

## EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

Cet article présente une unité didactique intitulée "Représentations des femmes (entre impositions et choix)", conçue par l'enseignant pour aborder le thème de l'identité, prescrit par le programme scolaire, et fournir aux étudiants l'occasion de pratiquer la langue cible à travers l'exploration de la représentation des genres dans la société. Cette unité a été enseignée pour la première fois à un groupe de sept étudiants avancés en EFL dans une école secondaire de Serbie. Pour aider ces étudiants à examiner la représentation des femmes et la manière dont les stéréotypes sont communiqués, l'enseignant a présenté trois histoires courtes. Ces histoires ont servi de point de départ à une discussion qui a incité les étudiants à examiner la réponse des femmes aux exigences de la société, la présentation stéréotypée des femmes et la manière dont ces stéréotypes se reflètent dans le langage.

### ● Olja Milosevic | The International School of Belgrade



Olja Milosevic, from the International School of Belgrade, has been involved in second

and foreign language teaching at all levels in primary, secondary and tertiary education. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and is primarily interested in second language acquisition intercultural learning.

### Introduction

Sensitive topics are those that are found disturbing or unsettling and their level of controversy could depend on social or cultural contexts. Topics related to gender equality and the representation of women are considered sensitive particularly in patriarchal societies such as in Serbia (Schubert, 2016). When controversial topics are introduced in conversations, participants "may either avoid answering sensitive questions altogether or provide untruthful responses" (Isaqzadeh et al. 2020:173). Thus miscommunication often occurs when sensitive issues are discussed with adolescent students. They notoriously hold strong opinions and are seen as immature when dealing with topics that could provoke heated debates, and that is the reason why "many teachers feel uncertain and underprepared" to introduce sensitive topics to secondary students (Kello, 2016:35).

A foreign language classroom could provide "the perfect scenario for teaching and learning about pressing issues in the social world" (Santos, 2012:89). In order to develop students' communication skills and encourage awareness of differing cultural perspectives, the foreign language syllabus integrates global issues. However, textbooks do not ensure a balance of topics. Publishers opt to include 'safe' topics, and lessons that deal with sensitive topics, including gender equality, are not often found in textbooks (see for example, Gray 2002, Melliti 2013, Appleby 2017). Since the majority of teachers rely on textbooks for teaching materials, the representation of women is often neglected or inadequately treated. Learning and instructional materials in textbooks are insufficient or biased, therefore, it is up to teachers to "adapt, reject, sidestep and supplement them" (Prior & Woodward, 2017: 57). Although there may be concerns and risks, students need opportunities to learn and share

views about those issues despite the unpleasant feelings they may evoke and, in the process, make “visible and vocal the underlying assumptions” (Bell, 2007:11) that are deeply rooted in society.

Advanced foreign language classes allow an exchange of opinions and provide opportunities for students to gain and share new understandings whilst simultaneously helping them to develop language and thinking skills. This process leads to developing communicative competence, but also creates opportunities for language classes to become an arena where sensitive issues are explored. The unit “Representations of Women (From Imposed to Chosen)” was an attempt to implement “cultural pedagogy”, a term that Snowden (2010: 158) uses to refer to the ways “students learn about [...] social characteristics through their representations in literature, film, visual art, and popular culture media”. Accompanied by an emphasis on mutual respect, it was hoped that the unit would start a genuine exploration of both how women are represented and how gender stereotypes develop.

### The context

The unit “Representations of Women (From Imposed to Chosen)” was taught to seven seventeen-year-old students enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP). The DP is a two-year program and the students were in their first year of the course. They attended English B, a language acquisition course. Their English language proficiency level was B2 - C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). There were four female and three male students in the group. The DP English B units of study are designed around the following themes: identity, experiences, social organization, human ingenuity, and sharing the planet. The unit “Representations of Women (From Imposed to Chosen)” was linked to the topic of identity and it was taught for several reasons. First, the school promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion and the unit presented an opportunity to promote school ethos. Second, it was hoped that the learning engagements would encourage students to critically consider differences in civic rights for men and women. Finally, as “gender is reflected by language and language helps to shape

gender” (Aydınöğlü, 2014: 233) students would become aware of gender-biases in language and explore different ways of avoiding it.

