relational roles of women (p. 240). To ensure inter-rater reliability, each book was coded by two researchers, and the researchers concluded that the textbooks were unbalanced, suggesting that teacher training to ensure effective mediation of content may be an effective way forward (p. 254).

Summary. This review of existing content analyses suggests several issues to be considered if the method is to be applied to an analysis of graded readers. Firstly, the studies we considered most comprehensive assess a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from the texts and aim to ensure that what is assessed is balanced and complementary. As Porreca (1984) points out, the

numbers alone do not tell the whole story—in one of the texts she analyzed, one sample paragraph contained almost a third of the women presented in the entire text (p. 713).

Knowing how many men and women are present is valuable, but we also need to know where, when, and how they are present for a more complete picture. Comparing graded readers to other educational materials, there are clear differences that would suggest that quantitative analyses alone are insufficient. Language textbooks, for example, contain discrete themed units of learning, with somewhat decontextualized dialogues and characters, and there is clear value in counting for visibility and representation. In the longer form narrative stories of graded readers, a qualitative analysis of actions and themes may be more fruitful.

Research Purpose

We concluded that content analysis offered the most useful framework for our preliminary research into graded readers. While we consider the other approaches outlined above as potential avenues to pursue further research, we decided to apply content analysis to our current study.

Our basic question was: What information about gender representation in English graded readers can we discover through applying content analysis?

Method

Sampling of Graded Readers

With so many graded readers available, sampling presented a challenge. We concluded that using our own context (ER within a Japanese university) would not only provide a sample directly relevant to our own teaching practice, but also be instructive for others in similar contexts. In the campus-wide required English curriculum coordinated by one author, learners are expected to read between 3,000 and 10,000 words per week, adding up to a target of between 96,000 and 320,000 words during the academic year. Similarly, in the small second-year elective program for Business English coordinated by the other author, learners are expected to read at least 5,000 words per week, and over 10,000 words weekly were required for full marks.

Each member of a class selects their own graded readers, leading to a great variety in the list of texts read by each student, so the choice of which to analyze is arbitrary. We opted to begin with thirty graded readers, most commonly borrowed from the university library, all of which were fiction, as a typical representative sample. However, the second-year program required reading of at least one nonfiction reader a week, and we also opted to include a similar number of nonfiction readers for analysis, both for balance and to identify any possible general differences between fiction and nonfiction readers.

Fiction sample. The selection of the fiction sample was relatively straightforward. Identifying the graded readers most frequently checked out from the university library using a filtering function for the searchable database led to a sample of the top 30 titles with a total word count of 120,781,

which was between the minimum and maximum expected volume of reading for first-year students. While only four different series were represented, these were the series many students were actually choosing to read, and in that way were determined to be a representative sample. See Appendix A.

Nonfiction sample. The selection of the nonfiction sample was comparatively complicated. For one, while required reading in the Business English program, no nonfiction titles were in the top 100 titles checked out from the university library. While data for five years from the worldwide MReader quiz site for graded readers does show nine titles in the top 100 most quizzed, even there, we can see nonfiction is much less widely read for ER. In addition, the Business English courses used an online graded reader library, so it was felt that drawing from the materials available there was an appropriate way to determine a sample given the researcher's context.

Initially, in balance with the fiction titles, a set of 30 nonfiction readers that had been checked out the most by students in the program was identified. However, this list included 26 Halico Pocket Readers, four of which were the *Language Learning Tips* series and the other 22 from the *10 Ways to...* series. While this list could be considered representative of the most read nonfiction titles by these learners, initial investigation of this set indicated it likely would offer little insight into any gender differences in nonfiction readers since these 26 titles were all written in second person and gendered references were almost completely absent. Since English for business purposes is the focus of the second-year program, we decided to identify and analyze a set of nonfiction readers that have some focus on business or work, and arrived at a new, expanded list of the 40 business-related titles ranked highest by number of checkouts since 2020. While this sample still included 14 of the *10 Ways to...* series, it also included one or more titles from six other series and therefore could potentially be more representative of nonfiction titles more generally. While a larger number of titles than the fiction set, the total word count of these titles was only 85,856. For reference, the average total reading for all students in the elective program over the preceding 4.5 years was 139,281 words, and 17% did not reach 85,000 words. See Appendix A.

Content Categories and Coding

We manually coded the graded readers, with one of us focused on the fiction readers and one of us on the nonfiction readers. After deciding on initial categories, we both coded a pilot sample of five fiction and five nonfiction readers in order to check not only that our interpretations were in agreement, but also that the categories were appropriate and feasible for our project.

