# WHO GETS TO BE THE HERO(INE)? ANALYSING FEMALE AND MALE ROLE MODELS IN JAPANESE TEXTBOOKS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

En termes de représentations de genres et d'ethnies, les manuels d'anglais langue étrangère (EFL) au Japon sont encore loin d'atteindre une égalité et ce malgré une amélioration dans les dernières années. L'objectif de cet article est de montrer de quelle manière le genre des « personnages exemplaires » dans les manuels japonais d'EFL pour le lycée contribue à la diffusion de modèles inégalitaires, renforçant des idéologies et représentations biaisées des diversités. Les résultats tendent à montrer une sous-représentation de personnages féminins et étrangers, souvent limités à des archétypes soumis ou liés à la nature et au respect de l'environnement, au lieu de modèles plus actifs (gagnants, athlètes ou personnes de succès), plus souvent réservés aux personnages masculins.

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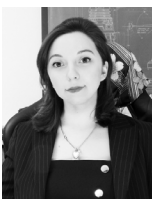
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Introduction

For the last twenty years, scholars have shown an increasing interest in the representation of gender and ethnicity in textbooks of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan (Sano & al., 2001; Smiley, 2015; Lee, 2016 and 2018; Cook, 2015; Otlowski, 2003). These studies show the presence of gender-biased implicit messages, stereotypes as well as an underrepresentation of female characters or ethnic diversity. They also report on recent improvements in the field, with textbook authors recognising in the last decades the importance of gender-inclusive vocabulary and neutral titles (e.g.: *Ms*). However, while gender and ethnic representation may have become more balanced than in the past, equal representation is still to be achieved.

The distribution of female, male and undefined characters

In order to contribute to the aforementioned discussion, an analysis was conducted on a corpus of eight recent EFL textbooks currently used in Japanese high schools. The first issue to address is the distribution of characters and their nature: while analysing social actors through van Leeuwen's framework (1996), female (F) and male (M) characters were observed, as well as characters that could not be defined by this binary division. For instance, in some texts the characters' gender is undefined (?) because of a functionalisation (such as 'researchers'); in other cases it is not a relevant feature (/) (for example, in texts dealing with subjects such as software or a space mission). It is also important to point out that other gender expressions such as non-binarity or gender fluidity are never shown in the textbooks. The reason why I decided to take into consideration undefined or non-gendered characters is because they are roughly as present as female ones in the textbooks (16% versus 20% of all characters), as can be seen in Table 1.

	EXERCISES			READING (P)			READING (NN)			READING (N)			TOTAL		
Sex	Occ.	Tot	%	Occ.	Tot	%	Occ.	Tot	%	Occ.	Total	%	Occ.	TOT	%TOT
?	3	34	8,8 %	7	77	9 %	8	31	25,8 %	2	54	3,7 %	20	196	10,2 %
/	0	34	0 %	8	77	10,3 %	1	31	3,2 %	4	54	7,4 %	13	196	6,6 %
F	7	34	20,5 %	13	77	16,8 %	5	31	16,1 %	16	54	29,6 %	41	196	20,9 %
M	24	34	70,5 %	49	77	63,6 %	17	31	54,8 %	32	54	59,2 %	122	196	62,2 %

Table 1

Distribution of characters in the corpus from peripheral parts of the textbook (exercises) to pivotal ones (narrative sequences in reading texts).

In this table, we distinguished *where* the characters appear in the textbooks, from peripheral places to more important ones. In the first column, the characters appearing in grammar or vocabulary exercises were listed (in these places there is no space left for explaining who the characters are, meaning the reference needs to be immediately understood). The following columns are reserved for characters appearing in reading texts, either in a peripheral place (P) or as the main characters of narrative sequences (N), following Adam's definition (2017), or non-narrative ones (NN). As we can see, female characters are underrepresented in comparison to male characters and they appear approximately as often as characters whose gender is undefined or not relevant, meaning that generally speaking, a chess software or a group of people have as many chances of appearing as agents in an EFL textbook as any determined woman. On the contrary, men tend to be more present and individualised, appearing frequently as singular characters both in peripheral and important places. In terms of representation, it is important to point out that the most visible characters are Japanese men occupying an important role as scientists or artists, while more diverse ethnic representations and jobs are scarcer.

