



## Through the Anti-Bias Looking Glass: The Messages We Send Our Learners in (Primary) ELT

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### *Abstract*

English language teaching materials in primary schools are fraught with images and examples that upon closer scrutiny, need unpacking or even replacement to steer learners away from stereotypes and to promote deeper thought and encourage exposure to the world. The purpose of this paper is to introduce readers to the Learning for Justice's Social Justice Standards and show how these can be applied to standard coursebook images for basic A1, A2 and B1 level activities. These same activities can be applied to images and texts from other sources, such as international newspapers' images of the day. Secondly, results of a classroom experiment with pre-service teachers using the Dispositions for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Scale will be shared and ideas for prompting discussion provided. Finally, larger project ideas for EFL lessons in public primary schools to promote an anti-bias stance to education will be suggested.

**Keywords:** anti-bias education, EFL, Social Justice Scales, coursebook adaptations, authentic materials, cultures

*The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.*

(James Baldwin, 1963)

## 1. Introduction

The words of the late novelist James Baldwin unfortunately still persevere today. The world is still navigating through turbulent waters – locally in Switzerland 2021 celebrated only 50 years of women’s right to vote, yet in many countries this is still a concern. Globally, UNESCO’s Sustainable Development Goals encourage us to think about issues facing us all, such as climate change. Glocally, Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movements provide a push towards a more just future no matter where we are.

This paper is a plea for teachers to consider what they are working with in the English language (and all other) classroom and to learn omit materials that can be seen as oppressive or too limited, to address other materials that can be seen as provocative more deeply, or use authentic sources that encourage learners to expand their background knowledge and encourage an open and tolerant world view as local curricula suggest. In the words of Derman Sparks, “it is not sufficient to be non-biased nor is it sufficient to be an observer. It is necessary for each individual to actively intervene, to challenge and counter the personal and institutional behaviors that perpetuate oppression” (1989, p. 3). To do so, using the Dispositions for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Scale and the Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework can create awareness and be valuable for the planning of instructional content. These tools can be used from the images we show our learners to the model sentences and texts we provide.

Teachers, who are in a role of responsibility, have an obligation to uphold basic tenets of their local curriculum; in Switzerland these are upholding “humanistic and democratic values” (D-EDK, 2015) in every subject taught. In this same line of thought, the Council of Europe’s 2020 “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion” volume refers to both addressing overgeneralizations and stereotypes (p. 24) as well as embedding foreign language teaching into contexts that “develop competences for democratic culture, such as valuing cultural diversity and openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, worldviews and practices” (D-EDK, p. 14). Thus, the foreign language classroom - albeit working with learners who

cannot express themselves to the same degree as they can in the local languages - has the same social responsibilities as the regular classroom – it is not because learners cannot express themselves elegantly in a foreign language that foreign language teaching has to be babied down and cognitively over-simplified.

Addressing current events and issues of social justice and not avoiding them in every classroom and including the EFL classroom is supported from other perspectives. First of all, long before the age of nine (when foreign language instruction begins in Swiss and other European schools), learners are aware of the ethnic, racial, and cultural groups to which they belong (Ray, 2015) and are aware of and even act upon racial bias as early as the pre-school years (Waxman, 2021). Thus, it is never too early to propagate critical thought and to include materials that reflect the world.

Furthermore, there is more and more evidence (e.g., Hirsch, 2010 or Willingham, 2017) to suggest that reading skills are influenced more by content or background knowledge than pure reading skills per se. This research generally encourages content and projects that increase learner contact time with myriad topics from science and social studies, current events, and more. In the ELT classroom, this can be interpreted as a recommendation for a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach. CLIL can not only be beneficial because it helps learners see connections and provides rich and meaningful contexts, but also because such CLIL content provided in a foreign language classroom increases learners' background knowledge and thus hopefully has a positive effect on other skills in the local language, such as reading (see contribution by Steinlen and Priska in this volume). Such contexts, in a social justice, anti-bias setting include historical knowledge, politics, religion and are tied to each and every school subject.

