

ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION APPROACHES TO VISUAL STORYTELLING USING AVATAR:THE LAST AIRBENDER

Im Englischunterricht (EFL) sollen neben Sprachkompetenzen auch kritisches Denken sowie sozio-kulturelles Wissen durch Medien gefördert werden. Diese Arbeit untersucht, wie multimediale Jugendmedien Anti-Bias Lernen in der Sekundarstufe unterstützen können. Dafür wurde das Anti-Bias-Medienanalysemodell entwickelt, das Ansätze der Anti-Bias Education (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Chiariello et al. 2022) mit kritischer Medienkompetenztheorien verbindet und Schüler:innen von der Beobachtung über die Reflexion zum Handeln führt.

Am Beispiel von Avatar – Der Herr der Elemente, mit Fokus auf Zukos Charakterentwicklung, wird gezeigt, wie Identität, Ungerechtigkeit und moralischer Wandel thematisiert werden können. Diese Arbeit zeigt, wie das Modell eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit gesellschaftlichen Themen ermöglicht und dadurch Anti-Bias- und kritische Medienkompetenzen fördert. Zudem werden Leitprinzipien und Unterrichtsaktivitäten für den Einsatz in verschiedenen Medien Kontexten skizziert.

● Abitha Ranganathan
| PHZH (Zurich
University of Teacher
Education)



Abitha Ranganathan recently graduated with a Master's degree from the Zurich University of Teacher Education.

She works as a substitute teacher and is currently travelling to explore diverse educational contexts and perspectives.

Rationale

In an increasingly complex sociopolitical landscape, young people are continuously exposed to visual media and algorithmically filtered content that shape their understanding of identity, belonging, and power (Derman-Sparks, 2016). At the same time, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers face the challenge of developing language skills, critical thinking, media literacy, and socio-cultural awareness through authentic and engaging material (Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Derman-Sparks, 2016).

This work addresses this challenge by developing a classroom-ready analytical framework to support anti-bias learning through multimodal youth media. It is situated at the intersection of media literacy and anti-bias education (ABE). Drawing on the Teaching for Justice Social Justice Standards (Chiariello et al. 2022), based on ideas by Louise Derman-Sparks (1989), it asks how multimodal youth media can support anti-bias learning and

critical engagement with social issues in secondary EFL contexts.

Anti-bias education is an approach centred on four core goals aimed at helping learners to develop positive self-concepts, appreciate human diversity, recognise unfairness, and engage in action to address bias (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010). However, its application to multimodal fictional youth media remains underexplored (Woo et al. 2022).

To address this gap, this study first analysed existing theoretical and analytical frameworks, which then were synthesised into a classroom-ready tool. In a next step, a preliminary version of the framework was applied to selected episodes of Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-2008) with a focus on one of the main characters, Zuko, to refine and validate it as well as to demonstrate its classroom applicability.

The animated fantasy series allows for the exploration of complex issues, from

explicit engagement with themes of imperialism to identity formation, cultural genocide, multiculturalism, and social justice (Saurer 2019; Kerr, 2024). Its distinctive multimodal storytelling draws on cultural inspirations predominantly from South Asia and East Asia (Kerr, 2024; Van Hoey, 2022) and combines symbolic imagery, narrative structure, and audiovisual elements. This allows students to analyse how meaning is constructed across modes, making it particularly suitable for teaching visual and critical literacy in EFL contexts.

Furthermore, the fictional setting lowers barriers for discussing sensitive topics without singling out students or real-life situations, while still enabling critical engagement. With teacher support, students can analyse representations and connect fictional worlds with real-world institutions, thereby developing transferable media literacy skills.

Zuko's (the banished prince of the Fire Nation and the main villain of the show) character arc is particularly relevant for this study. His arc illustrates non-linear moral change, challenges fixed identity categories, and foregrounds systemic injustice rather than individual blame. For example, his shifting loyalties and eventual decision to join the protagonists shows how identity is shaped by both social structures and internal conflicts. This makes his story accessible and meaningful for adolescent learners, as it mirrors their own negotiations of autonomy and responsibility.

This article presents a condensed version of the full study, focusing on the framework and its classroom application. The complete study, including materials for extended analysis, is available on <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19351751> (Ranganathan, 2025).

