

CHALLENGING ABLEISM IN EFL AND ESL CLASSROOMS: SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract

There are millions of disabled people across the world, and they are often vulnerable to discrimination. As a result, they experience difficulties concerning health, education, and employment because non-disabled people are considered more normal and superior than disabled people. This kind of segregation leads to ableism which is based on the belief that disabilities are flaws and disabled people are inferior, more fragile, and less strong. Ableism is an understanding that values the general physical and/or mental abilities of the people. It can manifest itself in different forms. Among them are the verbal expressions which refer to the ableist language. Considering that one's perception of the world is immensely affected by the language that s/he uses, it is of crucial importance to eliminate ableist language. Apart from non-ableist language, a non-ableist pedagogy should also be promoted. To achieve a more inclusive world, the education settings should reflect a non-ableist pedagogy by including disability themes and related activities. English as foreign and second language classrooms can provide convenient contexts to develop an awareness of non-ableist language and pedagogy. Therefore, drawing on the extant literature, this study sets out to suggest pedagogical implementations that can be used in English classes to promote non-ableism.

Keywords: *ableism, ableist language, English as a foreign language, English as a second language*

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YABANCI DİL VE İKİNCİ DİL OLARAK İNGİLİZCE SINIFLARINDA SAĞLAMCILIK İLE MÜCADELE: ÖĞRETMENLER İÇİN ÖNERİLER

Öz

Dünya genelinde milyonlarca engelli insan vardır ve bu insanlar genellikle ayrımcılığa karşı savunmasız durumdadırlar. Bunun sonucu olarak, engelli olmayanlar, engellilere göre daha normal ve üstün kabul edildiğinden engelli kişiler, sağlık, eğitim ve istihdam konusunda zorluklar yaşamaktadırlar. Bu tür bir ayırım, engelli olmanın kusurlu olduğu, engelli kişilerin daha güçsüz ve daha hassas olduğu anlayışına dayanmaktadır. Sağlamcılık, insanların genel mental ve/veya fiziksel yeteneklerine önem vermektedir. Dolayısıyla, kendini farklı şekillerde gösterebilir. Bunlar arasında, sağlamcı dile atıfta bulunan sözlü ifadeler vardır. Kişinin dünyayı algılayışının kullandığı dilden büyük ölçüde etkilendiği düşünülduğünde, sağlamcı dilin ortadan kaldırılması büyük önem taşımaktadır. Sağlamcılık karşıtı dilin yanı sıra, sağlamcılık karşıtı pedagoji de desteklenmelidir. Daha kapsayıcı bir dünya için, eğitim ortamları, engellilik temalarını ve etkinliklerini dahil ederek sağlamcılığa karşı olan bir pedagojiyi yansıtmalıdır. Yabancı dil ve ikinci dil olarak İngilizce sınıfları, sağlamcılık karşıtı dil ve pedagoji bilincini geliştirmek için uygun bağlamlar sağlayabilir. Bu nedenle bu çalışma, mevcut literatürden yola çıkarak, sağlamcılık karşıtlığını destekleyici İngilizce derslerinde kullanılacak pedagojik uygulamalar önermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: sağlamcılık, sağlamcı dil, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, ikinci dil olarak İngilizce

1. Introduction

There are currently over one billion disabled people around the world (World Health Organization, 2020). As each individual in the world, disabled people's rights to education and adequate living standards including food, clothing, housing, and medical care (United Nations, 1948) are ensured. However, World Bank (2019) reports that persons with disabilities have problems in taking part in economic and social activities. Accordingly, they have limited access to education and healthcare services; therefore, they are vulnerable to malnutrition, education inequality, and unemployment. They also experience problems in their social lives, such as inaccessibility to transportation as a result of social exclusion (Bates & Davis, 2004). That means non-disabled people ignore or block disabled people's engagement with rights, goods, and services that are fundamental for their well-being and

social/economic development. For this reason, United Nations (n.d.) emphasizes an inclusive world where all people, regardless of their gender, race, and disabilities participate equally in social and economic life. Therefore, it aims to promote inclusive education for all people at all levels, from pre-school to tertiary education. However, this aim will be realizable if a radical change happens in the cultural and social views towards education (de Beco, 2016). Accordingly, it should be well-understood that education is not a commodity of a specific group of people. There is a need to represent and include people of diverse identities including disabled people. Otherwise, the social inclusion of disabled people is unavoidable, thereby maintaining discrimination towards them. This leads to ableist thinking where the non-disabled people are perceived as superior to their disabled counterparts. In every walk of life, ableism could manifest itself unless it is challenged.

