

Fostering good relations: Textbooks, affordances, and the equality agenda

A response to: Brown & Nanguy's (Vol. 8, Iss. 2, 2021)
"Global Coursebooks and Equalities Legislation: A
Critical Study"

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In their article (*NYS TESOL Journal*, Vol. 8, Issue 2), Brown and Nanguy argue against the use of Global ELT textbooks in ESOL classes in Scotland because—they claim—such books essentially contravene UK equalities legislation. The UK Equalities Act of 2010 (UK Government, 2013) protects certain groups from discrimination based on their age, gender reassignment, disability, race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, being married/in a civil partnership, and being pregnant/on maternity leave. The Act has also introduced a public sector equality duty so that public bodies “have due regard to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different people” (2013). Brown and Nanguy (2021) claim that the act also requires promotion and representation of these protected characteristics in teaching materials (p.51). Based on this claim, they conduct an analysis of the intermediate level of two global textbook series, *Headway* (Soars and Soars, 2012) and *Outcomes* (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a), the second of which I co-authored, in order to test how well such textbooks meet the Equalities Act and, what they call, the equalities agenda. Brown and Nanguy use a combination of two interpretative methods, semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to “reveal how damaging-- from a social and a legislative perspective-- global textbooks can potentially be” and how they act as “an obstacle” to social inclusion (2021, p. 60). The current article offers an alternative analysis of *Outcomes Intermediate* (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a), and provides examples from other books in the series to show how some equality issues and related language have actually been actively embedded in the book curriculum—contrary to the 2021 article claims to the opposite.

Social inclusion is an important issue for any educator and it should be a consideration in the process of selecting and *using* teaching materials. Brown and Nanguy's article may be seen as a spark that can encourage others to consider the way language books have traditionally represented any of the members of the protected groups. However, as a sole basis for such their article's debate, it appears deeply flawed. Firstly, it provides no methodological framework. Their analysis starts with the preconceived view that books for profit that are sold in more than one country ('global textbooks'), are uniformly bad for all teaching and learning. Second, the authors misinterpret the Equalities Act because the Act does not *require* representation of protected characteristics. Their extensive focus on the book material means that not enough attention is placed on the institution where the classes are taught and where structural aspects of inequality potentially unfold. It also can lead to learning being seen as a process of telling students what to do or think, rather than encouraging them to engage in a dialogue. Brown and Nanguy (2021) rightly understand that dialogue around discrimination and representation of protected groups can be difficult and can leave teachers exposed, but they see the solution to that difficulty as having different teaching materials that unambiguously challenge

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“normative values” (p, 59). I argue that fostering good relations between different protected groups and individuals requires a shift of focus away from textbook material to affordances (see Anderson, 2015; Thornbury, 2012): that is, the learning opportunities provided by the whole class environment – from the *interaction* of students and teachers with material and each other.

Flawed Methodology

In their article, the authors use each of the nine categories cited in the UK Equalities Act of 2010 as a way to structure their analysis of textbooks. Some quantitative data is mentioned, but no explanation is given as to how this data was defined or measured. No overall figures (total number of photos or teaching units) are given to contextualize—for the readers—how the photos and excerpts were initially extracted for semiotic readings. They only present their interpretation without any actual textbook contextualization. However, it should be noted that there are around 140 photos and 50 reading and listening texts in Outcomes Intermediate, but the focus of their analysis is a mere 6 photos and —shockingly— only 3 texts. In terms of their qualitative analysis, CDA is very poorly defined, no data collection method is provided, and it is unclear what type of analytical framework was applied—in particular the criteria related to just how those photos were selected beyond the authors themselves acknowledging from the onset that they had disliked the textbook. Furthermore, there is no discussion of any academic debate around CDA’s use, which has its well-documented weaknesses. As a result, the article provides no replicable analytic framework for teaching practitioners or even other researchers should they want to consider equality and social inclusion when choosing class material. Taken all together, this flawed methodology has led to a serious misrepresentation of Outcomes Intermediate in their 2021 article (this Journal, V8, Issue 2).

Representation and Discussion of Age in Outcomes

In their 2021 article, the authors state that Outcomes has “rather negative images of old people verging on the *promotion* [emphasis mine] of ageism” (Brown & Nanguy, 2021, p 55). This finding is based on 2 quoted instances – a photo of old people doing exercise, and an excerpt from a tongue-in-cheek text on the acquisition of fame, featuring a singing group of older people who had a hit record.

