

# Overcoming Bias in ELT Textbooks: A Study in the Indian Context

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## Introduction

Textbooks form the primary resource of English language teaching in classrooms in most second language scenarios of the world. Their primacy as the basic source material lies as much in their versatility of production, as in their ease of use in actual classroom situations. Furthermore, textbooks serve as models of language materials, graded and refined, and made to suit the level of learners in accordance with the immediate and long-term requirements of the policy makers, both at macro- and micro-level contexts. Though some commentators have degraded the importance of textbooks in ELT, and described them as “a shackle for the innovative teacher”, (Saraswathi, 2004, p. 120), the primacy of textbooks in English classrooms has not been effectively challenged to this day.

## Content of texts

It is commonly accepted that textbooks are collated from English language and literature resources, either directly, or in an abridged or summarized form, in accordance with the level of attainment of the learners. In the Indian context, ‘readers’ or graded textbooks which serve as the repository of basic language and literature structures, have formed the core of English language curriculum across the state and national boards administering secondary and senior secondary examinations. Since all textbooks in ELT are supposed to contain lexical units which are “central in language use and language learning” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 227), it is significant that content be so chosen

that contextual and lexical use can be united through carefully selected passages or extracts.

The content of textbooks in English courses can be categorized under the following basic types:

1. Prose passages, directly lifted from original English works, such as extracts
2. Prose passages abridged from original English works
3. Short stories
4. Extracts from newspapers, generally journalistic reports
5. Poems by English or Indian poets, usually limited to sonnets or lyrics not more than 30 lines
6. Recreations of well known English plays in prose
7. Extracts from full length plays, usually in the form of an important or climactic scene

## ‘Bias’ and where it creeps in

‘Bias’ is a widely defined term in the contexts of sociology and social psychology. Ordinarily, ‘bias’ can be defined as the tendency to portray and interpret individuals, their actions, or socio-cultural practices according to the parameters defined by the observer, usually in rigid, non-flexible terms (Baron & Byrne, 2002, p. 91). This rigidity often results in the portrayal of a different culture or practice as ‘wrong’ merely because it differs from the point of view of the observer. In the context of the present study,

the bias may not be as explicit as has been defined. In some instances, its presence is so subtle that for an ordinary reader, it would be almost non-existent. It is this aspect that makes dealing with bias in ELT textbooks difficult to detect and deal with.

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Teachers using ELT texts in Indian schools often encounter bias, usually in the form of:

1. Neglect and invisibility: This can be commonly detected in textbooks where women and religious or cultural minorities have little presence in the selected prose or poetry pieces.
2. Stereotyping: This involves assigning traditional and rigid roles to certain sections of the society or individuals, thereby making them unable to function as members in different roles in the society.
3. Selectivity: Since individual literary works may not have the scope to infuse deliberate socio-cultural universality in their plot unless the author deems it necessary, it often makes random selections of prose or poetry pieces for ELT textbooks a hazardous exercise.
4. Unreality: In many cases, our textbooks produce extracts from works which are written from specific viewpoints in contexts that are different from the target student group. Students who are taught such texts may tend to take whatever they read as true or real, and invalidate their own real life experience as something untrue.
5. Isolation: Women and socio-religious minorities are often neglected in mainstream literary texts. Extracts from such texts in

ELT textbooks may present them to be fringe groups with little or no social importance.

### **Basic Guidelines in ELT Material Preparation to Minimize Bias**

It has been highlighted earlier, that no editor of a textbook would normally include materials that are overtly violent or in any way offensive to the learners. However, in spite of the best editorial competencies, materials containing biases often creep into a text. A study of the examples of biases encountered by our teachers in English language texts reveals that the norms of content-selection and content-illustration are often flouted during the editorial process. The basic norms which may minimize biases in texts are:

1. Photographs and illustrations, if used, shall portray a wide range of socio-religious backgrounds, rather than a limited number.
2. Characters having names common to religious or social minorities should be sensitively portrayed, so as not to give an impression that members of such groups are prone to certain types of behaviour.
3. Plots of stories should avoid gender type-casting. For example, a prose piece entitled 'A Happy Family', showing that the father goes out to work and the sister helps her mother in the kitchen, while the brother plays with his friends outside the house, can easily generate a notion among learners that male members of a family are generally earning members, and female members are more suited to household chores.
4. Literature pieces sourced from foreign writers should be filtered for nuances that may appear foreign to the target students.
5. All vocations and professions in the texts should be depicted in such a way so as to show equal respect and importance for them.

