

Diversity in English language textbooks: An analysis of race and gender

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Introduction

The study of English in Japan occurs in various contexts; as a school subject at primary school through to its ubiquitous presence on university exams, and also continues in popularity as a hobby outside of formal education in ‘*eikaiwa*’ or English conversation schools. Many of these schools use textbooks, and these materials serve as authoritative representations of the English speaking world, and the learner’s place within it. Pictures and illustrations, it is argued, serve as one of the more salient features of such representations, as they are accessible even to complete beginners, who may have a limited understanding of the written text or accompanying aural materials. In line with other studies that have investigated diversity in ESL/EFL materials (LaBelle, 2010; Otlowski, 2003; Saeme & Nomnian, 2021; Wijetunga, 2017), this paper seeks to investigate representations of racial and gender diversity in English textbooks in use in Japan.

The representation of both gender and race have specific importance within the Japanese context which differs from other countries. Japan consistently has poor rankings in terms of gender equality (“Japan Ranks 116th in 2022 Global Gender Gap Report,” 2022), which means that accurate, empowering depictions of women are perhaps even more important than in other countries. Furthermore, if the pictures are ostensible representations of English-speaking culture, it is vital that the sexism prevalent in Japan

is not carried over to depictions of other more liberal countries.

The depiction of race within a Japanese context also warrants careful investigation, and stems from a number of distinct areas. Firstly, while many students of English in Japan may picture themselves conversing in English with blue-eyed locals in exotic overseas locations, the contexts in which Japanese people may use English today are changing. The increase in workers from overseas, as well as inbound tourism, especially from South East Asia, means that today's students of English may find opportunities to use their English in Japan with others who also speak it as a second language, reinforcing the role of English as a lingua franca in both education and business contexts. It would be preferable to have teaching materials that not only represent a wide variety of racial diversity, but also contain some representations of, for example, two non-white people talking rather than the typical 'Asian and blue-eyed foreigner' dyad. Furthermore, as racial prejudice against those of Black or other South East Asian heritage still unfortunately occurs in Japan (see, for example, Denyer, 2020) it is vital that negative depictions are no more frequently found in relation to these groups.

Also related to race, the depictions of 'English teachers' and other fluent or authoritative speakers needs to be carefully monitored within the Japanese context. It has been found that some native speaking teachers of English who are non-white face prejudice when working in Japan (Hasnain, 2021), and face having their fluency questioned simply because they do not fit the preconceived image of a native speaker. Furthermore, the diversification of what was traditionally (if erroneously, see Heinrich & Ohara, 2019; Loveday, 1996) thought of as a monolingual society through the growing numbers of children of intercultural marriages and partnerships, and those who have lived part of their lives overseas (*kikokushijo* or 'returnees'), means that growing numbers of Japanese people will also have English as their first language. Today's textbooks should depict a variety of races who are teaching, giving presentations, or other representations

of fluency, as well as those who are depicted as learners or receivers of knowledge. Textbooks that have a tendency to show white people speaking and non-white people listening may disempower these latter groups.

The current research will pilot a new instrument for measuring gender and racial diversity in ESL/EFL textbooks. From the preceding paragraphs, it will be seen that it is not only necessary to investigate numbers of depictions, but also give some qualitative assessment of such depictions. In other words, a textbook that includes equal numbers of women and men among its illustrations may still not support gender equality if most of the women pictured are engaged in stereotypical pursuits such as cooking and cleaning.

A brief word on the choices of terminology used in this paper is now necessary. The author uses the word ‘gender’ as it represents a performed social category, rather than the biological ‘sex’. It is noted that gender is a continuum, rather than a binary category, and while the author looks forward to the day when non-binary genders are more visible in ESL/EFL textbooks, for the moment persons depicted were coded as ‘male’, ‘female’. The category ‘ambiguous’ was initially created, however no instances where gender was ambiguous in the current sample were identified.

The word ‘race’ rather than ‘ethnicity’ is used, as the initial aim was to code pictures based primarily on the physical characteristics of the people represented, rather than cultural ones. However, it is noted that cultural artefacts often affected the coding of particular images. For example, two women pictured wearing kimonos at a coming-of-age ceremony (Pathways, p.1) were more easily coded as East Asian according to their clothes rather than their facial features.

Racial groups are referred to with capital letters as per APA style, although objections to the capitalization of both ‘Black’ and ‘White’ are noted. ‘Latinx’ is used over the

gendered term ‘Latino’, and in preference to the word ‘Hispanic’, which may suggest Spanish speaking.