Archetypes and role models

One of the reasons behind the distinction between the narrative (N) and non-narrative (NN) categories in Table 1 is the presence of a specific narrative genre in the EFL textbooks that appears to be very frequent and allows for more space for female characters. This genre will be referred to as 'the role model'. Indeed, every narrative sequence in the reading material of the corpus is built around a main character facing a series of obstacles before the end of the plot. In doing so, the character usually conveys a moral message and is thus portrayed as a role model, whether implicitly or explicitly. All the stories in the narrative category were analysed through Adam's framework for the analysis of textual sequences (2017) in order to break them down in terms of general plot schemes. This allowed for the establishment of five archetypes (reaction schemes), which were further developed into eight archetypal images (actualisation(s) of each archetype). Both the names of the archetypes and archetypal images were chosen in order to give an approximate idea of the content of the plot at first sight and do not follow traditional storytelling patterns.

As shown in Table 2, some of these images are more popular than others (the most frequent archetype being 'do your best' and the less frequent 'respect nature') and the distribution of female, male and non-gendered or undefined characters among them is not consistent. The distribution of main characters of narrative sequences is mostly coherent with the results in Table 1 in terms of female/male balance: male characters are more prominent than female ones; undefined or non-gendered characters appear in some cases just as much as their female counterparts. However, two archetypal images stand out in this analysis: the 'character in distress' and the 'environmental soul'. The former emerges because of the total lack of female characters, while the latter shows the opposite pattern.

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Archetype	Archetypal image	Sex distribution		%	Overall %
Respect nature	Environmental soul	/ or ?	-	0 %	F = 60% M = 20% / or ? = 20%
		F	2	100 %	
		M	-	0 %	
	Successful person (learn from nature)	/ or ?	1	33,3 %	
		F	1	33,3 %	
		M	1	33,3 %	
Help others	Good Samaritan	/ or ?	-	0 %	F = 38,4% M = 61,5% / or ? = 0%
		F	5	38,4 %	
		M	8	61,5 %	
Believe in yourself	Unrecognised genius	/ or ?	-	0 %	F = 37,5% M = 62,5% / or ? = 0%
		F	1	20 %	
		M	4	80 %	
	Redeemed person	/ or ?	-	0 %	
		F	2	66,6 %	
		M	1	33,3 %	
Do your best	Winner	/ or ?	3	27,2 %	F = 22,7% M = 59% / or ? = 18,1%
		F	2	18,1 %	
		M	6	54,5 %	
	Successful person	/ or ?	1	9 %	
		F	3	27,2 %	
		M	7	63,6 %	
Let others help	Character in distress	/ or ?	1	16,6 %	F = 0% M = 83,3% / or ? = 16,6%
		F	-	0 %	
		M	5	83,3 %	

Table 2

Distribution of characters in narrative sequences from more female-friendly to male-dominated ones.

The gender gap related to the 'character in distress'

In the case of the 'character in distress', the plot revolves around a main character who needs the help of others to achieve a goal or some specific aim. The observation that this role is never portrayed by a female character in our corpus of eight EFL textbooks suggests two possible and not-mutually exclusive hypotheses. First, this choice could reveal the intentions of the authors in avoiding the well-known 'damsel in distress' image. By deciding to only represent male characters (and one non-gendered character) as in need of help, all of the authors take a clear stance in not perpetuating gender stereotypes. Another possible explanation lies within the duplicity of these particular characters. Three out of five 'distressed' characters also actualise the 'good Samaritan' archetypal image, meaning that the same reading text provides two distinct narratives, with the main characters both helping and being helped by others. One example is the character of Anpanman, a Japanese superhero made out of a sweet roll that feeds hungry people by giving them parts of his body, thus becoming weaker and weaker until he needs to get help from his friends to stand up again. This mirrored narrative (to help and to ask for help) could have provided a double representation of female characters, yet the authors' choice results in only male characters conveying how, in order to help others, they need to seek and accept help first. Despite this interpretation allowing room for conscious approaches against gender stereotypes, the overall lack of female representation in the whole corpus suggests that the absence of 'distressed' female characters is not to be understood as an indication of a feminist stance from the authors.

The representation of female characters as 'environmental souls'

The second example would lead to similar conclusions. The 'environmental soul' plots revolve around characters who either fight for the preservation of the environment from the danger of industrialisation (e.g., Beatrix Potter) or who achieve their dreams by learning to respect nature (e.g., Uchino Kanako). In both cases the moral message is clear: nature needs to be respected and protected. The message of environmental care is a common topic in EFL textbooks in Japan, but it is more often expressed in expli-

cative or argumentative sequences (Adam, 2017). The choice of presenting this theme in narrative sequences is less common. Even if the number of occurrences found in the corpus is low, it is interesting to note that the environmental theme is the only one where female characters prevail. Indeed, the linkage of women and nature has been an important part of the debate within feminist research, whether in the field of ecofeminism (Shiva, 2016) or other feminist studies that take different stances (Argawal, 1992; Diamond and Orenstein, 1990; Warren, 1987; Warren & Erkal, 1997). Despite disagreements between them, all these studies are based on the common postulate that women are traditionally associated with nature, be it because of their ability to give birth (thus the association with animals or even 'Mother Earth' herself), because of patriarchal systems that bound them to agricultural fields instead of more industrial or intellectual occupations (reserved for men) or even because of the leading roles women often take in the preservation of environmental causes (although the reasons for this stance can differ).