The main argument against the photo is that it is drained of colour, that the people are isolated (although there are six of them), and that it is “sad and depressing” (Brown & Nanguy, 2021, p55). The authors ascribe this portrayal to an attitude towards old people, but one could imagine that it could equally be attributed to the photo having been taken at dawn. They also wonder why nothing was done (in the text) to use the image to open up a discussion about age, lifestyle preferences, or the societal roles of different generations. This is odd because space in the textbook is clearly given for all students (young or old) to relate the photo to their own experiences about sport and morning activities. According to the authors, the “refusal” to discuss age is reinforced by the text excerpt that starts by stating that “age is no barrier to achieving fame” (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, p.147). This, they say, “belittles old people and their potential problems” (Brown & Nanguy, 2021, p. 55).

These interpretations of the image and excerpt are debatable as they stand, but even more so because many other references to age and aging in Outcomes Intermediate are excluded from the analysis. In fact, there are around 20 photos of middle-aged or older people and many other references to age in the text, such as, for example, a retired Chinese couple backed by a sunny blue sky (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, p. 28). In a lesson on fashion/shopping, there’s a picture of an old sapeur smoking a shisha, and another of a ‘funky’ retired couple on a beach, smiling (pp. 54-55); there is also an old man rolling out pizza (p. 69); the octogenarian Nelson Mandela is a focus of an entire language exercise (p. 145). All these photos are similarly exploited for the topic of the unit rather than specifically for the issue of age, but the specific age issues are explicitly dealt with elsewhere.

There are many other photos, too. There is a double-page photo (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, pp.104-5) of several men with the presumed grandfather at the *centre* of the photo. Here, the discussion

includes advantages and disadvantages of an extended family, and students talk about the oldest and youngest people in their families. In the same unit, there is a double-page lesson (pp.108-9) centered on a text that challenges traditional roles of the grandparents and raises issues for older people. It includes a photo of a stereotypical granny with the caption "*Is this how grandmothers still are?*" The lesson asks students to re-contextualize this content for their own country and/or culture. A double-page picture (p. 133-4) shows an old person's hands with a large number of pills and a question as to whether it shows a positive or negative view of health and medicine, which can lead to a discussion on longevity and related age issues. The intention in including these topics and photos in the textbook was to allow for learning to take place and an authentic examination of related issues to unfold. That was certainly the intention on my part as book author, but as I shall argue, the 2021 article's authors' misinterpretation of the UK Equalities Act 2010 and their positioning of textbooks dismiss the role of non-textual affordances generated by the textbook teaching material.

Incomplete Contextualization and Gender Analysis

Brown and Nanguy (2021) apply a similar, preconceived approach to their analysis of gender. While they acknowledge that Outcomes gives some opportunity to discuss sex discrimination and that it has "less overt stereotyping than Headway" (a book they use in the comparative analysis) (p. 58), they immediately undermine that view by yet again singling out the photo that could serve their interpretation. A single photo of a group of hijab-wearing girls doing karate is selected for analysis. This particular photo is placed in the textbook alongside a listening exercise featuring a Japanese woman who is a judo champion. The authors apply a stretched semiotic reading that sees the book as condoning "a patriarchal normativity that disapproves of women doing martial arts" (2021, p. 58). It is completely unclear, or even unfathomable how they could ever have reached this conclusion. It is even more puzzling why they suggest that it is the *book* which is enforcing this normativity, and not the people who actually came up with such a skewed interpretation. The book not only presents women doing martial arts, but also shows them doing it successfully. In a word: it is a very positive image that represents women as doers, achievers and in charge of their own success. Brown & Nanguy mention a question in the listening task that asks why someone might hide a talent, allowing for a potential discussion of discrimination but leaving it open for students to discuss what they want. However, they don't discuss the existence of other questions that ask if learning martial arts is a good solution to bullying and what alternative solutions there might be to bullying (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, p. 36). These student activities directly address discrimination and allow for an active, engaging discussion of structural policies and *actions*, which lie at the core of the Equalities Act.

A Contestable Interpretation of a Text on Immigration

Brown and Nanguy (2021) state that Outcomes does represent diversity with almost 60% of non-white people included in photos (though we do not know how whiteness is defined), but then undermine this positive statement by suggesting that these photos tend to have "problematic semiotics [...] with regard to size and anonymity" (p. 57). No criteria for size or selection, no statistics as to the average size of textbook photos are given for this statement, and so the analysis cannot be checked or replicated, if any other teacher, book writer or author needed or wished to do so.

