



## Images from Japanese English Teaching Materials as an Ageist Hidden Curriculum

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**Abstract.** Ageism in mass media is of great concern with older individuals often being stereotyped or simply rendered invisible. Yet research is largely silent on ageism in English language teaching (ELT) materials. Given the power of English education, the impact of visual media, and the tendency for English teaching materials to include visual depictions of people, such research is warranted. In response, a content analysis of 7350 visuals of people from Japanese ELT resources was conducted in the study described here. The goal was to understand four issues. First, how visible were the elderly overall? Second, given intergenerational friction as one outgrowth of ageism, did these materials normalize intergenerational interactions including the elderly? Third, to what extent did these materials exhibit ageism of women since ‘gendered ageism’ is an especially important issue? Fourth, to what extent did these materials either reproduce or subvert stereotypes of the elderly? Findings indicated that the amount of representation was biased against the elderly, that intergenerational interactions involving the elderly were scant, and that older women were especially underrepresented. While some of the elderly depictions were stereotypical, others did portray elderly people positively, as socially-involved and vigorous. These findings demonstrate the need for greater sensitivity to an ageist hidden curriculum in ELT.

**Keywords:** ageism, EFL, gender, hidden curriculum, Japan; critical media studies

### Introduction

Assuming we live a typical lifespan, we will all experience aging and, thus, the potential for victimization via ageism. This universality sets ageism apart from other forms of social group oppression such as sexism and racism. Yet ageist discourse and practices are broadly tolerated. For evidence of this in the North American context, one need venture no further than the greeting card section of the local supermarket where birthday cards for adults consistently draw upon ageist tropes as a source of humor (Ellis & Morrison, 2005). In addition the intersectionality of ageism with other forms of oppression such as heteronormativity, racism, and sexism can compound the burden upon the individual. Ageism is clearly a powerful force. Yet we know little about the role of ageism in English language teaching (ELT). Work along these lines is strongly warranted in light of the ubiquity and power of ELT coupled with documentation of ageism across the globe.

To address this gap in scholarship, this study focused upon visual depictions of people in Japanese ELT materials to shed light on how these materials portrayed older individuals. Such visual depictions are plentiful in ELT materials as illustrations of characters in dialogs, images supporting a story or activity prompt, or simply as a more decorative function used to enliven lessons. An examination of images is particularly important given their power as agents of socialization coupled with what is known about the role of visual depictions of people in reinscribing ageist attitudes. Rather than considering official textbooks, materials created and used by English teachers and then shared via online repositories across Japan were collected. This provides a potent window into actual ground-level teaching. Understanding how such materials may reflect or disrupt ageist beliefs can point the way for improvements to be made in ELT materials while also contributing to the broader theorization of ELT's role as a conduit for the propagation of relations of social power via the hidden curriculum.

## Literature Review

### *Ageism as a social problem*

First explicitly delineated by gerontologist Robert Butler (Butler, 1969), the issue of ageism has garnered increased attention in recent years. Although ageism is usually employed as a term to describe negative attitudes or actions directed toward the elderly, experts actually define ageism more broadly as any positive or negative thoughts or actions directed by members of any age group toward any other on the basis of age differences (Levi & Macdonald, 2016). This includes prejudice, an affective dimension, discrimination, a behavioral dimension, and stereotyping, a cognitive dimension (Iversen et al., 2009). Ageism can be powerful: The tendency to categorize people along the lines of age, gender, and race is so strong that social scientists refer to these as “primitive” or “automatic” categories (Nelson, 2005). Ageism levied against the elderly may now be more extensive than sexism or racism (WHO, 2017). Henceforth, when “ageism” is spoken of in this work, it refers to ageism negatively impacting the elderly.

Ageism permeates modern society as a pan-cultural phenomenon (Cuddy et al., 2005). There are several factors contributing to this prevalence. The trend of formal education increasingly usurping the traditional role of elders’ knowledge reduces perceptions of the value of the elderly (Bodner, 2009). Also, declines in traditional intergenerational cohabitation within single households results in decreased perceptions of common interests across generations (Bugental & Hehman, 2007). Attitudes that the skills of elders are less relevant in light of rapid technological innovations and perceived resistance of the elderly to any form of change have contributed to the increase of ageism as well (Ivan & Cutler, 2021). The implicit fears of growing old harbored by most of us also lend potency to ageism as we simply seek to psychologically distance ourselves from that which we fear (Butler, 2009). Contributing to this attitude is the “biomedicalization” of aging in which aging is defined as a problem rather than as a normal phase of life (Holmes, 2007). One related manifestation of ageism is the anti-aging industry which fosters a denial of typical human aging as something to be controlled or even hidden rather than promoting an acceptance of aging in a healthy manner as part of the life course (Calasanti, 2005). In this way, “successful” aging is constructed as success in concealing aging’s normal physical effects.