## **2. Using the Dispositions for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Scale**

Developed by Whitaker and Valtierra (2018), The Dispositions for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Scale (DCRPS) measures dispositions towards praxis (willingness to be vulnerable, to exam identities), towards

social justice (willingness to discuss hot topics) and towards community (not discussed here). It is a good place to start to see not one's own bias as perhaps Harvard's Implicit Bias test might show, but rather to see one's dispositions towards educating diverse students regardless of one's own beliefs or affiliations. Concrete ideas for using this scale in pre-service training can be found in Loder-Buechel (2022) where pre-service teachers were asked to judge the appropriacy of certain images (such as a woman serving a man wearing a crown turkey as an example of a traditional English Christmas as shown in Figure 1) found in Swiss primary school coursebooks, to rate themselves on the scale and then to again judge the appropriateness of certain images found in coursebooks.



**Figure 10: Traditional English Christmas dinner picture (Arnet-Clark et al., 2019, pp. 42–43)**

Pictures, such as that in Figure 1, suggest “this is what all English Christmases looks like” which are overgeneralizations, are Anglocentric when English is a Lingua Franca, neglect other holidays at the same time of year, and the picture itself can lead to thoughts on gender roles. This process led to quite a revelation for many students as noted in their comments: “Uh-Oh...It might be better to have different families doing

different things and open this up to other winter holidays” (Student A) or “The picture shows stereotypes like the woman serving the man. However, if there is enough material in the classroom against those stereotypes and if the teacher opens a conversation about the problem of this picture it can still have a positive effect” (Student B).

Scale item (taken from Whitaker and Valtierra, 2018)	Possible questions for discussion or thought
I value assessing my teaching practices.	If you were to use this picture as the Teachers Notes state (name all the costumes and describe what is in the picture), would the language the children learn be functional and useful in the larger world and would the level of thought the prompt provides allow for critical thinking?
I am aware of my cultural background. I am willing to examine my own identities.	Does your own culture celebrate Halloween or is it seen as a commercialized American holiday? Have you lived abroad and experienced Halloween? What could you bring into the lesson from your own experiences?
I am willing to be vulnerable. I believe that hot topic conversations (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) should be had in class when necessary and/or relevant.	When you look at this picture, do you see any costumes you think may not be appropriate (e.g. people dressed as Native Americans)? How would you broach this in English or in the local language with your learners?
I am willing to take advantage of professional development opportunities focused on issues of diversity.	Do you know where to find information on Halloween and other such holidays (e.g. Dia de los Muertos or All Saints Day)?
I value equity (giving each student what they individually need) over equality (giving each student the same thing).	How can you use this picture to not only promote thought but also to allow learners to work at their own levels? Is there a dialogue that can be created from the picture that supports any of the topics elicited here (compliments, cultural appropriation)?

**Table 1: Using selected items from the DCRPS to discuss a Halloween party**

The DCRPS is meant to show willingness on a much larger scale than for a singular school subject, yet it is extremely valuable in ELT as well, especially on this micro level for reflection. The statements on the scale (see Table 1) can be prompts for discussing coursebook content, and lead to intercultural and anti-bias learning for both teachers and learners alike. The DCRPS does not necessarily have to be used for pictures that are provocative or where there is a clear issue – it can be used as tool for analysis about pictures that merit more discussion due to the topic they represent. For example, Halloween is a topic that is often acceptable to include in ELT books, yet in some books it is presented without much context, as a simply descriptive activity (describing costumes). As an example of using the DCRPS statements, when looking at a picture of a Halloween party where one sees a haunted house and about thirty children dressed up in various costumes, including Native Peoples, discussions can be held in teacher training or even with learners in the local or target language depending on the learners' age or interests that connect the DCRPS statement when applied to the Halloween (Table 1).

Following a description of the picture itself in the classroom with learners, teachers can then choose to develop teaching ideas that are more reflective of a willingness to encourage social change. They can:

- 1) Start with the level of thought they want the learners to be on (justifying a costume decision? complimenting a costume?);
- 2) Go to Cambridge University Press' Language Profile grammar section and search for A1 or A2 level language structures that would reflect the thought that is to be encouraged;
- 3) Design a language teaching activity (see Table 2 for an example role-play) that is at the right level for their target learners.