The remainder of this article will be structured as follows. The following section will contain a brief review of relevant research to situate the current study within its broader context. The method will then be described, including an explanation of the novel research tool. Results will be presented, and in the final section an analysis of these results, as well as an evaluation of the research tool will be provided.

Literature Review

Many scholars have investigated bias within teaching materials. In the USA, LaBelle (2010) examined ELL (English Language Learning) textbooks in use in Milwaukee middle schools. An analysis of both the images and text revealed that while some books exhibited high diversity, many books had an overemphasis on White characters, and sometimes Black and White, to the exclusion of other races present in Milwaukee and the greater USA. Salient traits of each ethnicity were also coded with a range of adjectives. White characters were frequently portrayed as ‘active’ and ‘directive’, while depictions of Black characters coded highly at ‘active’ and ‘cooperative’.

Similarly, Ndura (2004) analysed ESL textbooks used in USA schools for various kinds of bias. She found various gender stereotypical situations, including mothers making clothes while fathers make furniture, and a mother and girls in the kitchen eating and tending a baby, while the father and boys play ball and do gardening outside. Racial stereotyping was also reported in the form of a story about an African boy who lives in poverty, encounters snakes and lions on his way to school, and improves his life by getting an education.

Ihm (1998) examined ESL/EFL textbooks in the USA and Korea respectively. Overall, males and females were represented in equal numbers, but statistical analysis revealed males were more likely to appear as main characters, rather than supporting ones. Males were also portrayed in a wider range of occupations, with females frequently portrayed as actresses, office workers, teachers and secretaries. In terms of race, ‘caucasoid’ (sic) people comprised just over half the characters, and other racial groups were not accurately represented in proportion to their presence in North American society.

Sexist stereotyping was also present in the ESL textbooks used in Sri Lanka in Wijetunga’s (2017) detailed study. Women consistently occurred in fewer illustrations, and when they did occur, were pictured in traditional or conservative ways. Within the text, women were sometimes only referred to in relation to men (eg. ‘Mr. Nadaraja’s wife’, p. 57). The list of occupational roles prescribed to men and women was tallied, with more than twice the number being allocated to men, furthermore the women’s list included stereotypical roles such as ballerina, housewife, receptionist and stay-at-home mother, and was not helped by the inclusion of somewhat whimsical roles of princess, empress, and queen ¹. Her research uncovers many other instances of sexism in these textbooks, and paints a very dismal picture of gender equality.

Within the Japanese context, Otlowski (2003) focused on portrayals of gender and ethnicity in a popular EFL textbooks. He found a noticeable lack of depictions of women in roles other than homemakers and mothers, and noticed that in all scripts that deal with domestic issues such as laundry, the kitchen, and shopping, women are used to model the conversations. He also found a significant lack of representation of minorities throughout the text, with only 4 non-white persons in over 100 illustrations. These include pictures of classrooms in both the UK and USA.

1 Wijetunga does not comment on these roles, but elsewhere in the article mentions chapters on myths and fables. It is possible that roles such as ‘princess’ appear in this context.

These examples highlight the need for rigorous scholarships on gender and racial bias in English language materials. It is hoped that this study can contribute to this growing field.

Method

As this research forms a pilot study with which to test a new research instrument, a decision was made to focus on complete volumes of a small number of texts, rather than taking single chapters from a larger number of texts. This was felt to provide a better measure of the usability of the research instrument.

Three textbooks aimed at tertiary or adult learners of English were selected for inclusion in this study. Selection criteria included being a speaking or communication focused text, rather than a reading or writing specific one, as this was felt to increase the possibility of people being represented in the accompanying illustrations. Within multiple-level text series, books aimed at beginner levels were selected, as it was reasoned that by featuring less text, the chance of pictures being included would conversely increase. Furthermore, as mentioned above, beginning learners may be more strongly influenced by illustrations if they have difficulty in understanding the written portions of the text. Finally, texts that included a large number of clip-art or illustrations within which race was not particularly salient were excluded. Of course, this still left a vast number of publications from which to choose, and after applying the above criteria, a random convenience sample of three books were chosen: ‘Listen Up, Talk Back: Book 1’ (Flaherty, Bean, & Kamakura, 2019), ‘Finding Connections’ (Rucynski, 2019), and ‘Pathways: Foundations’ (Fettig & Najafi, 2020). These books will be referred to by title rather than by author hereafter for ease of understanding.

