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How well do materials evaluation schemes empower users to detect problematic social group portrayals within ELT materials? A corpus analysis

Charles Brown, Purdue University, West Lafayette, USA

Abstract

This research sought to determine how well schemes for evaluating English language teaching (ELT) materials provide guidance in detecting problematic social group portrayals. I collected 107 frameworks for ELT materials evaluation, assessing the guidance provided for detecting social group portrayals problematic in ELT materials. Specifically, I considered how well these frameworks instructed users in detecting ableism, ageism, lookism, racial bias, religious bias, cultural bias, undue UK/US focus, undue English native speaker focus, gender bias, heteronormativity, and urbanormativity. While results revealed some attention to these social group issues, this attention was limited and guidance to users was poor, especially when compared with more traditional areas of ELT materials evaluation such as that afforded to assessing presentations of grammar and vocabulary. This suggests a troubling blind spot in materials evaluation, one that could allow ELT pedagogy to promote social injustice given that problematic social group portrayals can form a potent hidden curriculum.

Keywords: Textbook evaluation, diversity, hidden curriculum, social justice, EFL, ESL

Introduction

In this paper, I consider how well English language teaching (ELT) materials evaluation schemes provide guidance in assessing portrayals of social groups historically at risk of marginalisation. This is important for several reasons. First, there is ample evidence that ELT materials often inadvertently include problematic social group portrayals. Examples include undue focus on the UK and US in materials purporting to be 'international' (e.g., Brown, 2021) and content that promotes stereotypical and confining gender roles (e.g., Dabbagh, 2016). Also, the inclusion of mass media materials such as print ads and movie clips in the language class as part of the embrace of 'authenticity' in language teaching increases the urgency of considering social group portrayals in ELT given the abundant documentation of problematic social portrayals in mass media artifacts. Yet, practitioners often accept materials, especially textbooks, as immune to social and political undercurrents and biases while the public at large concurs, viewing language education overall as a politically neutral conduit for linguistic competency (Atai, et al., 2018). Such faith further indicates the need for criticality. Despite these issues, no research has examined how well the many frameworks for evaluating ELT materials – popular as decision-making tools – empower users to be sensitive to social group portrayals. The work presented here addresses this gap.

Literature review

The importance of materials evaluation in ELT

Educational materials represent a cornerstone of language teaching. Teachers especially embrace the use of textbooks for many reasons, including perceptions of their value in structuring content and in easing the teacher's workload (Ahmadi & Derakhshan, 2016). Course textbooks can also foster progress, security, and autonomy for students (McGrath, 2013). Indeed, as Riazi (2003) argues, students view the textbook as the most important dimension of the language course aside from the teacher. Besides course texts, other forms of materials are increasingly important in ELT, especially computer software and other multimedia materials, particularly in light of their potential for motivating students by combining texts, images, video, and sound (Gilakjani, 2012).

Given the centrality of such educational materials, systematisation of decisions regarding their adoption and use is a key dimension of the training and support of ELT professionals (Mukundan, et al., 2011). The need to provide educators with tools to evaluate materials is also heightened by the tendency for the present-day educator to develop their own materials from scratch or to adapt them from other sources (Bouckaert, 2019). Beyond making decisions about which extant materials to use, evaluation represents an integral component of these productive activities as well (Levis & Sonsaat, 2016). Responses to the need to appropriately prepare educators include ELT teacher training courses with strong attention to materials evaluation (Tomlinson, 2016). Textbooks on ELT materials creation and selection likewise reflect this need. For example, an influential text on ELT materials with multiple editions over the years gives prominent attention to the issue of ELT materials evaluation (McDonough, et al., 2013). Another recent book dedicated to providing ELT educators with guidelines for materials development devotes the first chapter to materials selection and evaluation (Rubdy, 2014). An outgrowth of the importance of systematising materials evaluation and easing the burden of this work has been the development of checklists readily usable by educators (AbdelWahab, 2013). Işik (2018) argues that the important role of English education, and of the materials used, necessitates the rigorous evaluation of such checklists to promote the highest standards of validity and reliability. Yet, the literature is silent when it comes to considering how well such evaluation schemes provide guidance in assessing social group representations in ELT materials.