Although this is not using the scale for its original intent, such an exercise allows for a level of thought that then can transfer to other pictures encountered and encourage the more in-depth and reflective use of pictures found in coursebooks. It also allows a guided way of getting (future) teachers to (re)consider what they are "expected" to work whilst allowing them to knowledgeably decide to work with materials sensitively or even not at all – in this case perhaps it would simply be better to print out pictures of various holidays around the world. Finally, there are other

tools, such as the “Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children’s Books” (Derman-Sparks, 2016) which can be used for similar guided thought activities. These tools can also be used in various situations different than the ones for which they were originally written. This can contribute to the better use of images and text in any coursebooks.

<p><i>Aim: Asking about cultural appropriateness</i></p> <p><i>Setting: Two friends</i></p> <p>Friend A: I need to find a Halloween costume!</p> <p>Friend B: I am going to be a bird – my little sister has a costume.</p> <p>Friend A: I have an Indian costume and lots of feathers, I can wear that!</p> <p>Friend B: No!!! It’s not “Indian”, it’s Navajo or Hopi or something! And you are not Navajo or Hopi. You cannot wear that!</p> <p>Friend A: Why not?</p> <p>Friend B: Because that is traditional and you are not Navajo! What do you know about the Navajo or Hopi?</p> <p><i>Students can continue the conversation.</i></p>
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**Table 2: A2 level role-play ideas using a Halloween party picture prompt (own source)**

**3. Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework**

The Southern Poverty Law Center is a US platform that serves teachers with materials to combat prejudice and hate. One core tool they provide is the Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework (Chiariello et al., 2016) which are based on Derman-Sparks’ (1989) goals for anti-bias education. These standards are broken into four domains and provide standards for Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action and describe learning outcomes and possible scenarios for kindergarten through twelfth-grade students. For Swiss teachers who are allowed the freedom to teach in the way they see fit and use additional materials, but who are not allowed to choose the

coursebooks with which they teach and often do not have time to create new materials as they are generalist teachers, this framework can provide a useful angle from which to view the current coursebooks for purposed adaptations or exclusion of content.

### **3.1 Using the framework for questioning**

Taking the same Halloween picture described above, using the Social Justice Framework prompts us to think about how this picture could be used in class, in English or in the local language.

From an identity angle, the following questions teachers could ask:

- Where do I fit in in this picture? Where and who am I in this picture? Why?
- Who do I want to be in this picture? Why?
- Would I have been the same person last year? Why or why not?
- Who influences who I am?

From a diversity angle, teachers can ask if the people in the picture are representative of a diverse population or if there are people in the image that represent the world as it really is. From a justice angle, the question can be asked if children are allowed to dress up in a certain costume (such as a Native person), and list what would and would not be allowed and why. Finally, from an action angle, learners can prepare a proper Halloween party with certain rules (no Black Face, etc.) or host an event that raises money for a certain cause.

The question that comes up in class is often of whether or not these ideas are too complex for primary school EFL learners. The answer is a mix of asking ourselves if we should be allowed to teach “Halloween” if only denotations are used when the pictures we provide our learners are full of connotations and ideas for expanding the topic to the local language or also to other subjects, in this case to have learners compare Halloween with All Saints Day and Dia de los Muertos – which is possible in the English language classroom but simply not in the official coursebooks.



### 3.2 Using the framework more generally – “Identity standards” example

The Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework can also be used more generally, as a tool to scrutinize coursebook activities and get an overview of the entire curriculum. Generally, the process would be to:

- 1) Read through the standards (Chiariello et al., 2016) on the Learning for Justice website (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/>).
- 2) Locate where there are examples of them in the locally used materials and find out where these examples could be taken further.
- 3) Find out for which standards are not exemplified in the local materials and plan out activities around these missing standards.
- 4) Analyze the provided scenarios for use with learners.

The example provided here takes the standards for “identity”. This same analysis could be done in class for diversity, justice and action standards but is not treated here.

What elementary school coursebooks in Switzerland do provide are opportunities for learners to “develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society” and “language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe this membership”(Chiariello et al., 2016). These can be found in family tree activities, in a unit where learners have to present their family origins and mini books about themselves. This could be taken further whereby learners take any of these products and look more at the history of their origins or where their families split or merged with other groups.

To delve deeper, using pictures such as Elise Gravel’s “All Kinds of Families” picture that shows eleven different families with the author’s comment “There are many different kinds of families. I can’t draw them all on this page, it’s impossible!” (Gravel, n.d.). Learners can answer the following questions:

- Do you know any families like the ones in the pictures?
- What do they do for fun together?
- What is a family? What makes a family a family?
- Who is in your family?