The unit was taught over four weeks from mid-January to mid-February 2021. It consisted of eight 60-minute lessons. Throughout the unit, visible thinking routines were used to help students activate their thinking and verbalize ideas. To introduce the concept of gender equality and to encourage discussion about different perspectives, three short stories were used. As the students engaged with the texts, they interpreted events and discussed opinions. A summative assessment writing task documented students’ views and was used to see if they had developed new understandings through this curriculum.

### The unit design

The coursework consisted of four stages (see Tab. 1): (1) reading and discussing literary texts; (2) exploring how different stereotypes are communicated and the reasons that gender power issues are sustained; (3) a summative assessment: creating a blog post in which students communicated their views; and (4) a reflection on learning.

**Table 1**  
*The unit plan*

	Coursework	Sequence of learning engagements
Stage 1	Reading and discussing literary texts	Visible thinking routine: Color - Symbol - Image Composing the list of terms Readings ("The Birthmark" (Hawthorne, 1843), "Unpopular Gals" (Atwood, 1993), "She Unnames them" (Le Guin 1985)) • Two pairs and one group of three read one story each • Sharing ideas with the whole group Visible thinking routine: The 4 C's
Stage 2	Exploring how different stereotypes are communicated	Stereotypes - Researching commercials to explore representations of women Report findings - presentations (pair work) Whole group discussion: Where else do we find these stereotypes?
Stage 3	Summative assessment	Introducing the text type (students examine two blogs and identify key features) In-class assignment: Writing a blog post on gender representation
Stage 4	Reflection on learning and on the topic	Feedback - discussing the opinions: Have our perspectives changed? Re-addressing Color-Symbol-Image Thinking routine

# Students need opportunities to learn and share views about those issues despite the unpleasant feelings they may evoke.

## Stage 1: Exploration of the topic through literature

The unit started with the Color-Symbol-Image visible thinking routine (see Table 2). Students were asked to use one color, one symbol, and one image that came to mind when thinking about how women are represented in modern society. Their comments were recorded and used to understand students' initial views.

After the introductory activity, students were asked to work in groups and compose a list of terms that they expected to be used in the unit. This activity was not only geared towards eliciting terms but also was a way for students to 'own the vocabulary' for that topic. Next, the teacher shared three stories with the students. All three stories dealt with the representation of women and their position in the society on three different levels: women accepting the role assigned by men, women conscious of their status and not reconciling with it, and women playing with their position and changing it. Students worked in two pairs and one group of three and read different stories. Each pair had one male and one female student, and the group of three consisted of two female and one male student. The first pair read, "The Birthmark," by Nathaniel Hawthorn, a story about a scientist who talks his wife into removing her

birthmark which causes her to die. They were instructed to discuss what price people are prepared to pay for conforming to society. The second pair read "Unpopular Gals" by Margaret Atwood. The story consists of three short monologues told by three 'unpopular gals': Cinderella's ugly stepsister, a wicked witch, and a stepmother. Students were instructed to discuss the perspective of women characterized as antiheroes. The group of three read the story "She Unnames Them" by Ursula K. Le Guin. The text explores how Eve distanced herself from the ideas created by Adam who showed his power by labeling all creatures with a name. By 'unnaming' animals, Eve rejected Adam's power. The goal was to engage students with the topic, challenge them and generate discussion.

Students read stories, discussed their content, and shared ideas with the whole group. When discussing the stories students were prompted by the question "What (else) do you notice?" They were invited to think about why some women were not acceptable and what one should be prepared to do to conform to the norms. They were also encouraged to consider how the stories convey different aspects of the representation of women, think about how women were portrayed in the three stories and if they could find similar portrayals today.

The final activity of this stage was the 4 C's thinking routine (see Table 2) which prompted students to consider connections between the texts and life, extract important ideas from the texts or those they wanted to challenge, and suggest changes in attitudes they would like to see.

**Table 2**  
Visible Thinking Routines from Project Zero

Strategy	Procedure
Color - Symbol - Image	Students choose a color, a symbol and an image that best show the representation of women.  Students share their choices and provide explanations.
The 4 C's	The 4 C's stand for Connections, Challenge, Concepts and Changes.  After students have read texts, they discuss how these texts refer to each of the C's.