6. Nationalities, if necessary, should be depicted in a manner that promotes mutual respect, rather than animosity.
7. All textual materials should be subject to peer review for detection and elimination of instances of bias. This may significantly diminish instances which would otherwise escape the eyes of a single editor.

Clearly, these checks and balances can go a long way in decreasing instances of bias in our English textbooks for children. However, in spite of a number of such precautions, our teachers often encounter instances of bias in textual materials. Significantly enough, Tickoo (2003, p. 265), stresses on the need for assessing a textual material on the basis of its ideology, since, admittedly, most biases that creep into a text are a manifestation of a flawed ideology.

### Dealing with bias in actual classroom situation

English language teachers wanting to use a textbook in a particular class are likely to go through the textual matter in some depth. Examples of bias, if any, are likely to be detected at this stage of evaluating a language material – well before the text is used in the classroom. McDonough & Shaw (2003, p. 65) clearly highlight the examination of cultural bias as one of the nine important evaluative parameters of a coursebook. Once a bias is detected, a specific workplan dedicated to neutralizing the biased material has to be chalked out by the teacher. In such an instance, a teacher ought to keep the golden rule of teaching English texts in mind, which is, “English teaching materials are not meant to be taught in the exact way they have been produced” (Ramadevi, 2002, p. 207). Such a plan may take the following sequential steps:

Step 1. Look out for bias.

Step 2. If bias detected, note the nature of the bias, whether linguistic, cultural, religious, social, gender or racial.

Step 3. Devise alternative paradigms, usually through extraneous examples, to neutralize the bias in the classroom.

Step 4. Involve the students in discussions on why the matter is biased, and why it is not supported by facts from real life.

### Illustration

A textual material in the form of a journalistic report describes how local villagers enter a protected forest without permission, and collect logs of wood in darkness. In the absence of logs and twigs post-autumn, they cut branches from trees. Trees have been destroyed for years through such a practice.

*In fact most children, in actual practice, go beyond the meanings of words and phrases and generate their own world view on the basis of a text. In fact, according to Davison & Dawson (2003, p. 276), ‘knowing the specification’ is an essential parameter of a successful detection and neutralization of a text-based bias in English language classrooms, ‘specification’ referring to the layers of meaning that a text can generate in the course of an in-depth study.*

Areas where bias is generated in the young readers:

1. Villagers are insensitive when it comes to following the laws of the land and concern for environment.
2. In the absence of reasons for cutting the logs of wood, a learner may not know that

poverty and lack of alternative sources of fuel are forcing the villagers to act in the way they are doing.

How is the bias neutralized in the classroom?

1. The teacher highlights the reasons for the actions of the villagers.
2. The teacher highlights other examples to show how people in the villages adopt environmentally sensitive practices in their homes and surroundings.

As is seen in the illustration above, it is imperative that a teacher equips himself/herself with the sub-texts of a given textual material, since texts do not remain at the level of a first-level meaning generation in most children. In fact most children, in actual practice, go beyond the meanings of words and phrases and generate their own world view on the basis of a text. In fact, according to Davison and Dawson (2003, p. 276), 'knowing the specification' is an essential parameter of a successful detection and neutralization of a text-based bias in English language classrooms, 'specification' referring to the layers of meaning that a text can generate in the course of an in-depth study.

## Conclusion

It is unanimously agreed among all the stakeholders of the English language instruction that bias has to be eliminated in text materials because of its potentially harmful impact on adolescent minds. In fact, since English is veritably a link language for the entire globe, and writers use the language in varied contexts, course materials taken from original English works are prone to varied levels of misinterpretations and bias. Only a careful editor and an alert and informed teacher can help learners develop a realistic, balanced and

unbiased world view, which can withstand the twin rigours of literary scrutiny and general rationalism.

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