The relationship between ageism and the media is robust. In the media, older people are often simply invisible (de Mendonça & Castro, 2016; Hurd et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that ageism in the workplace is increasing for a number of reasons including a heightened focus on youth culture in the mass media (Roscigno, 2010). Also, older people are often portrayed as inept in the use of new technology (Choi et al., 2020). Perceptions that older people lack relevant skills and are resistant to change result in broad discrimination in hiring practices (Handy & Davy, 2007). When older people are visible in the media, they are often stereotyped. Common ageist stereotypes include the older person as irritable and possessing poor driving skills (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2015). Older individuals are often depicted as senile or decrepit as well (Palmore, 2015). The infantilized elder represents yet another stereotype (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016). In television shows, older people are often included for comic relief by drawing upon stereotypes of decrepitude, senility, and sexual incapability (Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000). While stereotypes of older people can also include their being perceived as warmer and friendlier than members of other groups, this is not necessarily positive since it is often coupled with them being stereotyped as lower in ambition, less responsible, and lower in intellectual competency (Cuddy et al., 2005). The United Nations has acknowledged the political invisibility of older people and has responded by seeking to promote explicit attention to this group in future policy decisions (Horkenstad & Roberts, 2013).

Ageism has potent consequences. One reason for lower technology adoption by older people is simply that ads for technology typically feature the young (Cutler, 2005). Stereotypes surrounding aging can have tangible implications for health and well-being. The lower social status of the aged can result in decreases in access to healthcare (Angus & Reeve, 2006). Ageism is an important factor in suicidal ideation and attempts among the elderly and helps to explain why the elderly have higher suicide rates than other age cohorts (Wand et al., 2018). Ageism and its deleterious health effects occur even in the so-called ‘Confucian’ cultures in which respect for elders traditionally represents a pillar of social behavior (Young 2017). In Korea, ageism coupled with neglect also result in suicidal ideation and attempts among the elderly (Ko et al., 2021). Neglect of the elderly has even resulted in a new word, *kodokushi*, entering the lexicon in Japanese to describe the situation of dying alone, a phenomenon primarily impacting the elderly in Japan (Nelson-Becker & Victor, 2020).

The effects of ageism on women are especially strong due to the intersectionality of marginalizations associated with aging and femininity (Krekula et al., 2008). This has resulted in the widespread acknowledgment of “gendered ageism” as particularly problematic. Age, especially for women, is treated as a kind of preventable disease in which showing the effects of aging is viewed as a lapse in personal responsibility (King, 2004). In the case of men, maintaining an active-looking body represents

successful aging in the eyes of society; for women maintaining the appearance of youth – a more difficult feat - is critical (Calasanti, 2007). Age discrimination begins earlier for women than men based upon a reduction in women's traditional source of power in their appearance (McGann et al., 2016). Thus, overall, older women are devalued more, and earlier, than men (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016). The combination of age and gender effects upon women is often referred to as a 'double jeopardy' with the effects of "lookism" upon women combining to create a "triple jeopardy" effect (Granleese & Sayer, 2006). In business careers, women experience a narrow window of optimal age with younger women subjected to demeaning "girling" while those in their 40s may already be seen as past their prime (Barnes, 2020; Jyrkinen, 2009). Given the gendered nature of ageism, men are often less aware of ageism than women (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2015). While older people tend to be less visible in the media in general, older women are especially affected. The lack of visibility of older women in the media often extends to the point of symbolic annihilation, or almost complete invisibility (Edström, 2018). Beyond this, the female body, being sexualized, becomes effectively invisible with age in the sense that the female body commands less attention (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). This has also been referred to as "social invisibility" as aging women are no longer the focus of the male gaze, become peripheral, and their lives and manifestations of their concerns are attenuated within the mass media (Jermyn, 2012; Ojala et al., 2016; Raisborough et al., 2021).