Problematic portrayals of social groups in ELT and mass media

Considering how well such evaluation schemes address social group portrayals is important given documented problems with social group representation in ELT materials. From at least the 1980s, scholars began to trouble the power of the traditional English-speaking countries such as the UK and the US, dubbed the 'inner circle' by linguist Braj Kachru (1988), along with the power of the native speaker in ELT. Despite such efforts, recent scholarship examining ELT materials indicates a continued bias toward inner circle culture at the expense of representation of other groups. Examining the seven most commonly-used ELT texts in Turkey, an analysis of photographs of people within their pages found that non-inner circle individuals were depicted as more socially distant and lower in power when compared with their inner circle counterparts (Günay, 2015). Such biases include a heavy focus on the inner circle and representations of inner circle individuals who are overwhelmingly white in advertisements for cram schools in Japan and Taiwan (Author, 2018). Chao (2011) documented the idealisation of an imagined native speaker culture in international ELT texts. In an analysis of ELT texts used in Iran, Davari and Iranmehr (2019) found that the focus was not only upon the inner circle, but one presented as both sanitised and culturally homogeneous.

ELT materials research from around the globe has amply documented problematic portrayals related to gender. This includes manifestations of traditional gender roles in Malaysian ELT textbooks (Bakar, et al., 2015). An analysis of Malaysian primary school English textbooks found men to be depicted as exercising greater agency (Shamsuddin, et al., 2015). Images sometimes present males as more central, visible, and active than females in ELT textbooks (Marefat & Marzban, 2014). In ELT texts from Iranian schools, males have been found to enjoy greater numerical representation (Nabifar & Baghermousavi, 2015). An analysis of English textbooks from Ugandan schools found women depicted as 'emotional, invested in physical appearances, vulnerable, and in need of men [and also as] irrational, passive, nurturing, trivial, empty-headed, and jealous' (Namatende-Sakwa, 2018, p. 609). An analysis of gender representation in English texts from Turkey revealed that 70 of the 102 jobs presented were held by males and that the adjectives used for females were more negative (Söğüt, 2018). In ELT software, Kordjazzi (2021) found that 'males appeared as active, competent, dominant, and powerful. Females appeared as reactive, objects of the male gaze, intimate, subordinate, and powerless' (p. 59).

Research indicates other forms of problematic social group depictions in ELT materials as well. Evidence of heteronormativity appears in ELT texts from Britain and the US (Baleghizadeh & Motahed, 2010). Paiz (2015) in an analysis of a collection of ESL texts found broad evidence of heteronormativity, noting that '[b]ased on the results of the data, the average ESL reading text/textbook can be described as being heteronormative' (p. 89). Cultural stereotypes such as those depicting African and Asian contexts as backward are manifest in ELT textbooks (Bao, 2016). Examining 3746 teaching materials from Japan, Brown (2021) found evidence of Christonormativity and the symbolic annihilation of other religious groups. In an analysis of ELT texts used for Mongolian people in China, Xiang and Yenika-Agbaw (2021) found representation skewed toward China and the inner circle, representation biased toward white people, and invisibility of LGBT people and the disabled. Racial stereotype and bias have also been documented in English language learning software (Babii, et al., 2016).

Additional types of problematic social group depictions in the mass media as revealed through critical media analysis are important to consider in ELT, although they have as yet been largely unexamined through scholarship specifically related to language teaching. Considering them in ELT materials assessment is strongly warranted for several reasons: First, most ELT materials are commercial in nature suggesting that they may be impacted by similar needs to cater to the ideological proclivities of consumers, as are mass media products in general. Also, ELT materials creators live within the same socio-cultural milieu as those authoring mass media artifacts, indicating that they may hold similar beliefs, whether conscious of these or not. Perhaps most importantly, materials employed by language educators have broadened in recent years to increasingly include 'authentic' materials such as movie clips, television commercials, and print ads to generate interest, to provide timely content and to compensate for some of the linguistic artifice and cultural deficiencies associated with the course text in language education (Kovács, 2017). These factors indicate the need to carefully evaluate ELT materials for the same problematic social depictions present in other media. I turn now to a discussion of these issues.