We decided to focus on presence and information related to occupations. Analysis of presence included a quantitative tally of the presence of characters in the texts and images of each reader. We counted named and unnamed individuals, assessing whether they were female, male, or unidentified as either male or female. Characters were assumed to be gender normative, with male and female pronouns and indicators such as names, clothing, and hairstyles typically associated as belonging to females or males, all taken at face value. We also included a coding category of "unidentified" for any images or noted characters that were not clearly female or male. We also decided to tally the different occupations that were mentioned and the genders they were associated with. We considered "occupation" to mean the role primarily ascribed to a

character, so this meant an inclusion of unpaid roles such as volunteer or homemaker, and socially unacceptable labor such as gangster. We coded not only how many different occupations were associated with each gender category, but also how many times each kind of occupation type was ascribed to a particular gender.

We initially intended to also include an analysis of gendered representations in all the activities, character traits, and physical traits described or presented in these readers. However, we found the vast volume and variety in the data made it impractical to assess within the scope of this project.

Results

Visibility

In the text of the combined set of all readers, there were 442 named characters and 174 unnamed characters. Of the total of 616, only 32, or roughly 5%, were not clearly identifiable as either male or female, while 33.4% were identified as female and 61.4% as male. In the images, which included both photographs and illustrations, we counted nearly 3,000 identifiable individuals (there were instances such as a mass of spectators in a stadium or vague background images of people, and we chose to exclude these completely when individuals were indistinguishable). As with the text, 4.5% of individuals in the images were not clearly female or male. However, a somewhat higher percentage—42%—appeared to be female, while about 54% of the images were of males. A breakdown of the numbers of individuals in each category can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. *Numbers of individuals appearing in the readers by gender*

	Fiction			Nonfiction		
	Female	Male	UnID*	Female	Male	UnID*
Named characters	113	166	1	38	122	2
Unnamed characters	31	47	29	24	43	0
Images	778	1045	57	223	240	50
Total (image and text)	922	1258	87	285	405	52

**Note*. UnID = characters not identified as either male or female.

Fiction. In fiction readers, we found the male-to-female ratio of named characters was 1.47:1, or nearly six named male characters for every four females, and this ratio was fairly similar (1.34:1) in the images. Of the unnamed characters, 29% were considered unidentified; the male-to-female ratio of the remaining individuals was 1.52:1, nearly identical to that of the named characters. There were no books among the fiction set without at least one named female character and one named male character, and every book depicted both male and female images. Twelve of the fiction readers featured a male protagonist, while fourteen cast a female character in the lead

role. The remaining four books presented an ensemble cast without a clear protagonist. In general, although the main character roles were reasonably equal between male and female, the number of male secondary characters depicted in occupations outside the home is largely to blame for the unbalanced ratio.

Nonfiction. In the text in nonfiction readers, we found a greater gender imbalance than in the fiction titles. The male-to-female ratio of named characters was 3.21:1, while the ratio was 1.79:1 for unnamed characters. On the other hand, the images were much closer to balanced, with a ratio of 1.08 males to each female, though the fiction readers also had more than 3.6 times the number of individuals pictured as did the nonfiction readers. Also, one nonfiction series appended the same timeline of key historical events after the end of each reader's text and glossary, which showed images of twenty-two named male historical figures and only one woman, but that was excluded from the character and image counts. Had these timelines been included, especially if counted for every reader from the series in the set, it would have made the image figures significantly more unbalanced (1.54 males to 1 female).

Beyond the evident imbalance between males and females in the simple numbers of the nonfiction texts, when details are explored, the imbalance can be seen to extend to what types of roles men and women are being presented in. For example, one reader introduced six inventors, all of whom were male, and included nineteen other male characters, most of whom were professionals or luminaries of some sort. On the other hand, only twelve women in total were noted in the reader, eleven of whom were noted as wives, daughters, or mothers. Another reader introduced four male performers and one female performer, along with twenty-five other named men, yet had only eleven other named women, most of whom were wives or other family members. A reader focused on the history of medicine named thirteen pioneers, all men, while the only women mentioned were unnamed milkmaids and nurses. Ironically, the book concluded with encouraging appreciation of both men and women forerunners in the field. The following section on occupations presents more data on this aspect.