One additional problem associated with ageism in modern society is intergenerational conflict. The decrease in multi-generational cohabitating families appears to be connected to this phenomenon (e.g., Bergston & Putney, 2006). This intergenerational conflict takes a number of forms. Members of older generations have increasingly been demonized for their perceived role in consumption of public resources and subsequent negative economic effects (Achenbaum, 2015). They are also seen as actively deploying their voting power to capture an inordinate share of public resources (Walker, 2012). Binstock (2010) argues that especially in the United States, perceptions of the aged have shifted from being seen as deserving of public assistance to being perceived as "greedy geezers" as concerns regarding the increased cost of federal programs benefiting older Americans have gained traction. Similar attitudes appear in Europe (Emery, 2012). In China, conflict between the post-1980 generation and elders has negative impacts in workplace performance (Zhu, et al., 2016). Such examples of intergenerational conflict abound.

There are many implications of ageism for education. An argument for education aimed at the reduction of ageism is the fact that ageist beliefs are formed quite early in life (Klein et al., 2005; McGuire et al., 2005). Unfortunately, though, there is actually evidence to implicate formal education itself in the propagation of such beliefs. Holmes (2007) argues that, although older people actually become different as they age, teachers tend to portray this group as homogeneous with changes in curricula to teach diversity tending to emphasize racial, religious, and ethnic diversity. Research indicates that children's literature overall is imbued with an ageist bent (McGuire, 2013). This includes strong elements of gendered ageism in which older women, when they do appear in children's books, are characterized in negative ways (Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013). This is important because children's picture books have a potent role in the socialization process (Brugeilles et al., 2002). Given the prevalence of stereotyped older figures in educational materials, redress would help children to prepare for their own futures and also contribute to improved intergenerational relations (Henneberg, 2010). Obviously, then, rooting out and reducing ageist stereotypes in educational materials is important.

To avert intergenerational conflict, there is an acute need to promote "intergenerational intelligence" through education (Biggs, 2008; Biggs et al., 2010). Schools represent ideal contexts for cross-generational activities, one means to reduce ageism (Cuddy et al., 2005). Education to disrupt ageism is also important given evidence that internalization of ageist beliefs throughout our lives negatively impacts the ability of each of us to age as well as possible (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018; Twigg, 2004). In this case, "stereotype embodiment" can even result in older people having poorer perceptions of themselves as they come to inhabit the stereotypes to which they have been exposed (Levy, 2009; Swift et al., 2017). Including "aging education" as a central feature of the curriculum could yield many positive benefits, both in terms of intergenerational relationships as well as in preparing young people for their own aging (Crawford, 2015). In the field of ELT, there has been some attention to the problem of ageism in ELT hiring practices (Mahboob, 2011; Templer, 2003). Yet the issue of ageism in ELT materials remains mostly unexplored. What research has been undertaken suggests cause for concern. Hurst (2014) found that ELT coursebooks used in Portugal were almost entirely devoid of older characters. A broad overview of ELT texts in 1995 found a focus on youth with little attention to older people (Cunningsworth, 1995).

### *Considering representations of aging in Japanese ELT materials*

English language teaching represents a ubiquitous and powerful force. As is the case in many parts of the world, English education is strongly emphasized in Japan. The Japanese government has stated its ultimate goal for Japanese people as a whole to be able to employ English in their daily lives (Hashimoto, 2009). Japanese people have a lengthy exposure to English education with all now taking English classes from elementary through high school. The importance of the subject is cemented by its prominence on

university entrance exams. In order to gain entry into the most prestigious universities in Japan, one must demonstrate English ability (Bailey, 2018). This ubiquity and power of English education is coupled with trust in language education as a politically-neutral source of language competency (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015). In toto, these conditions indicate the need to evaluate ELT critically.

Documentation of other forms of problematic social group representations in English education bolsters this warrant. For example, ELT materials can convey heteronormative messages (Paiz, 2015). Also, gender bias is often a problem in ELT materials (e.g., Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Hurst, 2014). This includes gender bias in English teaching materials from Japan (Lee, 2014). Such research has resulted in explicit attention to equitable gender representations in evaluation frameworks for ELT materials (Ahmadi & Derakhshan, 2016). Cultural depictions can likewise be biased in English texts (Chinh, 2013). These may especially be slanted toward depictions of cultures in the traditional English-speaking countries despite the fact that English is a world language (Babai et al., 2019). For example, Rashidi and Melhami (2011) found that American culture was emphasized and idealized in internationally published ELT texts. Racial depictions are also problematic in language texts with people of color often being underrepresented (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009). Research has documented the presence of colorism in Japanese ELT materials as well (Brown, 2021).