Perhaps the most carefully researched area of such social group depictions pertains to race. Detecting the more egregious forms of racism in media from previous generations, such as the Native American character speaking so-called 'Hollywood Injun English' (Meek, 2006) and the minstrel show 'mammy' (Adams-Bass, et al., 2014), is relatively easy. Yet, teasing out racist portrayals in today's media demonstrates the demand for sophisticated analytical techniques. For example, one analysis of television news broadcasts revealed that when the victim of crime was white, they were afforded greater screen time than when the victim was Black (Beale, 2006). A critical textual analysis of news media coverage of the killing of a Black man, Stephon Clark, by police revealed a tendency for the event to be framed from the perspective of the police (Kilgo, 2021). Another study found that image and print de-

pictions of Blacks as poor in the media far exceed the actual incidences of Black poverty, leading media consumers to overestimate the percentage of poor Blacks (Bullock et al., 2001). In entertainment media, numerous studies have documented problematic portrayals of race in animation intended for children, such as Disney features (e.g., Breaux, 2010).

A related area garnering heightened attention among scholars more recently is the issue of colourism in media. Hochschild and Weaver (2007), define colourism as a situation in which people 'attribute higher status and grant more power and wealth to people of one complexion, typically light skin, within the groups designated as non-white' (p. 646). Colourism is a worldwide phenomenon. Kyeremeh (2020) discusses challenges that dark-skinned athletes in Italy face in light of ideologies linking lighter skin to an imagined community of Italians. In India, the media promotes associations of higher value with those of lighter skin tones, which especially affects women (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016). A study of mothers in New Delhi revealed that in selecting potential mates for arranged marriages with their children, skin colour can be even more powerful than traits such as overall physical attractiveness and assessments of competency (Nagar, 2018). In the Philippines, television dramas and the print media promote the light-skinned ideal with sales of products for skin lightening representing an important industry (Flores, 2019). Steele (2016) has found that colourism is powerful in children's media such as cartoons in which '[a]ttributes of wealth, beauty, and intelligence are applied to characters with Eurocentric phenotypic characteristics while deviance, stupidity, poverty and unattractiveness typify characters with more Afrocentric facial features' (p. 53). Beyond skin colour, such colourism research documents the role of phenotype in general, recognizing that people of various skin tones and races but closer to possessing stereotypical Eurocentric features such as straighter hair, narrower noses, and thinner lips enjoy more favorable media depictions (e.g., Steele, 2016).

Another common form of social group misrepresentation in media is ableism, or the lower visibility of people outside of the stereotypical norm of able-bodiedness. Campbell (2001) considers ableism to represent '[A] network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human' (p. 44). This is reflected in a variety of media. For example, Flynn (2019) notes that the blockbuster movie, Avatar, portrays disability simply as something to be overcome, a common trope in science fiction and in public discourse surrounding people with disabilities overall; the film demands complicity in this stance on the part of the audience.

Ageism is also widely manifest in various media. Perhaps one of the most easily seen forms of this phenomenon is in the greeting card industry where birthday cards rely heavily upon ageist tropes such as physical decrepitude, sexual incapability, unattractiveness, and mental decline used to define elders primarily in negative ways (Ellis & Morrison, 2005). The fact that these materials are widely accepted as the basis for humour is indicative of the prevalence of and tolerance toward ageism. In the media as a whole, older individuals simply are often invisible and, when present, are depicted stereotypically (Achenbaum, 2015). The especially acute impact of ageism upon women has given rise to a focus upon gendered ageism in research. Gendered ageism is evident even in children's classic stories and fairy tales (Henneberg, 2010). Like many of these other problematic social group portrayals, ageism can be manifest in images, but also in text such as via group members being represented as the marked group, thus non-normative (Krekula & Johansson, 2016).