The Anti-Bias Media Analysis Framework

The Anti-Bias Media Analysis Framework was developed through an extensive analysis and synthesis of existing models and frameworks. Each of these models addresses different aspects required for multimodal character analysis. The approaches analysed include the Teaching for Justice Social Justice

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Standards (Chiariello et al. 2022), supported by principles of Critical Literacy (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004; Freitag-Hild, 2022), which help unpack issues of representation and power. In addition, Doelker's (2015) model of visual literacy provides tools for analysing visual and semiotic elements, while Eder's (2010) Clock of Character offers a method for examining character construction. Finally, Doering's (2013) affective-cognitive theory explains how learners emotionally connect and relate to characters and how this engagement can lead to meaningful reflection and action.

Four “pressure point” episodes were selected across the series to trace shifts within Zuko's character (“The Storm” S1Ep12; “Zuko Alone” S2Ep7; “The Crossroads of Destiny” S2Ep20; “The Western Air Temple” S3Ep12). These episodes are rich in character information and development, and mark important emotional turning points. Each episode was analysed using the framework. The insights were used to tighten the final classroom-ready framework and to develop concrete classroom activities. Thus, the framework functions both as a tool for students to analyse scenes and a guide for teachers to design activities.

The resulting framework (see Figure 1) is composed of five broad domains: Visual Scene Decoder (VSD), Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action (IDJA). The VSD guides initial observation and interpretation of audiovisual elements. The Identity domain explores how characters understand themselves and are represented. The Diversity domain examines relationships, perspectives, and understanding across differences. The Justice

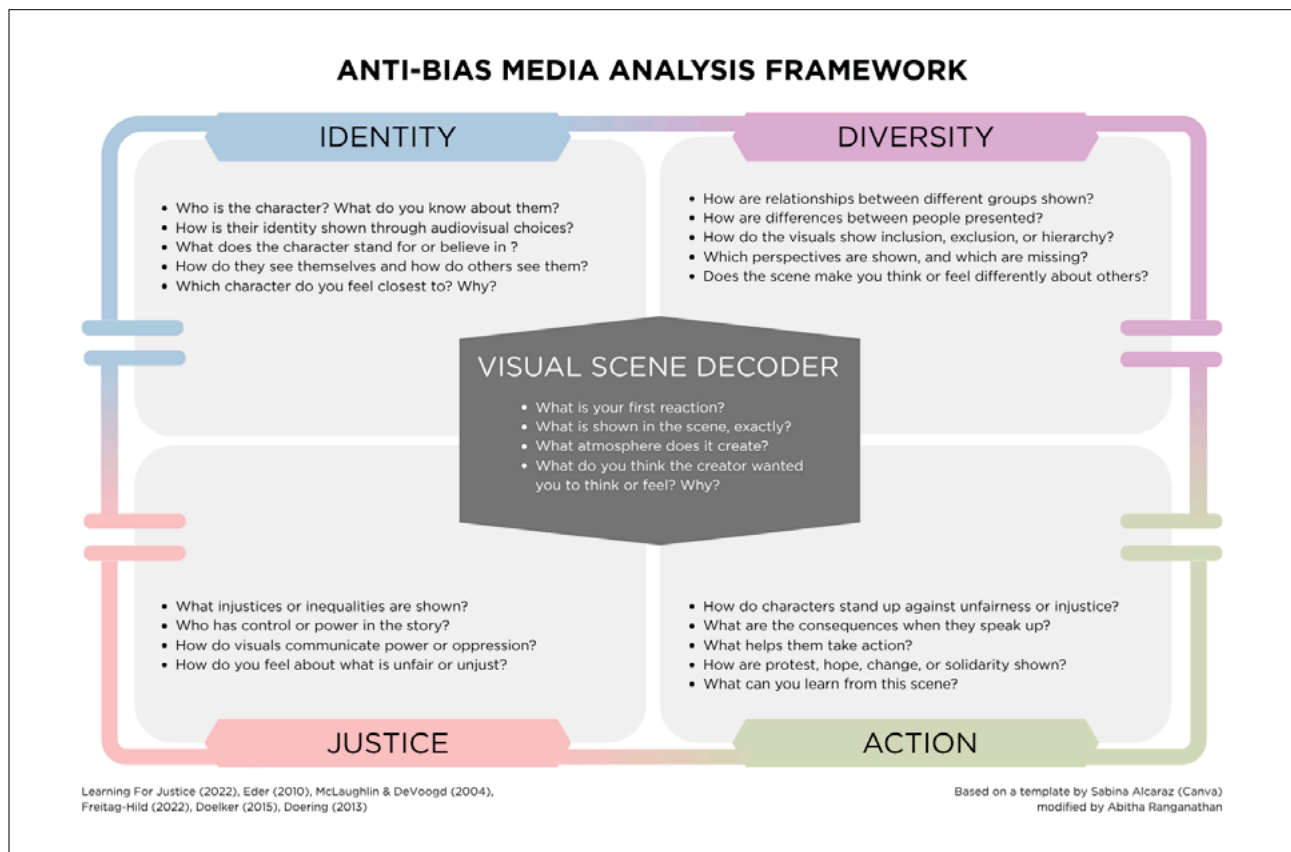


Figure 1
Anti-Bias Media Analysis Diagram. Design elements
sourced from Sabina Alcaraz via Canva.com