Such problematic social group portrayals form a hidden curriculum. Scholars recognize the hidden curriculum as the often-unintended but prevalent messages conveyed through formal education and tending to reproduce relations of social power (Apple, 2004). While examinations of the hidden curriculum may focus upon wide-ranging aspects of schooling, my focus here is upon visual depictions of people in ELT materials. Visual depictions of people in the mass media have a strong potential as socialization agent, especially among youth (Dubow et al., 2007; Holtzman & Sharpe, 2000). Such media influence the acquisition of the very schema whereby the individual understands the world in a process that can be unconscious (Dubow et al., 2007). This power is evidenced, for example, by the role of photos of models associated with advertising in promoting unattainable norms of physical attractiveness, a tendency tied to eating disorders among the young. So powerful are these effects that some countries have restricted the use of low-BMI models (Anderson-Fye, 2018). Because of the power of visuals in reifying positions of social groups and promoting stereotypes, a number of scholars have called for teaching that moves beyond visual literacy with its focus on teaching students how to discern the intended meaning of visuals to critical visual literacy in which students are sensitized to the role that regimes of social power can play in such artifacts (Knochel, 2013; Newfield, 2011; Schieble, 2014). As I have discussed, depictions of older people in the media are often problematic in terms of low visibility combined with stereotyping. So powerful are the connections between visual media and ageism that Loos and Ivan (2018) suggest that “visual ageism” represents a phenomenon unto itself. As a result of the foregoing issues, I formulated the following research questions for this study.

## Research Questions

Overall question:

How are visuals in materials from Japanese ELT reflective or disruptive of ageism?

Sub-questions:

1. How visible are the elderly in these materials?
2. To what extent are the elderly depicted as engaging in intergenerational relationships in these materials, and to what extent did these relationships reflect harmony or conflict?
3. How are older women portrayed in these materials?
4. To what extent do these materials either echo or subvert stereotypes surrounding the elderly?

## Methodology

For this study, a content analysis of English language teaching materials in Japan was conducted in order to discover patterns of representation of different age groups. I sought teaching materials actually used in elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools across the country. As a result, materials were sourced from 27 online repositories created for the dissemination of materials by teachers themselves. Unlike official texts, these had actually been used in classes prior to posting. These repositories are more current than many school texts as well. They also contained contributions from teachers all over Japan. Eighteen were official prefectural sites from around the country and were aligned with the Japanese education ministry. Although Japan has 47 prefectures, many lack such sites and others have sites with only minimal materials. Also, discussions with teachers in Japan indicated the sites chosen to be the most popular. All materials from these sources in which individuals were visually represented were collected. These included depictions of people as participants in conversations, to augment illustrations of vocabulary items, or simply as decoration. Depictions of people included photographs, videos, and drawn renderings such as cartoons within a broad

swath of materials including worksheets, informational handouts, games, Powerpoint presentations, tests/quizzes, and videos. I conducted this data collection from April, 2021 to February, 2022. Data analysis ensued.

Data analysis took two forms, a quantitative analysis to gauge the amount of representation of elderly people and a qualitative analysis to understand the manner of such representation. For the quantitative work, the number of representations of children (those under 18), the number of non-elderly adults (18-64) and the number of elderly people (those 65 and over) were tallied. Category placement was based upon three factors: First, the ages were given in some cases. Second, clues to the age of the person were sometimes provided via textual description and/or visually such as by their wearing a school uniform. For the others, the assessment was based upon physical appearance. Age categorization involved two raters. In the few cases of disagreement, the raters discussed the image and came to an agreement.

Data analysis included attention to depictions of intergenerational relationships in these images with tallies of images depicting the elderly in interactions with either adults or children being the focus. Tallies of interactions among children, adults, and the elderly as well as between adults and children were also completed for comparison. Raters coded people as being engaged in interaction in instances where any accompanying text indicated this, for example with a dialog; where individuals took part in the same activity such as a sport, dancing, or a game; where individuals appeared to be engaged in conversation or other interactions by facing each other and being in close proximity and/or when one individual was handing an object to another or making intentional physical contact; or where an individual was teaching another person or a group.