- Which families do you know / are in this picture that are NOT like yours?
- What language would YOU use to describe these families? Should you avoid descriptions such as “his mother is White, his father is Black”?

Where the local coursebooks do not touch upon these identity standards are in “people’s multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals” and in the recognition of traits of the “dominant, home and other cultures” (Chiariello et al., 2016) and how an individual negotiates amongst many contexts. Here, teachers can confront learners with more varied identities by asking:

- Who am I today?
- Who will I be tomorrow?
- Who am I sometimes?
- Who influences who I am / want to be?

Teachers can take the pictures of families and look at them from a cultural perspective – is this Canadian example similar to what we see in Switzerland? Furthermore, to address these missing standards, in the Swiss classroom, teachers can look at stereotypical images of Switzerland (fondue, Heidi, Swatches, etc.) and ask learners if they see themselves in the same way “Canadians” see them and if anything is missing.

Finally, the anti-bias scenarios provided in the standards as examples of the application of the standard to the classroom are worth working with on a content and language level. An example of one such scenario is:

For show and tell, Joi brings in a picture of her family on a church camping trip. “My family goes camping a lot. I like camping,” she says. “I’m a Christian, and sometimes my family goes camping with the church. I’m also a big sister, so I have to help my parents take care of my little brother, especially when we go camping” (Chiariello et al., 2016, p. 5).

This example is already at an A2 level (cf. <http://www.roadtogrammar.com/textanalysis/>) which is appropriate for a group of Swiss elementary school learners. Therefore, teachers can use the text directly as it is by

letting the learners replace words with their own, by turning it into a role-play, by creating a gap or a cloze activity.

Other anti-bias scenarios are a bit too complex linguistically, and need to be simplified, for instance reworking a scenario provided at a C1 level by simplifying the language and using cognates found in German to bring to a B1 or B2 level, as shown in Table 3.

Original Text	Adapted Text
<p>Omar’s mother is serving as a chaperone on her son’s field trip.</p> <p>On the bus ride, the teacher, Ms. Robin, overhears a conversation between Omar and Peter. “What is your mother wearing on her head?”</p> <p>Peter asks. “It’s called a hijab,”</p> <p>Omar replies. “Many Muslim women wear them.” “Why does she wear it?” “Our religion teaches us that the hijab is a way of being humble and modest. Muslim women wear it to show they love God.” (Chiariello et al., 2016, p. 6)</p>	<p>Omar’s mother went on the class trip.</p> <p>On the bus, Peter asks Omar: “What is your mother wearing on her head?”</p> <p>“It’s a hijab,” says Omar. “Many Muslim women wear them.”</p> <p>“Why?” asks Peter.</p> <p>“Our religion teaches us that the hijab is a way of being humble. Muslim women wear it to show they love God.”</p>

**Table 3: Adapting the Social Justice Anti-Bias Scenarios to a more accessible level in ELT**

The example in Table 3 can be used for a discussion, in English or the local language, about why hijabs are worn and what else people wear for religious or other reasons. In this regard, the general topic of clothing can be addressed. In many ELT coursebooks, learners have to describe each other by the color of their clothing in almost every grade, and even in the fifth grade in the Swiss context, after more than two years of English, they are asked to “Describe your best friend (eyes, hair color, etc.)” and the same in secondary, but with more attributes. With such exercises, instead of just simplistic descriptions, we can work on the semiotics a bit more by asking what it says about the person (and why). For instance, we can teach “I like wearing ponytails: I need my hair out of my eyes for gymnastics”

as an example of what we look like with why we do so. We can also show pictures, such as drag queens and teach language such as “They are wearing fancy clothes! They like them!” Adding word pools of positive characteristics is not overly linguistically demanding and might actually capture learners’ interest – learning “They’re spunky” is so much more fun than learning “They have brown eyes.”

There is a wealth of teaching ideas that come from using Social Justice Standards that are not in many current local coursebook materials. It would be relatively simple and much more meaningful to create activities based on these materials that provide a common thread that would go through the curriculum: promoting an anti-bias stance to education. It is simple enough to teach “one mom, two moms”, to create partnerships through platforms such as epals, or to explicitly put deconstruct gender stereotypes by using better pictures and example sentences. It is easy enough, instead of showing single representations of events such as holidays (e.g., Halloween), to print out several pictures from several different cultures. These ideas promote an anti-bias curriculum.