domain focuses on power structures and systemic inequalities. Finally, the Action domain encourages reflection on responsibility and possible responses to injustice. These domains serve as entry points for deeper inquiry and reflection. Each domain contains key analytical prompts and goals that provide an anchor for learning outcomes. The framework illustrates that anti-bias media literacy is interconnected. Analysis can begin at any point and often moved back and forth between domains. Teachers may hang up the framework in the classroom for constant visual reference. **F1**

As part of this framework, its classroom implementation follows a structured progression:

1. Perception: What do you see/feel?
2. Interpretation: How and why does the scene create meaning?
3. Reflection: What issues of identity, diversity, justice, and action are involved?
4. Action: Why does this matter, and what might we do?

On the one hand, this helps students maintain a stable routine whenever they work with a scene or an episode. On the other hand, a systematic approach prevents premature judgements and anchors the discussion in observable audiovisual details before moving towards social interpretation.

Before showing a scene or an episode, the teacher should point out one or two domains depending on the lesson focus to guide students' attention and prevent cognitive overload. Different tasks and activities can be integrated between the stages of interpretation and reflection to deepen understanding.

During this process, teachers can use characters as "mirrors" and "windows" (Bishop, 2015) by asking questions such as "In what ways is this character similar to you" and "what perspectives or experiences are new to you here?". This supports perspective-taking, self-reflection, and seeing characters as models for moral development.

Media-specific considerations should be made, such as including content warnings, clarifying cultural contexts, and avoiding stereotypical interpretations. The teacher's openness to multiple interpretations helps avoid imposing singular readings on students, especially when dealing with complex or sensitive themes. Language scaffolds such as sentence starters, emotion vocabulary, basic film terminology, key IDJA concepts can help students in expressing their ideas during discussions.

Suggestions for the Practical Application of the Anti-Bias Media Analysis Framework in the EFL Classroom

The following examples show how the framework can be applied to Avatar: The Last Airbender, while also presenting activities that are applicable to other media.

Domain focus "Identity": "Who am I?"

Episode focus: "The Storm" (S1Ep12), specifically the Agni Kai flashback, in which Zuko is punished and banished by his father after speaking out of line, and "Zuko Alone" (S2Ep7), which follows Zuko's isolated journey through the Earth Kingdom and his childhood and inner conflicts.

Key aims:

- Students explore how Identity is shaped by family expectations, cultural norms, and power structures.
- Students practise vocabulary for self-description, emotions, and values.

Possible activities:

- Students analyse screenshots/ short clips and identify audiovisual elements such as colours, light, camera angles, music, and body language using sticky notes or digital tags (e.g. Miro, OneNote).
- Students create identity webs for themselves and Zuko including categories such as age, gender, class, language, and discuss which aspects feel chosen or imposed. These webs get updated with each viewing of an episode.
- Students use Venn diagrams to compare either two characters or different stages of Zuko's

development in order to identify similarities, differences, and changes over time.

- Teachers introduce scaffolded sentence starters: "Zuko sees himself as...", "Others see him as...", "He wants to be..." to support structured discussion about identity.
- Students write a short reflective text about a situation in which external expectations conflicted with personal beliefs. This task can be optionally anonymised or fictionalised.

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Domain focus "Diversity": "Beyond Enemy Images"

Episode focus: "Zuko Alone" (S2Ep7), which presents Zuko's encounter with an Earth Kingdom family and challenges assumptions about enemies, and "The Crossroads of Destiny" (S2Ep20), in which alliances shift and Zuko makes a morally complex decision by betraying the Avatar.

Key aims:

- Students identify, question, and challenge stereotypical representations.
- Students practise multiperspectivity by discussing feeling empathy for the "villain".

Possible activities:

- Students are assigned role cards (e.g. Earth Kingdom villagers, soldiers, Zuko, Katara) and predict how their characters perceive others, tracking how these perceptions change over time.