One of the effective ways to combat ableism is education because schools are the settings where individuals with different identities can be represented and included. Among those settings, foreign language classrooms can be a suitable milieu to provide anti-ableist pedagogy because lots of materials including videos, reading texts, and projects are used to engage the learners to use the language. Those materials can convey messages about different subjects. Since English is the lingua franca and spoken by millions of people around the world, particularly English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) classes can foster educational outreach and expand the scope of inclusive education by incorporating disability themes and related activities concerning disabled people in the class materials. With that in mind, this study suggests some practical implementations to be used in language classes to challenge ableism and enhance the representation of disabled people in language materials. The overall structure of the present study is dictated by the extant literature of ableism and it seeks to contribute to the literature in language education. In so doing, it aims to provide further guidance for EFL teachers, material, and curriculum developers to achieve more inclusive learning settings.

2. Defining ableism

To develop an understanding of ableism, it is necessary to highlight the following concepts: (1) *able-bodied* and (2) *disability*. ‘Able-bodied’ is an adjective that describes the individual who has the capacity of performing normal physical efforts in the required settings (McGuere, 2006). Contrarily, *disability* refers to the impairment that limits and/or removes the ability to exert activity in the same way that an able-bodied individual does (United Nations, 2003). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that disability can occur in different forms including physical (e.g., visual, hearing, movement) and/or mental (e.g., social relationships, thinking, learning) impairments (CDC, 2020). Furthermore, World Health Organization (2020) estimates that there are more than one billion people that have any form of temporary or permanent disability during their lifetime, which accounts for

roughly one-sixth of the world population. Therefore, United Nations emphasizes that having any disability is quite normal for human beings.

Despite this, there is still an understanding that overestimates being able-bodied because it is considered 'normal'. This prejudiced thinking causes discrimination against disabled people, which refers to *ableism* (Hehir, 2002). Ableism refers to a set of beliefs and assumptions that signify disability as a lack or flaw; therefore, it is barely recognized as a variety (Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008). Accordingly, having any form of disability means the status of ailment, weakness, and subordination (McLean, 2011). However, we live in a globalized world where billions of people with various identities exist and connect; therefore, disability is one of those identities such as gender and race (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). For this reason, seeing disabilities as a variety and as a form of identity has never been more critical than today.

At the center of ableism lies the conception that disabled people are the ones who deviate from the normal (McLean, 2011). Therefore, their conditions are considered undesirable. As a result, the obstacles that disabled people experience remain unattended. Among them are inaccessible buses/restaurants/restrooms due to lack of wheelchair accessible features, and a lack of service that offers alternate formats for deaf/visually impaired individuals. To produce greater awareness of these problems and provide solutions for them, defining and understanding ableism is crucial. Therefore, education lies at the very core of challenging ableism.

3. Ableism in the language

Ableism is maintained not only through cultural expectations but also written and spoken language (Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Lester, Sasson, & Hand, 2021). Since language has an unavoidable effect on how individuals see the world, ableist language may lead to sustaining the prejudices about disability and disabled people. Although some do not mean to use ableist language at all, they may not be aware of it as it is embedded in society and culture (Kattari, Olzman, & Hanna, 2018). Therefore, an acute awareness should be developed to inform what accounts for ableist language.

Ableist language is even manifested in the language the individuals use for addressing/referencing disabled people. Dunn and Andrews (2015) explain that there are two kinds of language that handle this issue: (1) person-first language (PFL), and (2) identity-first language (IFL). Accordingly, in PFL, the identity is given weight; therefore, it is expressed in the form of "a person with a disability" such as "a person with spasticity". On the other hand, IFL focuses on the disability first, such as "a spastic person". According to Dunn and Andrews (2015), those who support IFL think that PFL implies there is a negative apprehension of disability and thus it is expected to be separated from the identity of the individual. That means, when one references a disabled person by expressing "a person with spasticity", this disability can be understood as a component that is detached from that person. However, there is

still no agreed form of referencing/addressing the disabled people as some of them prefer IFL while others choose the PFL (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).