Occupations

We looked at what different occupations were mentioned and the genders they were associated with. We considered "occupation" to mean what role was primarily ascribed to a character, so this meant an inclusion of labor that was unpaid, socially unacceptable, or both. So, descriptions of someone as a volunteer at an animal shelter or as a criminal were counted. In some cases, the main role ascribed was in relation to another character, labeled as things like sister, father, girlfriend, and the like, without any other noted role or occupations, and these were counted as noted and included in the larger category "Family/personal relationship". See Table 2.

Table 2. *Number of different occupations within each type by gender*

	Fiction			Nonfiction		
Type	Female	Male	UnID	Female	Male	UnID*
Animal care	1	3	0	1	1	1
Arts & Entertainment	4	6	1	6	7	1
Business & middle management	0	3	0	3	4	0
Criminal enterprises	3	8	0	0	1	0
Education	3	4	0	3	5	2
Executive leadership (Private)	0	2	0	2	4	1
Executive leadership (Public)	2	4	0	1	6	0
Family/personal relationship	4	5	0	6	4	1
Healthcare	2	1	2	4	3	0
Legal Professionals	1	2	1	0	0	0
Manufacturing & Construction	0	1	0	1	1	0
Military	0	0	0	0	1	1
Ownership	2	7	0	0	4	1
Primary industries	0	0	0	3	4	1
Public safety	3	5	1	0	2	5
Publishing & media	4	4	1	1	3	0
Receiving education or training	2	2	0	1	1	0
Religious work	0	1	0	0	1	0
Science & Research	0	3	0	1	6	5
Service & Support	6	9	0	6	9	8
Sports & Physical Education	3	6	0	0	7	1
Tourism & Leisure	2	0	0	1	2	2
Travel & Transportation	0	8	0	1	5	2
Total number	42	84	6	41	81	32

**Note*. UnID = characters not identified as either male or female.

In addition to what types of roles and how many different ones were ascribed, it would be valuable to examine how many different times a particular occupation was associated with a gender. See Table 3.

Table 3. *Number of times occupation types are ascribed by gender*

	Fiction			Nonfiction	
Type ascribed	Female	Male	UnID	Female	Male
Animal care	1	6	0	21*	4
Arts & Entertainment	16	36	1	9	36
Business & middle management	0	10	0	3	8
Criminal enterprises	3	33	0	0	2
Education	6	11	0	3	14
Executive leadership (Private)	0	4	0	2	6
Executive leadership (Public)	2	6	0	1	9
Family/personal relationship	12	8	0	42	17
Healthcare	4	7	2	7	18
Legal Professionals	3	8	1	0	0
Manufacturing & Construction	0	4	0	1	1
Military	0	0	0	0	6
Ownership	2	9	0	0	5
Primary industries	0	0	0	22*	25[#1]
Public safety	10	38	1	0	2
Publishing & media	8	33	26[#2]	1	5
Receiving education or training	76	55	0	2	8
Religious work	0	2	0	0	2
Science & Research	0	5	0	1	39
Service & support	9	23	0	8	48[#3]
Sports & Physical Education	5	11	0	0	74[#4]
Tourism & Leisure	2	0	0	1	2
Travel & Transportation	0	11	0	1	7
Total number	159	321	31	125	338

Notes:

* These two categories each had a single book with a very large number of images of the same female character (volunteer) or type of character (female divers).

[#1] Approximately half of these are images of fishermen from one book.

[#2] One illustration in one reader depicts a very large group of (male) paparazzi. When the photographers are mentioned in the text, their gender is unidentified.

[#3] 35 of these are representations of male butlers from one book, mostly images.
[#4] 61 of these are representations of male boxers from one book, mostly images.

Nonfiction in Tables 2 and 3. With a set of readers focused on work and business, it is unsurprising that various occupations were noted. In brief, there is a smaller variety of roles occupied by females than males, a larger number of higher-status roles are occupied by males than females, and there are more men shown in those roles in the nonfiction readers.

In Table 2, you can see the number of different occupations in each larger category that were ascribed to each gender. Firstly, you can see that there are about double the number of occupations ascribed to males as there are to females or mentioned in a gender-neutral way. Women are more likely to be described in a role only in relationship to others (e.g., wife) compared to men (father) or gender-neutral references (parents). Males are more likely to be ascribed higher status roles such as Governor, CEO, business owner, or something in science and research. Even within categories, you can sometimes find this reflected, such as in education, where two of the four roles mentioned for men are leadership roles in schools, while only one of three roles for women is in leadership, and some noted male teaching roles are higher status.