## Students' reactions

### Imposed Representations

Throughout the unit, students noticed socially constructed ideas about gender depiction and questioned them. After reading the stories, they discussed what happened when women did not fulfill societal expectations. The three 'unpopular gals' were seen as rejected by the community and experiencing difficult times of which others may be unaware. "Like a cruel sister... from what we know, she might have been constantly told that she is ugly... and people avoid those who are ugly." The story "Birthmark" prompted students to talk about expectations, both in terms of looks and roles.

### Stage 2: Exploring stereotypes through advertisements

The second stage was devoted to a critical exploration of gender depictions in the media. Students were shown several advertisements and asked to consider how genders were represented in them. They were encouraged to identify how society imposes perspectives on the viewers. The next step was to find modern advertisements or commercials, discuss how they represent the divide between genders and why that was the case. Students analyzed advertisements from a qualitative perspective by looking into the presence of female and male characters, and some other aspects, for example, distribution of jobs for female and male characters or locations where they appear in commercials or advertisements.

### Stage 3: Summative assessment task

The summative assessment task for the unit was to write a blog post in which one aspect of gender representation would be explored. This text type was chosen for two reasons. First, the purpose of a blog post is mostly to express strongly felt personal views and to share them with the world. It made sense to assign this text type that allows its writer to make a public statement and at the same time to provide personal experiences. Furthermore, it is one of the assigned text types for the DP English B exam and students need to be familiar with its conventions.

### Stage 4: Reflection on the unit

To encourage students to reflect on the unit, the teacher asked them to complete the Color-Symbol-Image visible thinking routine again and to consider how their answers had changed from those that they had at the beginning of the unit.

Students considered how tradition and society shape our beliefs and disadvantage women and how stereotypes create ideas of what genders can and cannot do. Although they were not required to do so, some were willing to share personal examples as seen in this comment on the roles that society imposes on women: "Women should stay at home to look after their children. My mom is a perfect example since she stopped working when I was born." When asked if women should live according to these expectations, students acknowledged that often women do not have a choice. "You have to be a strong person not to do what you are supposed to." It was recognized that "the system of patriarchy is reproduced inside women's consciousness" (Bell 2007: 7), and our beliefs related to gender definitely affect our reactions.

Students also identified the concept of privilege. One male student pointed out that "Women can be sexist towards men," and that prompted another student to remark that privileges might be taken for granted. "You often do not realize that you have privileges... But you feel bad if you do not have them." This student also explained that being female means the lack of privileges and not being in a position to change societal expectations and representations.

As students used images and metaphors to explore the topic, some highlighted how difficult it may be to identify which representations of women were imposed by our community. One student pointed out, "I chose white to represent inequality, mostly because white is everywhere.

Our beliefs  
related to gender  
definitely affect  
our reactions.

It blends with other colors and you do not see it. It is the same with inequality.” This comment emphasizes the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes. They may even become a part of the tradition and are assumed to be unquestionably true. Another student’s comment shows how it may not be easy to notice discrimination immediately. “I put the rabbit/duck image<sup>1</sup> since you see what you want to see and I see only certain things. You are not aware in the beginning that there are two animals... Inequality is there but you just don’t see it.” Changing perceptions can be difficult if one is not aware there are discriminatory practices.

## Conclusion

The unit “Representations of Women (From Imposed to Chosen)” was an attempt to raise awareness about how women are portrayed and how that affects opportunities for them to realize their potential. The students were encouraged to consider if it was possible to achieve gender equality. The stories were used as meaningful material to engage students with a relevant topic. The unit required students to focus both on language and on content. After being engaged with a topic that was challenging and prompted students to share personal experiences, the students had to organize and present their ideas in the target language. Discussing sensitive topics inevitably prompted students to agree and disagree with one another, and to express and justify their opinions. This took place throughout the unit: students used language structures with an argumentative function and practiced critical thinking skills that are all vital for successful communication.

One goal of the unit was to prompt critical reflection by providing opportunities for teachers and students to work together to recognize sources of stereotypes and to understand their role in creating the representation of women. The teacher expected that a unit dealing with the representation of women would provoke strong emotional reactions from students coming from a patriarchal background. Instead of generating extreme responses, the three short stories provided a safe starting point for reflection on the content and afterwards led to reflection on gender roles in general. Both female and male students genuinely attempted to examine reasons for different perceptions and how the views of their community impacted the way women view themselves. The teacher expected the topic to be sensitive, however, the patriarchal context did not prevent students from questioning gender roles in their communities and pointing out practices that should change. As the unit ended with student reflection of learning, it was encouraging to see students thinking beyond their point of view and considering multiple perspectives on the topic.