In this case, a purposeful, chosen example focuses on a text about one refugee's journey and the positive impact immigrants have on the economy (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, p. 118-19). While it is acknowledged the text is positive in representing refugees, it is deemed problematic because "the UK media often presents a confusing narrative on immigration by using the terms 'economic migrant' and 'illegal immigrant' interchangeably" (Brown & Nanguy 2021, p. 57). However, neither of these terms are used in the Outcomes text and, furthermore, tasks around the text, which are excluded from the 2021 article's analysis, provide opportunities to discuss immigration from different perspectives and broaden the topic about immigration beyond race. For example, in a pre-reading task, students are

asked the following: to think of reasons to leave one's country; discuss if they know anyone who has moved to a new country; say if they would like to move to another country and what kind of conditions might force them to do so. These questions are humanizing and *de-racializing* the issue of immigration by completely avoiding the term 'immigrant'. They also provide affordances. One could imagine that many teachers would respond to students' shared ideas by providing language where they don't have it. Words such as, *flee conflict*, *seek asylum* may emerge alongside phrases such as *seek a better climate or have a better lifestyle*.

Next, after the first section describing the refugee's escape from Afghanistan, there are questions about the problems students think refugees may face once in the new country, and how their previous experiences may benefit them. Classroom discussion in the Scottish context may well include issues like racism, difficulties around housing, language learning, etc. Those who have undertaken such a journey may or may not reject the notion that it has been a useful experience, but surely that is for those *students* to decide. This task prepares students to read the second (apparently problematic) section on the refugee's economic success, after which follow the discussion questions about immigration rules and well-known immigrants, or *émigrés*.

Brown and Nanguy's interpretation seems to be an example of confirmation bias: seeking out singular examples to prove a preconceived view that a global textbook indeed is discriminatory. The text includes a description of the economic success of immigrants. It is clearly presented positively, and actually aims to contradict the term *economic migrant*, which is used in UK media to present migrants as a drain on the economy and society. So, not only is the photo completely misconstrued, but I would argue that the learning tasks surrounding the photo challenge the conflation of race and immigration. We further support the positive representation of immigrants in the accompanying video that explains how research into genes places *everyone* (including the two white girls who are pictured) as migrants at some stage of human history (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, p. 112).

Textbooks Supporting Inclusion and Equalities? Or Not?

In the Brown and Nanguy's article, these critical interpretations of gender and asylum seekers outlined above are then combined with similar criticisms of the other book they analyse, Headway Intermediate (Soars and Soars, 2012). The result is an overly generalized depiction of global textbooks where:

... pregnant women are emotional; old people are a burden; women belong in the kitchen and not the dojo; asylum-seekers are valued only for their economic potential; not wanting to get married means you must be 'crazy'. (Brown & Nanguy, 2021, p59)

Even if the italicized examples from Outcomes Intermediate were true reflections of the material – which I hope I have shown is not the case – these instances are made equivalent to apparently more egregious examples in Headway. The impact is to exaggerate the negative effect of any 'global' textbook with regard to equality legislation in the UK.

A fairer analytical approach might look at lessons in the context of the whole curriculum – not just within one task, one unit, or one level of a textbook, but through the whole series. That is because all lessons are written in relation to each other. Language that has been actively presented in a previous level may not be re-presented in a new level. Recycling of this language might be expected to happen through activities that encourage student discussion. This can explain the 'supposed absence' of certain language. If words reappear, they might also sensibly be used in a new context – including examples that, in some instances, could be thought of as more 'stereotypical'. Similarly, previously discussed topics on one book level might not be covered again in a different book level, or they may be approached from a different teaching and discussion angle. This can be seen in the treatment of age across Outcomes Intermediate described above. Looking at the "protected characteristics" and

discrimination applied to the whole Outcomes series (that I co-authored) may suggest a markedly different conclusion to the one Brown & Nanguy draw. In fact, the readership of this journal can review the following examples and consider their own conclusions. I here list all the protected features and provide immediate contextualization in my book.

Pregnancy. Outcomes does not “bizarrely” ignore pregnancy, as the article claims (2021, p. 56). In fact, in Outcomes Intermediate (2016a), students are taught language to respond to someone who says they are pregnant (and the affordance for other related language that come up). *Pregnant* is taught with an accompanying photo at Elementary level (Dellar & Walkley, 2017, p. 147) and reference to, or discussion about, pregnancy occurs in all levels.