The results from an examination of the total number of times each role is ascribed to each gender can be seen in Table 3. We found that the overall ratio of females to males drops from approximately 1:2 to 1:2.7. However, if we take out the family relationship category from occupations, where females are 2.5 times as likely to be noted as are males, and which represents fully one third of female ascriptions, then the female to male ratio becomes 1:3.9. There are 3.3 males for every female in leadership roles, and if we focus on only executive leadership then that is five males for each female. There are exactly five males presented in ownership roles, and no females. If you put together education, science, and research, the female-to-male ratio is only 1:13.3, and it is 1:39 if looking only at science and research.

Even within education, only one female is ascribed a leadership role—principal—while one male each is ascribed schoolmaster and school superintendent, another is a professor, and one male teacher is noted as a physics teacher. The two remaining females are noted as a school teacher and a dance teacher, while the remaining ten males are noted as teachers. The healthcare category ascriptions for females are one doctor and two each for dentist, dental assistant, and nurse, but for males, fifteen are doctors or physicians and the remaining three are dentists, meaning there are no male assistants or nurses. So that is a 1:15 female-to-male ratio for doctors, but it is comparatively better at 1:6 if we combine doctors and dentists.

Fiction in Tables 2 and 3. Numerically, there were twice as many different occupations performed by men (84) as by women (42) (See Table 2). There were no women at all shown in science and research roles, or travel and transportation. Nor were there any women in business or middle management positions, although there were some female characters in public leadership and others depicted as business owners. The only category in which female characters held a wider variety of roles than men was healthcare with two roles for women and only one for men, but only because there were no male nurses.

As noted in Table 3, there were far more male characters (321) depicted in occupations than female characters (159), a ratio of 2:1. Once again, male characters outnumbered their female counterparts in almost every category. One exception is the number of women ascribed to the family/personal relationship category, at a ratio of 1.5 females to each male. Yet within that category, there was still a wider variety of descriptors applied to males (e.g., ex-boyfriend, grandfather).

These graded readers often included a list of characters with brief descriptions before the story. These were enlightening. The description of one character as "Hilary's father, a very successful businessman" (Thomlinson, 2015, p. 3) is typical—while fathers are usually reported in terms of their occupations, mothers are not. Another lists a female character purely in relation to her male sibling as follows:

> "Tommy: A ten-year-old boy
> Lizzie: Tommy's older sister."
> (MacAndrew, 2002, p. 4)

The only other category in which female characters outnumbered male characters (by a ratio of 1.38 females to 1 male) is the receiving education or training category. This category accounted for the largest number of both male (55) and female (76) characters in the fiction set of books. More than half of the books in this set came from two series—*Foundations Reading Library* (seven books) and *Page Turners Reading Library* (eleven books). Both series are pitched towards a teenage audience, and stories deal with real-life issues, such as friendship, family, or relationships, perhaps accounting for the higher proportion of female characters.

In contrast, many of the books in the *Cambridge English Readers* series (eleven books in our data set) present crime stories in which men heavily feature. Male criminals, often unnamed as background heavies or gangsters, outnumber females at a ratio of 11:1. Of the three female criminals in the thirty books studied, one is a murderer, another a diamond smuggler, and the last a shoplifter. Male characters also outnumber female characters in the public safety category, which includes law enforcement, by a ratio of 3.8:1. Again, many of the male characters are background police officers, and proportionally the women within the police are high-ranking, with two female detectives to one male, and an equal number of police inspectors (one) for each gender.

Illustrations and endnotes. There are two factors outside the main stories that increase male visibility in many of the books. The first is the choices made in illustrations, in which visible background characters skew towards males. One noticeable example is in the sports and physical education category, in which the number of males is inflated by the depictions of male footballers on the posters of the main character's bedroom wall. The other issue is the endnotes. Many of the readers have some extra endnotes—quizzes, fact boxes—to add context and provide teaching material. However, these can also tilt gender representation in a particular direction. The most egregious example is from the arts and entertainment category, in which 12 of the 36 male mentions come from one page about college bands at the end of a book, mentioning every member of the bands Queen, Coldplay, and Creed by name. Interestingly, the main story is about a female-fronted band.

Discussion

Implications

We feel that it is important for both teachers and materials writers to be cognizant of the ways in which gender is represented, and the unconscious biases that can both lead to and be perpetuated by inequities in these representations. Materials writers and publishers can make conscious efforts to avoid biased presentations in materials. The inequities we found lead us to believe more could still be done.