#### **4. Suggestions for using newspaper pictures**

Besides exposing, provoking and unpacking coursebook materials, a simple way of presenting the world as it is by regularly using newspaper pictures. All the international newspapers and many local ones have “Pictures of the Day”, “The Week in Pictures”, or “Bilder der Woche” which make rich prompts for simple language activities in ways that open learners’ eyes to the world around them. With a measured and age-appropriate selection and discussion in the local language if need-be, such images can prompt critical thinking and awareness and most of all, provide exposure. Coursebook images are always a compromise and are often outdated.

Relative short, simple activities at the A1 or A2 levels could be:

- Having learners write captions and then comparing them to the ones provided;

- Uncovering the picture bit by bit with an image reveal tool (e.g., <https://www.classtools.net/reveal/>) and just naming the colors or objects seen in each section;
- Having learners label what is in the picture either directly on the picture or as an ABC race on the board or on a separate sheet of paper;
- Having learners list categories / solutions / reasons for the picture as a whole or elements within;
- Using the pictures for classroom routines where every lesson, a child has prepared to show and describe a provided or selected picture;
- As a riddle, a learner can pretend to be in the picture somewhere and describe “from where I am in the picture, I can see...”;
- Having learners write 2 truths and a lie either about what is in the picture or about the context of the picture;
- Having learners use a graphic organizer to hypothesize on the Who/What/Where/Why/When/How of the picture and then following up on the actual information;
- Having learners look at the picture for 30 seconds and then taking it away (“What do you remember?” → “*I saw ... There is / are/was/were ...*”);
- Doing a word art project with the picture: learners take a small version of the picture and glue to a piece of paper and continue the drawing around it in a mix of word and picture;
- Hanging pictures around the classroom, describing one and having the learners go there and say more about it;
- Being provided with one picture a week and at the end of every lesson respond to a prompt (such as “What is in the picture?” or “What does the picture tell us about the situation?”).

For entire lessons, with enough support for an A1 or A2 level or at higher levels, learners can:

- Plan a story around the picture, then write it up or prepare a comic or storyboard about it;
- Choose two similar pictures and compare and contrast them;
- Find out more about the picture, its background and what it represents;

- Create a news report using the picture.

These examples do not take much work on the part of the teacher and can easily be integrated as permanent routines in the classroom (e.g. every Friday is a “What’s Going On in the World?” lesson). These ideas provide practice of the basic structures that learners need (“There is/are”, “In this picture, I can see...”) yet more than just teaching English, using such pictures can increase learner world knowledge substantially, hopefully thereby promoting critical thinking skills and through exposure, reading skills.

## 5. Conclusion

There are multifold implications of using the tools and ideas presented here. First of all, pre-service teacher training needs to include an awareness and discussion of dispositions and mindsets. With these in mind, teachers can view the materials they might be expected to work with in a new light that sheds questions on the implicit or latent messages being sent to learners, these which might actually contradict a teacher’s own beliefs or dispositions. Secondly, even a quick go-through of the core elements from the Social Justice Framework with a possible lesson in mind can provide ideas for questions or alternate ways of working with materials. Thirdly, knowing that it is acceptable to present the world as it is and the issues that touch us all even to younger learners or beginning language learners can lead teachers to taking more risks – be it in simply presenting pictures from the local newspaper to teaching entire units on Black Lives Matter or Unsung Heroes or whatever one is passionate about. Finally, such an awareness can lead to even simple changes: why show female ballerinas and male boxers when there are many both male and female dancers and boxers.

Just as Baldwin (1963) says, we teachers in central Europe are in a role of responsibility, we are obliged by our curriculum to help our learners learn to manoeuvre in a colorful, diverse world and expose our learners to the many people and places in it and we must not shirk this responsibility. There are many authentic numerous resources from the English-speaking world that can support English language teachers around the world (see [https://padlet.com/laura\\_buechel/diversity](https://padlet.com/laura_buechel/diversity)) to help.

Therefore, there is no reason for teachers to avoid “hot topics”, they should confront and embrace them and expose their learners to them as addressing issues of privilege, race, gender and more belong in every subject and in every grade.

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