Religion. Within the Outcomes series, there are also repeated references to religion and opportunities for expression of belief. For example, Outcomes Beginner has a video on Diwali (Dellar & Walkley, 2019), and teaches the word *religion* (p. 36). Outcomes Pre-Intermediate (Dellar & Walkley, 2016b) teaches the word *religious* for active use (p. 141). Outcomes Upper-intermediate (Dellar & Walkley, 2016c) has someone discussing a pilgrimage and invites students to share stories (pp. 100-1). It also has a lesson on culture and birth, marriage and death (pp. 120-1).

Disabled people. Firstly, we should note that in their article Brown and Nanguy (2021) mistakenly identify the hero bus driver in our text on fame as being “disabled” (p. 56). The text says the driver was *injured* (Dellar & Walkley, 2016a, p. 147) and makes no suggestion that disability is a price worth paying for fame. They also miss the fact that on (p. 100) *overcoming a barrier* and *disabled* is taught in the following sentence: *I’m blind so I think getting a degree and a good job is a big achievement as you have to overcome many barriers when you are disabled* – and there is then a follow-up discussion. There are also texts featuring people with either physical disabilities or mental health issues (p. 19 and p. 101), and there are examples at other levels too.

General equality agenda. The word *discrimination* is taught at the end of Outcomes Pre-intermediate (Dellar & Walkley, 2016b, p. 147) and, as noted by Brown and Nanguy, it is also presented for discussion in Outcomes Intermediate (p. 47) along with other language to discuss the legal aspect of equality. Outcomes Upper intermediate (Dellar & Walkley, 2016c) has a whole unit on society, which includes discussion on domestic violence, bullying, gender discrimination, and racism (p. 36).

Revisiting the Concept of Representation and the Equalities Act

Apart from the direct teaching of language related to the “protected characteristics,” textbooks – indeed any good material – will have tasks that generate discussion. These interactions, in turn, have affordances to teach/learn new language and content related to the ‘equality agenda.’ However, Brown and Nanguy make an odd suggestion that providing the opportunity for discussion does not in itself meet the requirements of legislation because teachers may be ‘bad at dealing with’ such discussions. They state:

materials that genuinely comply with the Equality Duty should themselves explicitly challenge repressive normative values and present alternative positions. Furthermore, ambiguities and unanswered questions could potentially undermine the equalities agenda. There are no guidelines for practitioners on how to react if students raise equalities issues while engaging with ambiguous materials, leaving scope for negative, inaccurate or prejudicial views to flourish—or, at least, to go unchecked (2021 p. 59).

The first and most important point to make here is that if the teachers are unable to deal with equalities issues or prejudicial views in the classroom, or if they themselves discriminate against other groups, then that is a failing of the institution and the training the teachers have received, not the textbook. The advice on the Act is absolutely clear in stating that “Schools can’t delegate responsibility

for carrying out the duty [of ensuring equality] to anyone else” (UK DofE, 2014, p. 30). That “anyone else” must surely include a publisher, or a textbook writer, or a textbook itself.

Second, the authors incorrectly state that the 2010 Equalities Act mandates that materials should promote particular representations, much less that they specify that “normative values” should be challenged in a particular manner. Indeed, the government’s advice to schools does not include the words *represent* or *representation* at all in its forty-five pages (UK DofE, 2014).

Fostering Good Relations: Using Dialogue Above Representation

There are certainly legitimate reasons why legislation might not promote or mandate particular representations. Firstly, providing equality of opportunity is not primarily about seeing certain representations, but about structural issues such as poverty, a lack of childcare, or inability to obtain a job based on the screening of names on the job applications, or particular protected characteristics. The aim of the Act is not to promote protected characteristics such as pregnancy or marriage, but to ensure that people who are pregnant or married are not discriminated against by being prevented from getting a job, keeping a job, working or studying *because* they are pregnant or married.

Secondly, identifying and then quantifying what constitutes adequate representation within the curriculum is very difficult and open to interpretation. They are often culture- and context-based and they change over time. For example, in Brown & Nanguy’s type of interpretation, a single (in their view) negative representation of women in Outcomes Intermediate is sufficient to suggest that the whole book/curriculum is contravening legislation, no matter what other positive representations are present in that same book. Their all-or-nothing approach would be seen as harsh even if we could be absolutely clear what a normative value is in their – or anyone else’s – analysis.

Furthermore, if the aim for teachers and schools is to “foster good relations,” it is important to recognize that this is not synonymous with *promoting* a particular group. *Promoting* a particular group is not advised because of the inherent instability of defining ‘good’ representation, but also because some protected characteristics, such as same-sex marriage and gender re-assignment may be in conflict with another protected characteristic such as religious belief. Indeed, the UK Department of Education’s advice to schools (2014) makes a point of emphasizing that: “No school, or individual teacher, is under a duty to support, promote or endorse marriage of same-sex couples” (p. 22).