The lack and fragility of female 'winner' models

The archetype where female characters are less represented (besides the 'character in distress') is the 'winner', which is one of the more common archetypes identified in the corpus. In this archetype, athletes participate in a competition despite a prior issue (e.g., sickness) and end up losing. However, they either figuratively win the hearts of the audience in the ongoing competition or achieve success later on by not giving up. One of the two unique examples where female winners are included is the narration of the Japanese football team's victory against the United States in 2011, presented in a reading activity based on a newspaper article that starts as follows:

Nadeshiko Japan Victory a Boost for Whole Nation

2011年ドイツで開催されたFIFA女子ワールドカップでは、サッカー日本女子代表（なでしこジャパン）が見事に優勝。東日本大震災直後の日本を大いに勇気づけました。彼女たちが心に秘めていた想いは、どんなものだったのでしょう。[Crown II: 46]

"In 2011, the Japanese feminine football team (Nadeshiko Japan) marvellously won the FIFA Women's World Cup held in Germany. It was a great encouragement to Japan in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake. What could these women have felt in their hearts?" (our translation)

The way the authors name the women's team provides some interesting clues in terms of status. The team is known in Japan by the name 'Nadeshiko Japan', with the name of the team being coreferent[1] to the phrase 'the female national football team'. In this example, the coreferential expressions need no further explanation, given that their reference should be immediately understood. We can compare our example, for instance, to 'Elizabeth II' and its coreferential expressions 'the Queen of the United Kingdom'. When writing about 'Her Majesty', a journalist would not need to explain either of these phrases. However, in the textbook example, the authors repeat the referent in parenthesis, thus showing that the information does not appear to be evident in their eyes. Indeed, the more a representation is evident or dominant in a discursive community, the less it is linguistically highlighted (von Münchow,

> Even if female characters do appear as winners in this case, their presence needs to be overly asserted in fear that the readers might not recognise who these role models are.

[1] Coreference is a phenomenon whereby two linguistic items have the same referent (e.g. 'Barack Obama' and 'The 44th president of the United States'); an anaphora, more specifically, refers to a noun or pronoun the reference of which depends on the existence of another one (e.g. '*Agnès* wants to sell *her* share of the family inheritance') (Schnedecker, 2019).

2018). By overly asserting and specifying the denomination of the women's team, the authors give us a hint of the fragile status that this information holds in their eyes.

By comparison, no author would feel the need to specify twice that 'Die Mannschaft' is the male German national football team, that 'Gli azzurri' is the Italian team and 'Les bleus' is the French team. While the women's teams bear similar names in Europe (e.g., 'Le azzurre' and 'Les bleues'), the same does not hold true in Japan, where the male team is named 'Samurai Blue', holding no morphological similarity to the female 'Nadeshiko Japan'. So, because female athletes usually have less visibility than male athletes (especially in football) and their team's name cannot be easily associated with their male counterpart, the authors signal the possibility that the readers might not know the referent of the phrase 'Nadeshiko Japan' by adding the coreferential expression in parenthesis. In short, even if female characters do appear as winners in this case, their presence needs to be overly asserted in fear that the readers might not recognise who these role models are.

Conclusions

The analysis of the distribution of female, male, non-gendered and undefined characters in Japanese high-school EFL textbooks tends to suggest that equality is still to be achieved. Indeed, women seem to be underrepresented, especially when it comes to specific genres such as the 'role model' narrative in reading activities, where Japanese male characters prevail. Messages such as 'doing one's best' are mostly portrayed in relation to men in the textbooks, whereas women tend to cover stereotypical roles, such as those who care for nature, or are bestowed with submissive roles (they often *learn from*, instead of *act on*). Even in the rare cases when women are represented as active heroines or winners, their presence is not self-evident and needs to be over-asserted.

In the end, the distribution and analysis of characters in recent textbooks point to the reinforcement of gender inequalities, as well as the perpetuation of stereotypical and patriarchal representations. These issues need to be actively addressed to improve both language textbooks and teaching.

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