Two related areas of problematic social group depictions are lookism and sizeism in which certain body types are presented in the media as superior (Diedrichs, et al., 2011). For example, a corpus analysis of 4,313 characters in children's cartoons indicated that overweight characters were three times as likely to be depicted as less attractive, less capable, and less intelligent than others (Klein & Shiffman,

2007). Results can be devastating, as attested by the many studies linking consistent media use of thin models with eating disorders, sometimes fatal, among young media consumers, especially girls (Benowitz-Fredericks, et al., 2012). Concerns about this phenomenon have prompted legislation to limit the use of low-BMI models in some countries (Anderson-Fye, 2018). Overall, the issue demonstrates the power of images in conveying hidden and unintended messages that demand consumer complicity in believing in, or at least acquiescing to, these norms (Anderson-Fye, 2018).

A final area of recent focus in scholarship about social group media portrayals pertains to the issue of urbanormativity. Analyses of mass media artifacts indicates that the rural is often stigmatised as backward with this stigma often being ascribed to rural people themselves (Hayden, 2013b). Bassett (2003) notes that negative portrayals of the rural in the media are widespread and largely tolerated, that they are accompanied with messages that success is associated with the urban, and that the rural is often depicted simply as a place from which to escape. Importantly, '[t]he burdens imposed by [negative depictions of the rural] carry the same devastating consequences as other, more widely-recognised, forms of discrimination' (p. 284). The extent to which urbanormativity is tolerated is evidenced in movies, such as many American horror movies, in which the rural is associated with degeneracy and backwardness and as a dangerous terrain populated with inbred sexual predators (Hayden, 2013a). Moreover, the tendency for the media to focus upon and glamorise the urban and suburban often represents a conscious effort to appeal to consumers from these settings since they are considered to represent a more desirable cohort for marketing purposes than their rural counterparts (Kaiser & Bernstein, 2014).

In the foregoing, I have discussed problematic portrayals documented within ELT materials themselves as well as those manifest in the media ecosystem more broadly. This is not simply a 'laundry list' of social problems: The widespread manifestation of these issues in ELT and mass media, the effects of such portrayals, and the trust that students, teachers, and parents place in materials used in ELT serve as a call for attention to these issues in ELT materials evaluation paradigms. In light of this situation, I undertook the research described here with a focus on the following research question.

Research question

How effectively do readily available frameworks for evaluating ELT materials provide guidance for users to detect ableism, ageism (especially, gendered ageism), lookism (including colourism and sizeism), religious bias, cultural bias, inner-circle centrism and native speakerism, gender bias and andronormativity, heteronormativity, and urbanormativity in both written texts and images?

Materials and methods

Data collection

I collected online resources for language education materials evaluation based on the following search phrases that one wishing to evaluate ELT materials might use in an Internet search: How to evaluate textbooks for English language learners; English language textbook evaluation form; Evaluating materials for English language learners; English language textbook evaluation checklist. I conducted searches using the Bing, Duck Duck Go, Google, and Yahoo search engines, examining the first five pages of results from each. I felt this to be adequate for two reasons: First, it indicates the most prominent information. Second, research indicates that only 2% of individuals look past even the first page of search results when conducting an Internet search (Moran & Goray, 2019). I selected any results having suggested items for evaluation. This included ready-to-use checklists as well as explanations of

how to design such checklists with example items. I rejected papers simply discussing theory underlying checklist creation, but having no such specifics. Also, I collected only publicly-available results, rejecting those requiring paid subscriptions and those requiring membership in an institution (such as a university) to gain access.

I chose this approach to simulate results that would be obtained by a teacher engaged in a typical Internet search. While a more rigorous search of the Internet, especially including the use of sites only available to those associated with academic institutions, may yield results more sensitive to social group representation, the use of common search engines did provide 107 evaluation frameworks with 2990 individual evaluation items. Such a collection would be sufficient for the teacher interested in harvesting materials analysis schemes to put to use or from which to construct new ones. Purposely searching for frameworks with attention to problematic social group depictions is a different matter: Scouring the Internet and including restricted academic portals in the interest of locating evaluation schemes sensitive to issues such as urbanormativity or colourism could possibly reveal some materials (although, as noted, issues of racism, colourism, ableism, ageism, lookism, sizeism, and urbanormativity, though evident in critical media scholarship, were not manifest in scholarship pertaining to ELT). Yet, in addition to determining the attributes of evaluation schemes readily available for teachers' use, a secondary rationale for this methodology was to understand what a teacher might surmise about issues of importance in ELT materials evaluation through conducting a typical Internet search. Undertaking a search for materials evaluation schemes targeting these issues of social group representation, on the other hand, demands an a priori sensitivity about and commitment to them.