Ableist language is not limited to this controversial PFL/IFL issue but covers a much broader language area that individuals use in their daily lives. Below is a list of some ableist vocabulary that is often used without realizing their ableist content (Ravishankar, 2020; Resnick, 2021).

(1) Barren: It signifies health problems regarding fertility, and it is metaphorically used for people who cannot have offspring. Beyond this meaning, this word is commonly used for something that is not fruitful and productive such as a barren landscape with no crops.

(2) Blind: It denotes a person with visual impairment; however, it is generally used for people who cannot understand and perceive things (e.g., I am blind to people's words about me).

(3) Crazy: It is often used to refer to someone/something that is strange and unusual, but it actually means someone with mental illness.

(4) Crippled: This is an offensive word to indicate someone is flawed about something although it signifies a physical or mental disability.

(5) Deaf: While this word indicates a hearing impairment, it is often used metaphorically for people who are ignorant (e.g., You are deaf to your family's problems).

(6) Dumb: Although this word is commonly used to refer to a person who is not smart, it originally means a person who is not able to perform verbal communication.

(7) Hysterical: This word is generally used for someone unable to control his/her feelings. However, it denotes a psychiatric illness related to hysteria.

(8) Lame: It is generally used to indicate an object or event that is boring and uninteresting. However, it means someone unable to walk properly.

(9) Obsessed/Obsession: This word is concerned with a psychological illness which means having unhealthy attachments to someone/something (e.g., obsessed with cleaning). However, it is sometimes used for meticulous people.

(10) Retarded/ Idiot: Although this word means a person with mental disability, it is often used for someone who is unintelligent and ignorant.

In addition to these words mentioned above, ableism is also crammed into the culture, which can be seen in the proverbs. For instance, Kesgin and Karakoç (2017) investigated the Turkish proverbs to find out whether/to what extent ableism was represented in their meanings. The researchers concluded that proverbs mostly made references to 'crazy' and 'blind' words. They provided examples as follows:

(1) **Körle** yatan şaşı kalkar: This proverb is used to tell the importance of making friends with good people. That means, if you make friends with bad or indecent people, then you are likely to bear a resemblance to them after some time. However, to communicate this meaning across, blind (in Turkish: kör) people are associated with bad/indecent people.

(2) Ağlama ölü için, ağla **deli** için: This proverb means that if one of your beloved ones passes away, you should not cry for him/her; but you should cry if s/he is crazy, you can cry because his/her pathetic condition will always be before your eyes and you will be in pain whenever you see his/her condition. In this proverb, the crazy (in Turkish: deli), people are perceived as someone who should be pitied.

Drawing on these proverbs, Kesgin and Karakoç (2017) further concluded that disabled individuals were used to denote unwanted conditions or flawed people. This permeates the stereotyped thinking towards disabled people. Although the non-disabled are well-intended and are not aware of using an ableist language, it should be dismissed because it may offend disabled people (Carruthers, 2019). Thus, anti-ableist language should be accentuated in educational settings. This means that teachers should pay extra attention to their language and they should prioritize anti-ableism in the subjects they teach.

4. Addressing ableism in foreign language education

The school settings have mostly able-bodied students and teachers; therefore, they may be ignorant about the problems/obstacles that disabled people experience due to their disabilities (McLean, 2011). As a result, disability and being disabled are seldomly represented in educational surroundings (Dolmage, 2017). In addition to this, talking about disability is frequently avoided and lots of teachers believe that it should not even be explicitly discussed if the students do not ask for it (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019), which may end up in preserving ableism and ableist language among teachers and students (McLean, 2011).

However, given that an increasing number of people who have disabilities attends universities each year, disability should be given a place in higher education and other professional settings as those people may need to receive educational and professional support in accordance with their particular conditions (Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008). Apart from disabled students, non-disabled students should also be aware of disabled people's problems to challenge ableism. For this reason, teachers should strive to include disability content into their classes (Ellman, 2012).