- Students participate in in-role discussions using phrases such as “From my point of view...”, “I understand that... but...”.
- Students reformulate generalising or stereotyping statements into more precise and nuanced language (e.g. changing “all Earth Kingdom people are...” to “some Earth Kingdom people are...”) using examples from the series such as Katara’s “it’s in your blood” (S2Ep20) statement.
- Students complete a “Missing Voices” task, in which they identify marginalised perspectives in the series and rewrite, perform, or draw these viewpoints.

Possible activities:

- Students analyse freeze frames and describe spatial relationships (e.g. above, below, dark) and the atmosphere they create.
- Students identify and label symbols of power, fear, and resistance (e.g. architecture, clothing, gestures, insignia).
- Students place characters on a “power ladder” from most to least powerful. They justify their decision and have discussions about what it means to have power.
- Students compare age-appropriate historical and contemporary images (e.g. Japanese Imperialism, Trump administration, Nazi Germany) with Fire Nation imagery, using simple comparative language such as “similar to...”, “different because...”.

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Domain focus: “Justice”: “Seeing Power Structures”

Episode focus: Flashbacks to the throne room scenes in “The Storm” (S1Ep12) and “Zuko Alone” (S2Ep7), which depict authority and punishment within the Fire Nation, and the coup scenes in “The Crossroads of Destiny” (S2Ep20), where Azula, the Fire Nation princess, tries to take over the Earth Kingdom.

Key aims:

- Students analyse how power and oppression are represented visually.
- Students understand how imperial/fascist aesthetics are reflected in media.
- Students develop vocabulary related to fairness and systemic injustice.

Domain Focus “Action”: “Honour and Accountability”

Episode focus: “The Western Air Temple” (S3Ep12), in which Zuko apologises to Team Avatar and wants to join them.

Key aims:

- Students practise language for apology, responsibility, accountability, and change.
- Students reflect on realistic forms of action in their own social contexts.

Possible activities:

- Students create a character journey timeline that tracks Zuko’s actions, setbacks and turning points to show the non-linear nature of transformation.
- Students do a “Hope Core” audio-visual task by collecting scenes and quotes that represent change or suggest hope.
- Students are presented with fictional or real-life conflicts (e.g. bullying, exclusion, gossiping). Students propose actions for these scenarios using prompts such as “If..., I can...”.
- Students analyse Zuko’s apology and identify key features of effective apologies before writing their own using sentence starters such as “I’m sorry for...”, “It was wrong because...”, “Next time I will...”.

Discussion

The application of the framework to *Avatar: The Last Airbender* highlights its potential as a learning tool for anti-bias education. It enables students to understand identity as evolving and negotiated, diversity as perspective-taking across difference, justice as shaped by systemic injustices, and action as a complex and often non-linear moral process. This series offers opportunities for students to engage with complex topics such as intercultural understanding, moral development, and agency, particularly when they may not yet have the language to discuss such concepts abstractly.

Applying the Anti-Bias Media Analysis Framework reveals several strengths. The IDJA domains ensure that anti-bias education questions are the central topic. The overlap of the domains reflects how they are interconnected both in the series they are applied to and in real-world contexts. The Visual Scene Decoder anchors discussions in concrete audiovisual details helping students move from observation to interpretation before engaging with broader social concepts. Combined with character coding and affective-cognitive layers, the framework encourages attention to how characters are represented, how viewers are guided to feel, and how those feelings can be questioned. Using the same prompts across multiple episodes supports pattern recognition of recurring injustices, evolving relationships, and shifts in motifs.

However, the framework also presents challenges. It demands a lot from teachers, as it requires extreme familiarity with the video to be used, experience with multimodal analysis, media and visual literacy, and knowledge of sensitive social subjects and how to address them in the classroom. Consequently, the framework can also be demanding for students who have to juggle multiple forms of analysis. Careful scaffolding of language and content is required to avoid over-interpretation or predetermined readings. Furthermore, multimodal analysis demands time and preparation, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms. For these reasons, the selected domains and the depth of analysis depend on class level and available time.

Conclusion

This work has introduced an Anti-Bias Media Analysis Framework and demonstrated its application to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. It shows how multimodal storytelling can make abstract social concepts visible and discussable. Through structured viewing and targeted prompts, students can move from describing what they see to analysing how meaning is constructed, questioning how power operates, and considering how moral agency might look like in their own contexts.

Narratives such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* can serve as effective entry points for anti-bias inquiry in EFL classrooms. They shape how students understand identity, belonging and justice. Rather than treating audiovisual texts as mere entertainment, educators can use them as sites for critical engagement with social issues. By combining language learning with critical media literacy, teachers can support learners in developing not only communicative competences, but also empathy and awareness for real-world social issues.

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