Data analysis

Most of the resulting materials analysis schemes collected were either published in academic journals or placed online by government educational boards and local school districts. I analysed this data in two ways. First, I considered the *amount* of attention to the areas of interest. I calculated both how many of the 107 frameworks included attention to each of the areas of interest as delineated in the research question as well as the number of framework items pertaining to these areas within the frameworks. I examined the materials collected for either the use of these exact terms or equivalent notions (for example, attention to inclusion of individuals of differing weights, BMI, or sizes rather than simply use of the term 'sizeism'). To contextualise the amount of attention toward these target issues, I also tabulated common areas of concern emerging throughout these assessment frameworks: These were grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and pronunciation.

Second, I also considered the *degree* to which guidance was provided for the areas of interest, examining how well forms of potentially problematic social group portrayals were broken down and operationalised for the user. Importantly, the studies cited in the literature review employed a variety of analytical techniques to obtain their results. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to delve into details, these methods included analysis of individual artifacts to determine problematic social depictions as well as examinations of corpora to reveal patterns of such depictions (such as the relative invisibility of specific groups). Such corpora included social group depictions within an entire textbook, a textbook series, or other collections of materials used by students. The importance of multimodal artifacts dictated the need for attention to images, videos, texts, and audio recordings. The complex demands of such analyses imply the keen need for instruction that the end user could readily follow. As with the amount of attention, I compared the degree of guidance with that afforded to grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and pronunciation.

Results

Amount and distribution of focus on assessing social group portrayals

In general, attention to gauging social group portrayals was scant among the materials assessment schemes collected. Only 30 of the 107 included any such attention to the areas of social group portrayals focused upon in this study. This was true even in the case of highly-reputed sources: Checklists gleaned from the publications of three world-famous ELT scholars, which were among the search results, contained no attention to any of the areas of interest. Likewise, a materials evaluation framework from TESOL International (TESOL International Association, n.d.) included no mention of social group portrayals: It was limited instead to concerns with Language Focus (Grammar, Vocabulary, Phonology, Discourse) and Skills Focus (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking). Overall, 61 of the frameworks included attention to grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or speaking. Of the 2990 individual assessment items on these lists, only 104 related to the targeted areas of social group portrayals. Attention to grammar (123 items) and vocabulary (152 items) each exceeded the attention to all of these areas of focus on social group portrayals combined. Attention to the areas of concern other than those relating to gender, culture, race, and inner circle centrism were especially sparse with only 23 of the 2990 items relating to ageism, heteronormativity, religious bias, ableism, lookism/sizeism, colourism, and urbanormativity combined. There was actually no attention whatsoever to colourism and urbanormativity in any of the 2990 items. Table 1 provides the breakdown of these quantitative results.

Item	Number of the 107 frameworks including each Item	Percentage of frameworks including each Item	Items among the entire 2990 framework Items	Percentage of framework Items
Grammar	49	45.8%	123	4.1%
Vocabulary	48	44.9%	152	5.1%
Speaking	34	31.8%	88	2.9%
Pronunciation	22	20.6%	33	1.1%
Gender bias, Gender stereotype, Sexism, Andronormativity	18	16.8%	31	1.0%
Cultural bias	16	15.0%	29	1.0%
Race, Racial bias, Racism	10	9.3%	12	0.4%
Ageism	8	7.5%	8	0.3%
Heteronormativity	5	4.7%	5	0.2%
Religious bias, Islamophobia, Christonormativity	5	4.7%	5	0.2%
Inner circle centrism, Native speakerism	4	3.7%	9	0.3%
Ableism	3	2.8%	3	0.1%
Lookism/Sizeism	2	1.9%	2	0.1%
Colourism	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Urbanormativity	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Table 1. *Attention to problematic social group portrayals in 107 ELT materials assessment frameworks*