Among the curriculum of other school subjects, ESL and EFL classes are the ideal settings to present disability content. Given the eminent status of English as a lingua franca and the learners' endeavors to learn ESL/EFL for career/professional prospects, disability content should be embedded into the ESL/EFL curriculum. The learners can thus be informed about all aspects of disability and

issues concerning disabled people. In an ESL/EFL class, lots of topics can be covered such as environment, health, cultural festivals, and the learners can study the language components (i.e., grammar and vocabulary) through these different topics. This means that when learners are engaged with the offered content, they can be explicitly/implicitly given information about it. For example, the teachers can make use of movies or biographical documents where the students are provided information about famous people with disabilities; this will present a role model for the disabled students (Storey, 2007). ESL/EFL classes enable such a variety of content to offer for the learners as the language can be taught through any material. Therefore, providing authentic materials where the disabled people are portrayed as achievers may also motivate the disabled students while they study the language skills such as reading or speaking. This will help to erase ableism and ableist stereotypes.

5. Sample ESL/EFL implementations to challenge ableism

Drawing on the extant literature, this section provides practical implementations about how to address ableism in ESL/EFL classrooms. Firstly, as aforementioned in this paper, since language has a strong impact on humans' perceptions of the world, ESL/EFL teachers should pay extra attention to their use of the English language in the class. They should avoid using the words such as dumb, idiot, obsessed, crazy, blind, and deaf to make references to people that they think they behave inappropriately depending on the context. Although the ESL/EFL teachers may be well-intentioned, these words are closely associated with ableism; thus, they should dismiss the use of these words during instruction. If the learners happen to use one of these words, the teachers are supposed to replace that word with another non-ableist word. For example, instead of using the words 'retarded' or 'stupid', 'ignorant' or 'dense' words can be preferred (Resnick, 2021). In so doing, the reasons for this preference should be explained to the learners by giving explicit information about ableism and ableist language. This may be useful in creating an awareness of ableism and its reflections.

In addition, among what Storey (2007) indicates as ways of challenging ableism in educational settings, the components that may be adapted and implemented into EFL/ESL classes can be listed as follows: (1) To create an ability awareness, (2) Incorporating disability in the curriculum, (3) Giving place to disability literature, and (4) Using role models. Inspired by the considerations mentioned by Storey (2007), the following section provides some sample implementations that are made specific to ESL/EFL classes to challenge ableism.

5.1. To create an ability awareness

Storey (2007) implies that role-playing activities where non-disabled students act as if they had disabilities are useful to create an ability awareness. In an EFL/ESL setting, such an activity may be used to promote speaking skills while the learners put themselves in someone's (disabled people) shoes.

5.1.1. Activity

To help learners understand the obstacles and problems experienced by disabled people, EFL/ESL teachers can have learners play the role of physically impaired people using a wheelchair. Accordingly, the teachers can have students:

- Watch a video clip that tells the importance of wheelchair accessibility.
- Discuss the possible hardships to use a wheelchair.
- Read the dialogue related to wheelchair problems such as narrow doorways, steps, parking wheelchairs, and the absence of automatic door openers and act the dialogue out.

Depending on the students' proficiency level, they can write the dialogue or the teachers can use a ready-made dialogue. The bottom line is choosing or including a dialogue where the problems of disabled people and their emotions are expressed clearly.

5.2 Incorporating disability in the curriculum

The disability content should be given a place in the curriculum (Storey, 2007). Speaking of foreign language context, there are texts and activities concerning cultural awareness or environmental issues in the EFL/ESL materials. Equally, the disability should also be a part of the curriculum. Reading materials that give information about some related aspects including ableist language and the problems that disabled people face in professional/daily life can be used.

5.2.1. Activity

EFL/ESL teachers can provide the learners with the following statistical information about disabled children:

Children with disabilities experience violence three to four times more frequently than their non-disabled counterparts (UNICEF, as cited in European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015).