The research instrument for this study is an adapted version of that used in LaBelle’s

(2010) investigation of ethnicity depicted in ELL texts. This instrument consists of a series of checklists; in part 1, raters tally the number of representations of different ethnicities in illustrations or graphics, in part 2, representations in written text are tallied; in part 3 salient traits such as ‘dependant’, ‘cooperative’, ‘creative’ are tallied for each image, and in part 4 any negative or oversimplified comments relating to ethnicity are noted. For the purposes of this study, parts 1 and 3, which focused on images, were used as the basis for the research instrument.

While LaBelle (2010)’s study only focused on representations of ethnicity/race, it was felt that such checklists could easily be expanded for the gender aspect also included in this study. The categories of race used, which were taken from USA Census categories, were also modified. ‘American Indian or Alaskan Native’ was expanded to include all Native Peoples. ‘Asian’, which included ‘Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, other Asians’ (p.10), was broken down into ‘East Asian’ (including China, Japan, Korea), ‘South East Asian (including Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam), and ‘Indian Subcontinent’ (including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) to more accurately represent Japan and its neighbouring countries.

Part 3 of LaBelle (2010)’s instrument, which aimed to ascertain the salient traits of the ethnicities, was felt to require modification in order to provide an accurate representation of the visual representations of people in the texts. While the traits he included such as did, to some extent, capture the features of the ethnicities depicted, it was felt that they were also subject to misrepresentation. This was clear from the examples provided for raters in the instrument itself. The first, ‘A photograph of a Black boy jumping off a picnic table accompanies a passage’ (p.35), was coded as ‘active’. However, standing on a table, let alone jumping off one, seems to represent a degree of anti-social behaviour, a negative trait unfortunately often associated with Black people. This aspect of the image was not captured by the research instruments coding of the positive term ‘active’. The

second example exhibited similar problems, and read as follows: ‘You read the following sentence in a passage. “The two Mexican American soldiers fought with courage and won” ’(p.35). This was coded as both ‘active’ and ‘agressive’. The code ‘agressive’ seems to be a negatively loaded term, while the sentence it refers to (fighting bravely) seems to be positive. Based on these examples, it was felt that coding salient traits with such adjectives could lead to unreliable results.

A different set of codes was therefore used to capture salient traits of each race in the current study. These describe what the person depicted is doing, such as speaking, cooking, playing tennis, or watching television. Such categories, although still to some extent open to interpretation, were felt to be more objective and easier to use than categories such as ‘dependent’ or ‘emotional’, for example. By describing what actions people of different genders and races are depicted as doing, it was hypothesised that any tendencies of particular groups being depicted in particular ways would be highlighted. These categories were compiled in a ground-up manner, with each new activity being added to the list of possible categories.

The images in the three textbooks were then coded. Bypassing the cover and table of contents, and starting from the first unit, each image containing a person was coded for gender, race, and activity. Where the race was unclear, the category ‘ambiguous’ was used. Some images, such as those of people in ski goggles or pictured in silhouette, were ambiguous for both race and gender. These images were excluded from the sample, as they were felt not to contribute to the current study. No images that could be coded for race but not for gender were found. Groups of people were coded as one instance following LaBelle (2010).

Table 1: Gender and Race in ‘Listen Up, Talk Back’

	Black	E. Asian	SE. Asian	White	Ambiguous	Total
Male	6	6	2	29	18	61 (47 %)
Female	9	6	0	37	16	68 (53%)
Total	15 (12%)	12 (9%)	2 (2%)	66 (51%)	34 (26%)	129 (100%)

Results

The findings for each of the three textbooks are summarized in the following sections.

Listen up, Talk back 1

This textbook has been ‘specially written for Japanese college and university students’ (iv), and contains 15 thematic units which cover scenarios that young people might encounter in Japan and abroad. These include ordering food in a restaurant, and talking about free time activities. It contains 4 characters who are introduced by name and nationality, and recur in some units. Bill and Meg are White, and described in the text as American; Takashi and Yoko are East Asian, and are described in the text as Japanese. These characters interact with other non-identified people such as shop clerks, and the book also contains stock images of people illustrating sports or free time activities. The representation of gender and race is shown in table 1 above.

This book contained a near-balanced number of males (61) and females (68). However, there was a tendency to depict females talking (9) more often than males (4). In terms of sports and exercise, females were shown in such activities only 4 times, while males appeared 10 times. However, males were also sometimes depicted in stereotypically female activities such as cooking (2), grocery shopping (1), and teaching young children (1).