Guidance details

Findings indicated that even when materials evaluation paradigms included attention to social group portrayals, the degree of nuance afforded to guiding the user was much less than for other areas. One example (Wuttisriporn & Usaha, 2019), dedicated sections to listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar, with each having around 5–6 items. For example, the scheme dedicated five items to vocabulary with attention to matching content to students' level, determining vocabulary 'load'

in each unit and in the text as a whole, recycling vocabulary items in later units, and designing exercises to promote greater vocabulary understanding and successful use. Only two out of the 70 items from this framework, by contrast, dealt with social group depictions. One included mention of cultural bias and stereotype. The other asked whether cultural materials included attention to people other than native speakers.

One of the frameworks with greater attention to social group depictions allotted three of 34 bullet-point assessment items to these issues. In this case, the creators stated that materials evaluators should examine whether 'the material is too culturally biased or specific' as well as whether 'the materials represent minority groups and/or women in a negative way and present a "balanced" picture of a particular country/society' (Maharani & Herani, 2018, p. 11–12). Even in this case, though, no further guidelines were provided for ascertaining the specifics. By contrast, the creators did include one item about avoiding inner circle centrism in which they operationalised it by stipulating that a variety of accents should be included. This concrete operationalisation of social group representation was unique in the collection. A different assessment framework stated that graphics should be 'culturally sensitive' and that materials should promote cross-cultural awareness (Wen-Cheng, et al., 2011). This treatment contrasts with the treatment of grammar, vocabulary, and reading in the same scheme: The authors indicated that grammar should be taught so as to recycle and build on grammar points, that target vocabulary should be recycled as well, and that reading should involve pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities with themes being recycled. This tendency to provide little guidance in the areas targeted in this study and much greater guidance for the more common areas of focus such as grammar and vocabulary was widespread among the materials collected.

One specific difference in guidance between these more prevalent dimensions of assessment and the issues of social group representation was the practice of drawing upon common concepts as reflected in metalanguage. The example above in referring to pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities with themes illustrates this: Users would likely be familiar with these concepts and, if not, references could be easily found. Thus, this meta-language increases the usefulness of these items. Another example considered the issue of text complexity. In this case, the framework creators noted the importance of text readability by appealing to lexile measures (NCTE, 2014). One more framework emphasised the importance of individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, and intonation as aspects of pronunciation (Razavi, 2014). Such nuanced guidance was sparse in the case of social group portrayals.

Questionable and unclear guidance

The analysis of materials assessment schemes collected for this study revealed advice actually appearing to conflict with fostering fair and equitable social group representation. Two evaluation schemes, for example, contained checklist items asking the user to assess the effectiveness of materials in teaching about 'target language culture' with American and British culture being explicitly mentioned (Demir, 2014; Miekley, 2005). Such items would tend to cement the status of the inner circle rather than dislodging it. One assessment scheme creator noted the value of a textbook because it included information about 'famous cities from around the world' (Nahrkhalaji, 2021). The intent of the author was to stress intercultural representation, yet a statement such as this one with its focus on the urban could also have the effect of promoting an urbanormative stance, and one limited to powerful ('famous') societies at that. Another scheme included the statement that '[a]ny cultural bias in the book is restricted to a degree acceptable to your learners in the sense that the cultural tone overall is appropriate for your learners' (Razavi, 2014, p. 3).This is confusing in suggesting that such bias could ever be acceptable and provides the reader with no means to assess such acceptability.

As the literature review demonstrates, images must especially be critically evaluated. Yet, guidance along these lines was lacking. One assessment scheme indicated that illustrations should be 'clear, simple, and free of unnecessary details that may confuse the learner' (Chegeni, et al., 2016, p. 2329). Such advice could actually promote stereotypes. This is because depictions conforming to stereotypes are less confusing than those challenging such stereotypes. For example, Steele (2016) documented how children's cartoons draw upon colourist stereotypes to create characters that the target audience can readily understand. In the interest of transformative education, materials should push students outside of their comfort zones by challenging stereotypes rather than drawing upon them. Yet, in the collection of assessment schemes this critical notion was almost never broached. Authors consistently treated illustrations naively, assuming their neutrality as a harmless means to add interest and vibrancy to materials.