In considering possible stereotyping of the elderly, I created the following instrument (adapted from Huang, 2011; Levy et al., 2004; McGuire, 2003). Raters considered the following questions for each image of the elderly.

- Were the individuals portrayed in accord with ageist stereotypes? That is, as decrepit, socially inflexible, needy, grumpy/cranky, asexual? Or, were the portrayals such as to disrupt such stereotypes?
- Were the individuals portrayed in an occupational or non-occupation position?
- In terms of physical traits, were the individuals portrayed as healthy/independent or sick/dependent, as active or sedentary?
- In terms of overall personality, were the individuals portrayed as positive or negative?

## Results

This collection yielded 7350 depictions of people for whom the age group was evident. Table 1 provides the resulting breakdown.

Table 1  
*Depictions of People by Age Group*

Group	Number of Depictions	Percentage of Total Depictions
All	7350	100.0%
Children	4596	62.5%
Adults	2516	34.2%
Elderly	238	3.2%
Elderly Men	154	2.1%
Elderly Women	84	1.1%

As Table 1 indicates, there were relatively few depictions of the elderly compared to other groups. The tally of 3.2% of the individuals appearing to be 65 or over stands in sharp contrast to the actual figure in most societies. Over 26% of Japanese are 65 or over with this percentage increasing (Chen, et al., 2016). Elderly women were particularly lacking in representation compared to all other groups as well as when compared with their elderly male counterparts. Table 2 presents the tallies for interactions in these materials.

Table 2  
*Interactions by Age Group*

<b>Total interactions depicted</b>	<b>711</b>	<b>% of all interactions</b>
<b>Single Generation Interactions</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>67.1%</b>
Children only	320	45.0%
Adults only	150	21.1%
Elderly only	7	1.0%
<b>Intergenerational Interactions</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>32.9%</b>
Children/Adults	188	26.4%
Children/Elderly	13	1.8%
Adults/Elderly	23	3.2%
Children/Adults/Elderly	10	1.4%

Intergenerational interactions including the elderly in these materials were few compared with others. Many of the interactions between children and adults were in the form of classroom scenes with a teacher and students. The other prominent type were depictions of stereotypical parent/child nuclear families. Three-generation family scenes were few. In terms of intergenerational harmony versus conflict, only 46 images in total depicted the elderly in intergenerational interactions. Among these, most were either harmonious or, at least, neutral. One harmonious scene depicts two children sharing a birthday card with an elderly woman<sup>1</sup>. Another shows a woman in her late 30s or so interacting with a group of three older people in a positive way with a smile. One image portrayed an incident of intergenerational conflict. This image shows an elderly couple denied seating in a subway or train car. Seven younger individuals are portrayed as uncaring and self-absorbed: Occupying all of the seats, they sleep, read, chat, or look at their phones. Thus, while this image does show youth, adults, and the elderly in the same tableau, there is no cross-generational engagement with the point actually being the lack thereof.

In terms of stereotypes, one such stereotype is that the elderly are inactive and confined to the home. Yet materials in this corpus depicted many elderly people in more active and agentive ways, but this was largely confined to men. The elderly were depicted in occupational roles 43 times and in non-occupational roles 36 times. The roles of others could not be determined. Of those depictions of elderly as engaged in occupations, 35 were depictions of men and eight were of women. Notably, of these eight instances in which women were rated as engaged in occupations, five depictions were of Queen Elizabeth, as she performed the duties related to her station. Several occupational images of men were noteworthy in showing the individual not simply as engaged in work, but in skilled occupations. For example, one portrayed an elderly man performing rakugo, a form of traditional Japanese verbal performance; another showed an elderly man engaged in carpentry. Comparable images of women were few. One accompanying a model dialog shows an elderly woman purchasing a television. While this woman is not depicted in an occupational role she is depicted as active outside the home in an agentive role. The image itself, though, represents a caricature of the elderly female with round ‘granny glasses,’ hair pulled into a bun, a sunken mouth, a cane, and stereotypically unfashionable garb.

