

# Socially Responsible Teaching Against Ageism: Some Practical Solutions

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ELT coursebooks represent the world of the youth, a fact that may cause many social misconceptions. Coursebooks' portrayal of the elderly can be regarded as negative stereotyping as this paper exemplifies. The solution can be found in teachers' willingness to create a classroom atmosphere in which he or she carries out a more socially responsible way of teaching. In this paper, some portrayals of the elderly in coursebooks are given, followed by some suggestions to minimize the negative effects of such materials.

## Introduction

Coupland (2007: 38) writes that media driven public discourses related to ageing causes anxiety and threats about the ageing body in which 'individuals are pressured into attempting to retain their appearance of youth, into staving off visible signs of their ageing. It should be noted that it is not the biological signs of ageing but the cultural ones that bring such anxiety most of which come from media and other societal images. Coupland & Coupland (2001) found the following in their review of societal verbal and nonverbal images of the people of old age:

- Older people are often assumed to be incompetent and marginal to the mainstream social life,
- Stereotypes of old people are in fact complex and multidimensional, and by no means uniformly negative,
- There is a preponderance of negative stereotypes,
- The decremental model of ageing excludes old people from opportunities and positive self-images,
- Aging or the aged are rendered realities. Language is the most actively constitutive semiotic medium, and is centrally involved in the "rendering" of age,
- Old people's talk is rambling and incoherent.

Cunningsworth's (1995) review analysis of ELT coursebooks show that the world of the ELT coursebooks is that of the young while little attention is paid to the other members of the social strata. My previous pilot study showed that ELT coursebooks tended to show the elderly in terms of their age related qualities rather than as whole persons with multiple positionalities (Arikan, 2005). The findings and arguments raised by Arikan (2005), Coupland (2007), Coupland & Coupland (2001), and Cunningsworth (1995) point that in various texts the elderly are portrayed in negative terms.

What is the role of ELT materials in this socio-educational problem? Do coursebooks, for instance, act against or for retaining such negative and anxiety bearing images of ageing? What can teachers of English do to minimize the negative effects of such materials and examples? In this brief paper, I first show how the elderly are portrayed in some ELT coursebooks, then, I give some practical solutions to minimize the negative effects of such materials.

## Coursebooks' Portrayal of the Elderly

We as foreign language teachers may sometimes see some passages in our coursebooks in which the elderly are portrayed as weak individuals who 'cannot' do certain actions because of their age. Here are some examples.

- David can't jump, because he is too old.
- They can't play tennis, because they are too old.

- Mr. Lee could walk fast when he was younger.
- Mrs. Miller could sing well when she was young.
- My grandfather cannot hear well, but my brother can.

## Practical Solutions

Here are some solutions to minimize the negative effects of such negative portrayals.

- **Showing role models:** Try to show pictures or videos that show the elderly in real life struggles such as walking, running, gardening, and even moving on a wheelchair. Try to put a stress on what they can do rather what they cannot.
- **Replace or re-phrase procedure:** When you see an adjective that portrays the elderly in negative terms, simply replace or re-phrase it by giving a more acceptable adjective.
- **Acceptance of differences:** As McKenna (1999) suggests ‘the bottom line is that we should celebrate the differences between us.’ So, when differences are mentioned, we should focus on the similarities we all have rather than on widening the gaps amongst our differences.
- **Ask for alternative cases:** Ask your students to question if the examples are true. Try to move your students towards remembering certain examples that does not support the case. For instance, when you read a sentence such like ‘She cannot run because she is old,’ ask students if they know an elderly who can run. If you want, follow this brainstorming up with showing role models activities as given above.
- **Correct materials / coursebooks:** If you have the power to do so, try to choose materials and coursebooks that are more sensitive towards and careful about social problems and representations.
- **Discussion:** As articulated by Rees (2002), a teacher should be aware of stereotypes and be ready to discuss them openly in the language-teaching classroom. Try to be sensitive towards such representations while extending these negative stereotypes to all aspects of living including ethnic, economic, gender and disability based negative portrayals.

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