Exceptions

While these results largely indicated that these materials assessment schemes lacked cogent guidance in assessing social group representation, four of the 107 schemes were exceptions, at least to a degree. In one (Sheldon, 1988, p. 244), the author included three assessment items under the category of cultural bias:

- [W]ould the book be able to wean students away from their preconceived notions?
- Does the coursebook enshrine stereotyped, inaccurate, condescending or offensive images of gender, race, social class, or nationality?
- Are accurate or 'sanitised' views of the USA or Britain presented; are uncomfortable social realities (e.g. unemployment, poverty, family breakdowns, racism) left out?

Especially notable was the first item which is unique among the 2990 items since it implied instructional scaffolding of students' attitudes toward social groups. In another example of attention to social group portrayals, assessment frameworks published by the Prince Edward Island (Canada) Department of Education included a section devoted to 'social considerations' in materials (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2008). Another scheme provided a detailed treatment of culture representation in materials with eight different items being about culture (AbdelWahab, 2013). Lei & Soontornwipast (2020) provide a checklist focused wholly on intercultural communicative competence. This scheme also placed a strong emphasis upon fair and empowering depictions of culture. Yet, none of these exceptional schemes included attention to a majority of areas of interest in this study.

Discussion

Results of this empirical study shed light upon the guidance provided by readily available ELT materials evaluation schemes in assessing social group depictions known to be problematic in ELT and mass media materials. Overall, findings indicated three areas of shortcomings in providing such guidance.

1. Little attention to problematic portrayals of social groups in ELT materials

When compared with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking, attention to problematic portrayals of social groups in ELT materials was very low overall. Gender bias, cultural bias, and racial representation garnered the most attention, but this was still much lower than that accorded to grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking. At the other end of the spectrum, attention to ableism and lookism was even less while there was no attention whatsoever to the issues of colourism and urbanormativity. The issue of inner circle centrism and native speakerism also was afforded little attention,

appearing in only four of the 107 assessment frameworks with some items actually *promoting* an inner circle focus. These results are troubling. For example, ableism, lookism, colourism, and urbanormativity are present across a broad swath of media and have deleterious impacts upon media consumers. As discussed in the literature review, media lookism has been linked to occasional fatal eating disorders.

2. Weak guidance

In the case of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking, more nuance provided superior guidance for the user. Not only did these areas tend to be broken down better with more sub-items under each issue, but meta-language was invoked plentifully, allowing links between these issues and related conceptual frameworks. For example, in the case of vocabulary, educators are likely familiar with concepts from these assessment schemes such as *lexile, verb, noun, word form, prefix, suffix, root, grade level* and *word attack strategies*. Such meta-language was absent in the case of items pertaining to social group portrayals. Yet, a body of relevant concepts does exist for these issues. There is, for example, a mature analytical toolkit drawing upon visual grammar, social semiotics, and statistical tools available for the analysis of images of people so as to discern issues such as gender bias. There was a single exception to this overall pattern in the data. In the case of cultural representation, the notion of the 'little c/big c' cultural dichotomy was used in three of the frameworks. The 'three p/four p model of culture' likewise appeared in three of the frameworks. The 'three p' model breaks culture into products, practices, perspectives; the 'four p' version adds people to the model (Baleghizadeh & Shayesteh, 2020). Both of these cultural models stress the importance of portraying culture not only as artifacts but as involving patterns of behaviour and the interpretive frames that members of different cultures bring to social situations (e.g., Kovács, 2017). Other possible means through which to evaluate representations of culture such as by invoking essentialism and tokenism, though, were absent as was the concept of symbolic annihilation (limited visibility or invisibility) of social groups.

The foregoing begs the question as to how much guidance regarding these areas of social group representation is feasible within materials analysis frameworks. While the scope of the present discussion precludes delving into this question, the research presented here does foreground an imbalance between the conceptual nuance invoked for more traditional areas of focus in these frameworks and those under investigation here. Yet, it is certain that conceptual frameworks for these issues of social group representation do exist in a number of fields, especially media studies. This study indicates, then, that it is critical for ELT educators to draw upon such work and to agree upon a meta-language so as to be able to conduct more cogent analyses and more fruitful communication given what is at stake.