In terms of race, Whites were depicted by far the most frequently (66), and therefore in the widest variety of activities. The second most frequent ethnic category was Black (15),

Table 2: Gender and Race in ‘Finding Connections’

	E. Asian	SE. Asian	Indian SC	White	Total
Male	0	10	0	50	60 (41%)
Female	29	0	14	44	87 (59%)
Total	29 (20%)	10 (7%)	14 (9%)	94 (64%)	147 (100%)

and although they were depicted listening twice, they were not depicted speaking at all. East Asian was the third largest group, and were depicted talking 5 times, twice of which were as female tour guides.

South East Asians were pictured only twice, as two males playing basketball. The text contained no people from the categories of Latinx, Indian subcontinent, Middle East, or Indigenous People.

Finding Connections

While the previous textbook had some recurring characters, this book is based entirely around the lives of 11 fictitious young people living in New York. The pictures usually show two of the characters in conversation, and each unit ends with an older white male in the role of a teacher explaining a communication strategy. Given the limited range of images, excluding the book was initially considered, however upon consideration it was also felt useful to understand which characters played more major roles in the stories, and which were pictured more often as speakers or listeners. The findings are show in table 2 above.

Of the 11 characters, six are female and five are male. Eight are white, one is East Asian, one is Vietnamese (stated the text), one is Indian (stated in the text). Despite being set in New York, no Black or Latinx characters appear in the textbook.

Overall, the images in the text contained almost even numbers of males (50) and females

Table 3: Gender and Race in ‘Pathways’

	Black	E. Asian	Indian SC	Indig.	Latinx	M. East	SE. Asian	White	Ambig	Total
Male	4	4	1	1	1	2	4	19	2	38 (54%)
Female	6	4	3	0	0	1	3	6	9	32 (46%)
Total	10 (14%)	8 (11%)	4 (6%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	3 (4%)	7 (10%)	25 (35%)	11 (16%)	70 (100%)

(44). However, significant differences occurred in the numbers of times they were depicted speaking or listening. Females were shown speaking in 29 images, and listening in 19 images. Males were shown speaking in 48 images, while only listening in three images.

The East Asian woman (Jenny) was show talking and listening in almost equal proportions (seven and six respectively). The Vietnamese man (Vinh) was only depicted talking (six times). The Indian woman (Maya) was show talking eight times and listening four times.

Pathways

This textbook, which utilises photographs from National Geographic, is longer than the other two books at 182 pages. However, the number of people depicted was the least. The resulting numbers of images depicting gender and race is shown in table 3 above.

In terms of gender, males were slightly more frequently represented in 38 images, compared to the 32 images containing women. This difference was most noticeable in the category White, containing 19 males and only six females. In terms of activities, there was a trend towards depicting males in stereotypically masculine occupations, such as inventors, engineers and a veterinarian, and engaging in sports such as skydiving and rock-climbing. The occupations for females depicted were as an author, a teacher, but also as two as doctors. Three women were depicted playing soccer, and one rock-climbing.

This book contained the widest amount of racial diversity of the three textbooks analysed, and included the categories of East Asian (8), South East Asian (7), Black (10), Latinx (1), Indian subcontinent (4), Middle East (3), and Indigenous People (1). Although judgements of race should have been made from the image alone, it was difficult not to use the captions to back up any initial interpretations, which often contained the country, such as ‘A teacher explains an activity to students in a classroom in Chikmagalur, India’ (p.30). For this reason, the category ‘ambiguous’ was not as large as it might have been.

Discussion and conclusion

This section will discuss representations of gender and race across each of three textbooks analysed, as well as providing thoughts on the novel research instrument piloted in this study. It concludes with suggestions for improvement for this instrument, as well as those for future research on this important topic.

Representations of gender and race

Of the three texts analysed, ‘Listen Up, Talk Back’ represented gender most equally, with 47% male and 53% female. However, males were over-represented in images of sport and exercise at 71%. Four different races were depicted, although White represented a disproportionate 51%. Black was the next largest category at 12%, and though these representations showed a variety of activities such as exercising, listening to music and graduating, they were never depicted speaking. South East Asian was the third largest racial group (9%). In terms of speaking and listening, they were depicted as speaking more often in five of the six occurrences. Since these all represented the two Japanese characters, they may provide positive role models for students of English in Japan.