Teachers may want to consider whole-class or individualized activities that help learners notice and consider how and why certain representations are made, whether or not they reflect a current reality, and how they do and don't align with our learners 'own aspirations for themselves and society. Language educators and learners may also choose to develop their own localized materials and share them more widely.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our sample was limited to a relatively small subset of the graded readers available for English language learners, and our analysis was limited to visibility and occupations. We believe that wider and more varied sampling and analyses in this area could help identify the kinds of sociocultural input graded readers are likely to provide to our students. In particular, we can see potential in comparative studies looking at books by different publishers, or between older and more recently published books. Considering fiction in particular, deeper analysis of behaviors or characteristics ascribed to genders, through critical discourse or linguistic analysis, or a narrative analysis of plot and storyline in relation to gender, may also bear fruit.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that there is a gender imbalance that presents considerably more male than female individuals in both text and images in graded readers. In addition, this imbalance extends to the kinds of primary occupation males and females are presented in, with males represented as engaged in a larger number of different occupations and represented more often in those occupations. Finally, the relative status of the kinds of occupations also shows more males in more high-status roles.

Our own perspective is that, however much these representations may or may not reflect existing roles in the societies these readers portray, are used in, or both, as educators, we hope that educational materials would present inspiring role models for all our learners in a balanced way.

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Appendix A

List of Titles Used for Analysis

Fiction titles by use ranking

Title	**Publisher / Series**
The Big Picture	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Just Like a Movie	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Inspector Logan	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Bad Love	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Next Door to Love	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Parallel	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers

John Doe	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Don't stop now!	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Blood Diamonds	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Help!	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
Three Tomorrows	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge English Readers
The Lift	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
Second Chances	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
Running Free	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
It's Just a Cat	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
Bigfoot	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
The 400	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
He's Mine	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
The Beautiful Game	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
Road Trip	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
All About the Music	Cengage Learning, Page Turners Reading Library
A Tale of Two Cities	Macmillan Readers
Let's party!	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
The Angels	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
My Mom, the Movie Star	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
Love Online	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
No, you can't!	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
I Spy	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
Who's best?	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library
Trouble at Sea	Heinle ELT, Foundations Reading Library

Nonfiction titles by use ranking

Title	**Publisher / Series**
10 Ways to Manage Money	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Communicate	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Manage Stress	HALICO Pocket Readers

10 Ways to Achieve Work-Life Balance	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Choose your Career	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Collaborate	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Solve Problems	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Influence People	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Speak in Public	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Succeed in an Interview	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Work in a Team	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to be Productive	HALICO Pocket Readers
The Life of a Geisha	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
10 Ways to be Assertive	HALICO Pocket Readers
10 Ways to Negotiate	HALICO Pocket Readers
A Disappearing World	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Making a Thai Boxing Champion	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Amazing Inventors	Collins Amazing People
Amazing Performers L1	Collins Amazing People
Enjoy Your Business Trip	I Talk You Talk Press
Snow Magic!	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
The Medical Revolution	Seed World History Readers
Traveling on the Silk Road	Seed World History Readers
Opal Town	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Puffin Rescue!	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Wind Power	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Alternative Energy	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Butler School	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Killer Bees	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Para-Life Rescue!	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
The Future of a Village	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
The Last of the Cheju Divers	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Communication Technology	Seed World History Readers

Global Trade and Peace	Seed World History Readers
Tea and Wars	Seed World History Readers
A Chinese Artist in Harlem	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Zoo Dentists	Cengage - Footprint Reading Library
Animal Shelter	Grass Roots Photostories
Drone Pilots	Seed Future Job Readers
Agricultural Engineers	Seed Future Job Readers

About the Authors

Darren Elliott is currently coordinating the English language program for the Foreign Language Education Centre (FLEC) at Nanzan University, Japan. He has previously taught at universities in the U.K. and Japan, and his research interests include metaphor analysis in educational research and student video production. He is a doctoral candidate at the University of Bath, U.K., focusing on language teacher engagement with professional development. Email: delliott@nanzan-u.ac.jp; Website: https://darrenrelliott.wordpress.com

Thomas E. Bieri is an Associate Professor in the Business Administration Department, Nanzan University. He has degrees in Women's Studies, Applied Linguistics, and Educational Technology, nearly 30 years of teaching experience, and extensive leadership service, including in the TESOL Reading and Vocabulary IS and the JALT Extensive Reading SIG. His research interests focus on extensive reading and educational technology in ELT. Email: bieritho@nanzan-u.ac.jp Website: thomasedwardbieri.weebly.com