3. Ignoring the hidden curriculum

Overall, the analysis of these frameworks for ELT materials evaluation indicated that attention to social group portrayals was seen as neither an appropriate part of the intentional curriculum nor acknowledged as a potential dimension of the hidden curriculum. Alarmingly, the notion of the *hidden* curriculum was not invoked in any of the frameworks collected. This shortcoming itself is suggestive since problematic social group representation is typically manifest as part of the hidden, unintentional curriculum. At the broadest level, these results indicate that assessment schemes for ELT materials reflect attention only to the explicit, intended curriculum rather than also empowering users to be sensitive to unintended forms of teaching implicit in materials.

Conclusion

Ample research reveals the ongoing presence of problematic social group portrayals in ELT materials and in the mass media more broadly. The fact that practitioners are encouraged to appropriate mass media resources into their language teaching in the interest of enhancing linguistic authenticity, capitalising upon students' interests, and making content current increases the chance for problematic social group portrayals to enter ELT practice. Many ELT materials are themselves also commercial in nature which suggests that they are subject to similar economic forces as those serving to promote questionable social group portrayals in the mass media more broadly. To what degree, for example, do people on the covers of commercial ELT texts tend to be young and conventionally photogenic rather than disrupting norms about physical attractiveness? Finally, ELT materials creators may be socialised along the same lines as their mass media authoring counterparts, suggesting that similar unconscious propensities may come into play. Careful attention to social group portrayals in materials evaluation guards against these possibilities. Yet, the research presented here indicates that materials evaluation pays scant attention to problematic social group portrayals and that when it does, guidance is muted, unsystematic, and unclear.

Anyone involved with ELT should be troubled by this situation. Some may respond that, of course, grammar commands a greater focus in ELT than social group portrayals, and that this is as it should be. I would like to challenge such thinking. First, I do not see this as an either/or zero-sum dichotomy in which we must make a choice. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that such problematic social group portrayals may exist in our materials as a hidden curriculum *whether we address the issue or not*. For example, the common use of stereotypical 'Anglo' names such as Jane and John in ELT dialogues supports the hegemony of the inner circle Anglo (Brown, 2021). Educator inaction in such cases may then be tantamount to complicity in sustaining historical relations of social power.

If guidance for ELT professionals to vet materials for problematic social group portrayals is not adequate, they can be propagated via ELT, especially given the ubiquity of ELT and the trust placed in it. Such promotion of harmful social group representations runs counter to the overarching goal of fairness in education. It also undercuts some ostensibly cherished goals of ELT such as interculturalism, internationalisation, and transformative education, concepts often enshrined in explicit policy and curriculum statements as rationales for ELT study. Moreover, the epistemology of these assessment schemes can, ironically, represent a hidden curriculum in its own right, one that teaches educators themselves what counts and what is of lesser importance in their field. Materials in this study promote the notion that grammar and vocabulary, for example, represent proper concerns of ELT, that gender roles and race in materials are less important, and that ableism, ageism, Christonormativity, colourism, and heteronormativity are not legitimate areas for concern whatsoever. Nor is the hidden curriculum itself.

This study thus indicates that more must be done. Perhaps one of the most unexpected and disappointing findings was the absence of much attention to inner circle centrism and the native speaker fallacy. This is concerning because some of the most famous scholars in language education have troubled these tendencies for decades now. It is clear, then, that efforts to focus upon problematic social group portrayals should be redoubled in materials evaluation schemes. The onus is especially upon members of the scholarly community, trainers of teachers, and other leaders interested in fair social group representation to take up this challenge. This is not a question of promoting social justice so much as making an effort to avert the propagation of social injustice via educational practice.

Biographical notes

Charles Brown i is a lecturer in the Purdue Language and Cultural Exchange (PLaCE) program at Purdue University, USA, where he works to support international English language learners at the university level. His work has also involved training pre-service teachers in Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. In his research, he especially investigates the roles and representations of different social groups in English language education in order to foster socially responsible practice.
Email: bairenyuan@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0952-7442

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