‘Finding Connections’ depicted slightly more females (59%) than males, which is

probably because the number of female characters was also more than half (six of the 11), and all occurred in multiple units of the book. When the activities ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’ were compared, vast differences between genders were revealed. While females were depicted speaking and listening in similar degrees of 60% and 40% respectively, males were depicted speaking in an overwhelming 94% of images, and listening in only 6%. This over-representation of males as speakers reinforces stereotypical notions of males as the primary holders of knowledge. The representations of race were also considered problematic in this book. Images of White people occupied a disproportionately large proportion (64%), and it is considered a vast oversight that this book, supposedly set in New York, contains no representations/characters who are Black or Latinx.

‘Pathways’ depicted women in slightly less than half the images (46%). This textbook depicted the most racial diversity, with eight categories represented, although White represented the largest portion at 35%. There did seem to be a slight tendency to picture non-white people in exotic or traditional locations and costumes, not surprising given the National Geographic heritage of this text. These included a barefoot Thai man punting a boat through a lake of waterlilies, women in traditional costume in a market in Vietnam, and a Fulani boy herding cows in Africa. While such depictions are not necessarily a problem, they should be balanced with images of such people in modern occupational settings or enjoying hobbies and sports in equal proportion to those of White people.

Comments on the research instrument

One of the primary aims of this research was to pilot the research instrument, adapted from LaBelle (2010). Expanding the checklist to include not only race/ethnicity but also gender caused no problems.

Expanding the category of ‘Asian’ into separate counts of ‘South East Asian’, ‘East Asian’ and ‘Indian Subcontinent’ was motivated by a need to provide important data about these groups for the Japanese educational context. However, such judgements were more difficult than expected, and resulted in a large numbers of coding at the term ‘ambiguous’.

It was also found that this code, ‘ambiguous’, also contained two distinct types of images. The first, as mentioned above, were people whose race could have been from either of two or more categories. The second type were images where the race (and sometimes gender) were obscured, for example by scuba-diving apparatus or ski-wear, or they were pictured from behind, or in silhouette. This may be an important distinction, and it would be worth separating these categories in future research.

This research also trialled coding the ‘salient features’ of race and gender as actions. This also proved more difficult than expected in some images, as a person may be shown listening, standing and frowning all at the same time. Perhaps more specific research questions, for example focusing only on representations of speaking or listening, may make coding the relevant action easier and more accurate.

Furthermore, some images also appeared to convey complex messages about race and gender which would not be accurately represented by coding for action. ‘Pathways’, for example, contains an image of a woman using gaming headset (p.61). This may be coded as ‘gaming’, and, as such, be interpreted as a depiction of a female in a stereotypically male domain. However, as shown in figure 1, the woman’s expression and body language suggest surprise and wonder, rather than marking her as a skilful player of online games. Another example, also from Pathways (p.117) shows a group of men of different races listening to a professor talk about trees, and may be coded as ‘listening to a lecture’. However, as shown in figure 2, this is a prisoner-outreach program at a corrections centre, and may therefore primarily convey information about the races



Figure 1: Woman with gaming headset



Figure 2: Correction centre inmates listening to a lecture

incarcerated, rather than the races present in education.

To address this, quantitative data would be enhanced by detailed qualitative analyses of selected images as part of a mixed methods research design. A multimodal analysis such as that formulated by Kress & Leeuwen (2006) may provide interesting insights into the messages about race and gender encoded in textbook images.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, images that obscured both race and gender such as that shown in figure 3 (Pathways, p. 63) were excluded from this study, as they could not be said to contribute to the quantitative representations of any of the groups under investigation. While this still holds true, further reflection suggested that this very ambiguity could be either a good reason for or against using such images in textbooks. If ambiguous images mean that students of any gender or race can identify with the persons depicted, this would be a great asset to the textbook. Conversely, if students' previous biases mean that they consistently interpret such images as a White males, this would be an argument for avoiding them, and including images that show more visible diversity instead.



Figure 3: A gender and race ambiguous image

In conclusion, this study has piloted a new research instrument with which to investigate gender and racial representation in EFL/ESL textbooks, as well as offered preliminary results on the diversity represented in three such texts. The research instrument shows potential value in such research, and suggestions for further improvement to it have been made. The three texts investigated showed near equal numbers of depictions of men and women, although racial diversity was lacking across all three textbooks. Future textbooks should aim to accurately depict the rich ethnic diversity of English speaking countries such as Australia, the U.K, and the U.S.A, as well as the range of situations in which Japanese students of English may expect to use the language in their home country.

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