Upon providing this information, the teachers can have learners discuss this social issue by addressing such questions:

- Do you know any disabled child that experiences violence?
- Why do you think disabled children are vulnerable to more violence?
- Do you know any organization that aims to prevent violence against children?
- What kind of solutions can be introduced to this problem?

This activity can be used in the pre-speaking or pre-writing stage where the aim is to brainstorm ideas and review some structures and vocabulary. At the same time, disability is also brought into the EFL/ESL classroom. As an extension, the students can prepare posters or documents where they suggest some solutions to the problem, and they can publish them by using WEB 2.0 tools such as blogs.

5.3. Giving place to disability literature

According to Storey (2007), teachers may have students read books with disability themes to develop empathy and understanding towards disabled people. In an EFL/ESL context, depending on the learners' age and proficiency, the teacher may introduce some disability-themed books.

5.3.1. Activity

A Smile from Andy (Holcomb, 1989) is a short story about a child named Andy with cerebral palsy. Andy is too shy and ostracized by his friends. However, one day he meets a girl who discovers something special about him for making friends. The story essentially emphasizes how a friendly person can change someone's perceptions and it encourages friendship with disabled people. Therefore, based on the moral of the story, it can be used in an EFL/ESL classroom to raise awareness of disabilities.

Before reading the story, the teacher can develop background information on cerebral palsy by addressing the following questions:

- Do you know anything about cerebral palsy?
- What do you know about this impairment?
- Is it a mental or physical disability?
- How can it be treated?
- What can/cannot a person with cerebral palsy do?

After reading the story, the teacher can have students:

- Summarize the story (i.e., writing or speaking).
- Discuss how they feel about Andy and his friend.
- Prepare a poster about cerebral palsy by indicating how to improve the life quality of children with cerebral palsy (e.g., doing fitness, making friends).

In doing this, the learners can also practice English language skills while they are informed about this disability. Alternatively, disability literature activities can be conducted for practicing intensive and/or extensive reading. While intensive reading refers to reading for studying the language, extensive reading is conducted for pleasure and understanding the meaning (Carrell & Carson, 1997). Therefore, the students can learn how to read new sources about disability and disabled people and they get informed while they employ such practices.

5.4. Using role models

Students with disabilities may need role models; therefore, materials that show famous and successful disabled people can be used in the classes (Storey, 2007). That means, they need inspiration from successful people with disabilities. Thus, they can understand that their disabilities are not

obstacles to achievements. Through reading and listening (the spoken and/or written word), EFL/ESL learners can extend their knowledge of famous people with disabilities.

5.4.1. Activity

Reading about the famous actor Tom Cruise who has dyslexia can inspire non-disabled and disabled learners. Similarly, there are lots of famous people like him such as Beethoven (deaf), Napoleon (with epilepsy), and Steven Spielberg (with autism).

Through such biographical texts, the EFL/ESL teachers can practice reading sub-skills such as scanning and skimming. The learners are either required to develop a full comprehension of the text or find specific information such as date, name, or place throughout the text. Alternatively, reading comprehension questions including True/False, multiple-choice questions or open-ended questions can also be directed to learners to check how well they understand the text.

6. Conclusion

Disabled people are not inferior to non-disabled people. This line of thinking informs that disabilities are not conditions that must be ignored or barely recognized. Like gender, race, and cultural differences among people, disabilities must be accepted as a variety. Given the lingua franca status of English, EFL/ESL classrooms can be the ideal settings where English is used as a medium to develop an awareness of this variety. Therefore, in this present study, practical activities are provided as suggestions to facilitate the understanding of the incorporation of disability into the EFL/ESL settings. In so doing, this article aims to challenge ableism by showing what counts for ableist language and introducing some EFL/ESL implementations. Incorporating disability is of vital importance for supporting an anti-bias curriculum (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). That means the exclusion of disability issues with no representation of disabled people in the language education curriculum may lead to failures in creating inclusive societies, thereby aggravating ableism. For this reason, teachers have critical roles in introducing disability issues into the curriculum and modeling non-ableist behaviors (Alves & Lopes dos Santos, 2013). Therefore, this article puts special emphasis on the activities that can be implemented in language classes with an aim of guiding teachers and curriculum developers.

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