## Changing perceptions can be difficult if one is not aware there are discriminatory practices.

### Towards Chosen Representation

While exploring the origins of representations, one student commented that they come from those who hold power. “The male population demands women to be perfect and create the ideals to their liking and the females are the ones that have to oblige and follow.” Another student thought that they often come from the media and women do not have many choices. “You either marry, have family, and take care of children while your man builds his dreams... or you are considered undesirable.”

Some comments show the rejection of traditional roles despite the pressure to conform. For example, a student who has a female friend who plays football shared her friend’s struggle, “People have negative opinions of her choice. She had difficulties finding friends but she decided not to give up the sport she likes.”

There were also attempts to find a solution on how to change the representation that is imposed by society and what could be done to eliminate inequalities. There was also a more optimistic approach, “Just like Eve in the story ... she cuts herself off from preparing dinner, the same way one must decide not to accept labels”. Interestingly, this student was not only thinking about what contributed to the current representation of women but also offering an idea of abandoning the imposed roles as a way for creating a future, chosen representation.

<sup>1</sup> The student refers to rabbit/duck optical illusion.

## References

- Appleby, R.** (2017). Addressing Sexual Moralities in ELT Materials: When Diverse Cultures Meet. In: H. Widodo, J. Mukandan, L. Canh, M. Perfecto & A. Buripakdi (Eds.), *Situating moral and cultural values in the ELT materials: The Southeast Asian context*, pp. 15–28. London: Springer.
- Atwood, M.** (1993). Unpopular Gals. *Mississippi Review*, 21(1/2), 72–74. Retrieved May 31, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20134561>
- Aydinoğlu, N.** (2014). Gender in English language teaching coursebooks. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 158: 233–239.
- Bell, L.** (2007). Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education. In: M. Adams, L. Bell & P. Griffin (eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. pp. 1–14.
- Color-Symbol-Image.** *Project Zero*, Harvard Graduate School of Education. <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/color-symbol-image>, Accessed May 31, 2021.
- Gray, J.** (2002). The global coursebook in English language teaching. In D. Block & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Globalization and Language Teaching*. London: Routledge, pp. 151–167.
- Hawthorne, N.** (1843). *The Birthmark*. The Pioneer. Available at <http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/125/>
- Isaqzadeh, M., Gulzar, S. & Shapiro, J.** (2020) Studying Sensitive Topics in Fragile Contexts. In: J. Hoogeveen & U. Pape (eds) *Data Collection in Fragile States*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. pp. 173–192.
- Kello, K.** (2016). Sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom: teaching history in a divided society. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*. pp. 35–53.
- Le Guin, U. K.** (1985). She Unnames Them. (1985) *The New Yorker*. Retrieved May 31, 2021, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1985/01/21/she-unnames-them>
- Melliti, M.** (2013). Global Content in Global Coursebooks: The Way Issues of Inappropriacy, Inclusivity, and Connectedness Are Treated in Headway Intermediate. *SAGE Open*, October–December, pp. 1–12 from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244013507265>
- Prior, J. & Woodward, T.** (2017). Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In: A. Maley and N. Peachey, *Integrating global issues in the creative English language classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. British Council, pp. 57–64.
- Santos, D.** (2013). 'This activity is far from being a pause for reflection': An Exploration of ELT Authors', Editors', Teachers' and Learners' Approaches to Critical Thinking. In: J. Gray (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Language Teaching Materials*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 88–121.
- Schubert, G.** (2016). Women in the Balkans / Southeast Europe. In: G. Schubert & J. Deimel (Eds.) *Women in the Balkans / Southeastern Europe*. Biblion Media, Leipzig. pp. 23–33.
- Snowden, K.** (2010). Fairy Tale Film in the Classroom: Feminist Cultural Pedagogy, Angela Carter, and Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*. In: P. Greenhill & S. E. Matrix. *Fairy Tale Films*, University Press of Colorado; Utah State University Press, pp. 157–177.
- The 4 C's.** *Project Zero*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, [pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-4-cs](http://pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-4-cs). Accessed May 31, 2021.