The corpus did include some images challenging the stereotype of the elderly as physically dependent. In this corpus, among ratable images, there were 91 instances of the elderly depicted as healthy, independent, and active and 16 depictions of the elderly as unhealthy, dependent, and sedentary. One photograph, for example, depicts an elderly outdoorsman. The image shows him in an outdoor, natural context. The man is muscular and wears some sort of climbing harness. He is thus engaged in vigorous physical activity outside of the home. The fact that he is alone in the image also implies independence. His being foregrounded in the image, filling much of the frame, and directly looking at the viewer further conveys a sense of strength, confidence, and engagement. In another picture, an older woman connoted by gray hair, wrinkles, and conservative dress takes part in an English class. In this case, the woman breaks stereotypes associated with older adults by learning something new outside of the home.

By contrast, some pictures did convey typical ageist stereotypes of dependence and decrepitude. In one, a younger person pushes an elderly individual in a wheelchair. The passivity of this older person is reinforced by the downcast (or perhaps closed) eyes along with a drawn in posture with hands clasped. Wearing slippers implies confinement to indoor settings. The individual is also portrayed as an asexual, androgynous, figure with the only clue as to gender being a fringed collar that may suggest a female. This is countered by the lack of hair leading the viewer to wonder whether this is a female or male.

<sup>1</sup> These images have not been included here. The teachers who created these materials obtained them from various sources with the result that the copyright holders could not be determined to seek publication clearance.

Among ratable images in the corpus, there were 85 depictions of the elderly as having positive personalities while only one was negative. One such image is a photograph showing an elderly couple as happy and affectionate. This image is also notable for its subversion of the ageist stereotype of the asexual elder via its display of joyful affection. In the image, the couple is seated and dominate the frame, creating an intimate scene. The man kisses the women on the cheek while she smiles broadly. In another cartoon image, an elderly couple smile. While this particular image and others like it were rated as positive in terms of personality, they do depict the older person as unfailingly happy to the point of benignity. In the sole example of a negative personality among older people in the corpus, a man is portrayed as angry, grumpy, unyielding, and authoritarian: Frowning, he looks toward the camera with his words contained in the caption, "Facebook? Why don't you face book and study?" Thus, in addition to a negative personality there is an implicit trope of intergenerational conflict rooted in stereotype with the man rejecting the use of new technology (Facebook) in favor of old technology (a printed book).

## Discussion

Given the power of images in promoting socialization via the underlying messages they bear, the use of images of people in English language teaching, the power of English education, and the problem of ageism in the media, the goal of this research was to shed light on possible ageism in representations of the elderly among illustrations from English teaching materials. The focus was upon materials posted to online repositories by English teachers across Japan. In light of concerns that the elderly simply lack visibility in mass media representations, this project first gauged the amount of visibility of the elderly in these materials. The corpus assembled for this project included a total of 7350 images of people. Of this total, only 238, or 3.2%, were of people 65 or over. In Japan, the host society, this segment is actually nearing 30% of the population. Thus, this low share of representation represents a strong bias in favor of representations of younger people. These results also provide evidence for gendered ageism with only 84, or about 1%, of the total representations of people being elderly women. With 154 representations of elderly men in the corpus, the situation actually represents bias within bias at the expense of the older female. Such materials represent a hidden curriculum, sending the message that the elderly are unimportant, and that the elderly woman is especially unworthy of notice.

In response to concerns regarding intergenerational conflict, this project considered portrayals of intergenerational interactions in this corpus. About one-third of the interactions portrayed in this corpus involved participants of different generations. Yet interactions between children and the elderly were few, at less than 2% of all interactions. Many intergenerational interactions involved either the nuclear family and were between parents and children or involved interactions between non-elderly teachers and students. These results represent biases that would tend to support ageism. Such materials failed to normalize interactions between children and the elderly, thus sending a message that such relationships are abnormal and that the elderly are neither core family members nor belong in a role teaching or mentoring youth. While the depictions of intergenerational interactions were largely harmonious, or at least neutral, interactions between the elderly and the young were so scant (only 23 of 711 interactions) that these interactions were essentially invisible.