The implication is that fostering good relations does not happen simply through telling students how to think and react, but it may happen far more if we engage in dialogue. The nature of that dialogue will be dependent on classroom circumstances leading to it, and students’ existing attitudes and relationships to others. Textbooks – indeed any material - cannot be explicit about those circumstances, or manage the dialogue for all people on everything. This is why more attention needs to be given to how teachers enable discussions that students want, how they deal with potential conflicts in the classrooms or learning settings, and how to then take advantage of the affordances that such instances provide.

Affordances and Students’ Agency

There is a second related problem with an interpretation of equalities legislation that places the textbook as the authority in class, which is that it denies students and teachers agency. This is, I think, unintentional on the authors’ part, because it is in contradiction to the learning policy in Scottish ESOL settings that they cite. This policy states that students should “co-design their learning experience” (2021, p. 53). We need to ask whether the students themselves want discussions on equality to happen in the classroom, and if they want to be challenged on those issues, or if they themselves want to challenge “normative values.” Quite possibly they do, but if that is the case, then the protected groups’ challenges and concerns may come up not only in a discussion of equality as a topic, but, for example, in a discussion of films or books the students have read, or a sporting activity

they engage in, or in the relationships they have with others – indeed, it can arise from pretty much anything people do. Teachers need to be prepared for these turns in a discussion and exploit the affordance, irrespective of whether the lesson is ‘about’ equality or some other topic or teaching focus.

In fact, there is no real discussion in Brown and Nanguy’s article of students’ opinions or choices with regard to content. On the contrary, their analysis of the immigration text in Outcomes Intermediate (2016a) leads them, as teachers, to question its suitability and, by implication, exclude it. This paradoxically treats the ESOL group as all sharing the same characteristics and attitudes, and denies them individual opinions that differ from the teacher’s view of what is or is not problematic. A genuine co-construction of meaning or a co-design of the lesson could, for example, involve the teacher telling students they are going to read a text on immigration. If the teacher has concerns, they might sensibly say so, without explaining why, but add that they are interested to hear what the students think. The students would read the text and discuss their own opinions (as, in fact, the textbook allows). The teacher could share their own views (including perhaps giving reasons based on the legal framework, *if accurately* presented), and the students may then discuss how far they agree. The teacher might also ask if the students want to read or discuss more about the topic and, if students do, they or the teacher may find some additional material to expand the conversation.

Similarly, the authors argue that global textbooks do not provide students with language to express their views on these various areas. I have already established, though, relevant language *is* presented (in Outcomes at least) and textbooks can provide many affordances for learning more language connected to the equalities agenda. It is worth reiterating that this idea of affordances, as Anderson (2015) and Thornbury (2012) discuss, is well-recognized as important in teaching; affordances are by definition something which the students generate and the *teacher* exploits. If teachers refuse to do this, or do it in a discriminatory way, then there may be a problem with regard to the Equality Act, but it is in no way a problem of a textbook that has led to those affordances.

A Better Way Forward in Meeting Equalities Legislation

Brown and Nanguy clearly come from a good place in turning our attention to the issues of social inclusion and equality. However, I would argue that if institutions are failing in their statutory duties, or want to improve the way issues around discrimination are tackled, we need a far broader approach. The choice of materials is one factor. Taking into account representation and opportunities to discuss discrimination when evaluating materials is a good thing, but practitioners need clearer criteria and method for applying them to all material within the whole curriculum. Ideally, teachers and students would also be involved in defining criteria and making decisions about if and/or how to use different material.

However, we also need to acknowledge that no textbook or teaching material is or can be an authority for all learning. I would focus on teaching the concept of affordances in initial teacher training and developing practical ways throughout teachers’ professional careers – a viewpoint with which Brown and Nanguy may share some common ground. I would also suggest that part of that professional development should specifically focus on critical events in the classroom relating to equalities and how teachers may challenge discriminatory language and behaviour in ways that still foster good relations among diverse groups. Doing this well is difficult and needs institutional support and training.

Finally, we must be clear about the structural nature of discrimination beyond the ELT class: it is the teaching institutions’ duty to enable equality and they need to ensure there is space for students to

raise concerns where they feel discriminated against. Similarly, the institutions must ensure that there are mechanisms to use adequate processes to deal with discriminatory practices.

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