The final area of research focus was in the manner of depictions of the elderly in these materials. This arises out of concerns that when older people are represented in the mass media, they are stereotyped and even included for humorous effect. Common stereotypes include the elderly as cranky, inflexible, physically decrepit, inept, passive, dependent and lacking in the ability to learn. Although the elderly were underrepresented in this corpus, when they did appear, they were mostly portrayed in non-stereotypical and positive ways such as being physically active and having the ability to engage in undertakings requiring great skill. On the other hand, such portrayals mostly involved men. Also, although many elderly were portrayed in what could be considered a positive manner, as friendly and kind, it seems that such portrayals may also send unrealistic messages that the elderly are and should be benign. Thus, the role of these materials in subverting stereotypes regarding the elderly is muted.

Overall, then, this study provides strong empirical confirmation that ELT materials from Japan parallel traditional mass media in that the visual representations of older people serve as a conduit for ageism. Pregnant with unintended messages about aging, they form a hidden curriculum around this topic with potent socialization implications for the young people who are exposed to them. In the case of this study, the curricular scale was across the entire country of Japan at the elementary to high school levels. This indicates an ageist socialization of nationwide extent via English education. Yet scholarship exhibits relatively little concern with critical analyses of visuals in ELT. Attention to the training of English language teachers and materials authors in critical visual literacy is likewise minimal. Implicating ELT visuals in the reflection and promotion of ageism as it does, this study indicates an acute need for redress of these oversights.

This neglect can be understood as part of a larger picture. Language educators have expended substantial effort in considering the linguistic authenticity of language teaching materials in light of the tendency for such materials to present idealized and unrealistic language, or so-called "textbook language." In response, research has striven to assess how accurately materials reflect language

as it is actually used (e.g., Ahmed 2017). Attention to the issue of the authenticity of language teaching materials from a social standpoint, that is to say, how fairly they depict the social world, has been far less. As this research attests, such scrutiny is important. This is because it is difficult to create language teaching materials without somehow inadvertently situating them within a social context, or including at least some social information. For example, even the names used for characters in model dialogs embed implicit information about social group membership. Choosing names such as “Smith” or “Green” over “Garcia” or “Rodriguez” privileges Anglo culture; yet such names are more abundant in many ELT materials than in the real world (Brown, 2021). In linguistics, creating materials diverging from actual language use can be attributed to the workings of “folk linguistics,” or widely-held, but inaccurate, intuitive perceptions of language, even one’s own (Preston, 2005). Relying upon our intuition regarding social reality is likewise dangerous. The propensity to include visual depictions of people in ELT materials exacerbates this need for great care given that such images convey information not only about age but attributes such as race, skin color, gender, and physical ability as well. Without care, then, our actions in including them can simply promote one more iteration of a socialization process favoring particular groups over others. This bolsters the call for robust training in critical media analysis for materials creators and users. Indeed, students themselves who are developmentally ready should receive such training if we are to truly promote “critical thinking” and “liberatory education” as more than buzz words nestled within curriculum statements.

## Conclusions

Several limitations to this project point the way to further research. Looking at these teaching resources was a valuable research approach since they represent grass roots materials actually used by teachers and since a large corpus could be assembled to bolster the reliable emergence of any patterns of bias. Yet this project did not address the beliefs held by teachers who created these materials. This would represent a natural piece of follow-up research. This study has focused on empirically discerning a hidden curriculum in these materials, shedding light on what is actually taught. Another area of research would be to delve into effects of these materials upon learners. Finally, given that this project was a case study of ELT in Japan, similar research in other locales is warranted especially in light of evidence for ageism worldwide.

Ageism is a pressing social issue. It is a worldwide phenomenon evident across cultures. In light of the trend toward increased aging of populations around the world, and given the unique potential of ageism to impact us all, it is imperative that educators become sensitive to the issue and take an active stance to disrupt its propagation. For the language teaching professional, the implications of the research presented here are clear: Along with attending to other forms of problematic depictions of social groups such as gender bias and cultural stereotypes in materials, we must crystallize our approach to evaluating the portrayals of age cohorts. This research suggests three practical questions for the language materials creator, evaluator, and practitioner. First, are the materials to be used biased in terms of the amount of representation of older people, especially women? Second, do they portray healthy intergenerational interactions? And, third, do they reinforce or disrupt negative stereotypes often associated with the elderly? Attention to these questions is a starting point for promoting education that benefits the elderly of today, that benefits all of us when we grow old, and that prepares our students themselves for the ultimate phase of their own lives.

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