

# Disability Representation in Saudi English Language Textbooks

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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate how people with disabilities are portrayed in the textbooks for English as a foreign language (EFL) that are currently used by students in Grades 1–12 in Saudi Arabia. A qualitative content analysis (texts and images) was employed to identify and critically analyze the textual and visual representations in the selected textbooks. Little research has examined the representation of people with disabilities in Saudi Arabia textbooks. Thus, this study aims to address this research gap and to contribute to the existing literature. The findings revealed that, while physical disabilities were the most frequently represented form of disability, sensory, cognitive, and learning disabilities were significantly underrepresented. The analysis also highlighted the extremely limited representation of disability in both textual and visual content, with only 0.45% of the total pages across all textbooks featuring disability-related content. Of note, the findings revealed that primary-level textbooks did not contain any representations of disability. Although the textbooks avoided negative stereotypes and presented people with disabilities in a positive light, the narrow focus on physical disabilities failed to capture the full spectrum of disability experiences. Therefore, the current representations of disability in Saudi EFL textbooks are limited and do not adequately reflect the diversity of disability experiences. Recommendations are provided for curriculum developers and policymakers to enhance the inclusivity of educational materials, to ensure that they reflect the diverse experiences of people with disabilities, and to promote content that is more inclusive.

**Keywords:** disability representation, English as a foreign language (EFL), people with disabilities, textbooks

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Problem

Because it is impossible to be “outside of ideology,” it is impossible not to write from a particular ideological position. Textbook authors are no exception. Regardless of the narrative and rhetorical strategies authors use in their writing to appear objective, their values, beliefs, and preferences are nonetheless present. —Rice, 2005, 405

Textbooks are indispensable in education, and are mirrors that reflect societal perceptions, values, and ideologies—including those concerning people with disabilities (Pogorzelska, 2016; Shume, 2023). Scholarly work suggests that, despite authors’ attempts to maintain objectivity in textbooks, their ideological positions inevitably seep into their writing (Hardin & Preston, 2001; Jensen, Herrebrøden, & Andreassen, 2023; Rice, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2017). This is particularly evident in the portrayal of different groups with a specific shared characteristic (e.g., ethnicity, race, gender, or people with disabilities), as textbooks can either challenge or perpetuate stereotypes, often in an indirect way (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023).

Education, as a primary source of knowledge, is a multifaceted process that not only influences skills and critical thinking, but may also shape personality traits and worldviews (Kaddour & Ahres, 2023). Given the essential role of textbooks in the context of education, these works have the power to perpetuate stereotypes and attitudes based on how they portray (or do not portray) certain groups (Pogorzelska, 2016). The role of such texts in shaping collective awareness, particularly regarding people with disabilities, is important because textbooks can play a role in validating some types of knowledge while neglecting others (Hardin & Preston, 2001).

The Salamanca Statement marked a shift in international educational policies by advocating for inclusive education as the norm (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994). This approach is situated within a broad social justice agenda, which argues that equality for all must include equal access to education for all students (Vinodrao, 2016). As a result of this and other global initiatives and movements, one such previously marginalized group—students with special educational needs (SEN)—has begun to be regularly integrated into general education institutions and classrooms. According to Vinodrao, segregated education can lead to social isolation, discrimination, and the marginalization of people with disabilities in their adult lives. The benefits of inclusive education are now widely recognized, particularly those related to the significant psychological advantages of inclusion for children with disabilities. However, research has indicated that non-disabled peers often exhibit negative attitudes toward students with SEN and may even avoid interacting with them, thereby creating barriers to true inclusion (Di Maggio, Ginevra, Santilli, & Nota, 2022; Edwards, Cameron, King, & McPherson, 2019; Krischler, Pit-ten Cate, & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2018). Textbooks should be considered as valuable resources to promote understanding and acceptance and to address these challenges (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023).

Despite the increase in disability studies, with pioneering work such as that by Ellis and Goggin (2017) and Ellis, Goggin, Haller, and Curtis (2019), there is a global lack of research in the area of representations of disability. Existing research is either rare or is focused on specific aspects of disability and media (Devotta, Wilton, & Yiannakoulis, 2013; Goethals, Mortelmans, van den Bulck, van den Heurck, & van Hove, 2022; Johanssen & Garrisi, 2020; Worrell, 2018). However, the previous research on representations of people with disabilities in textbooks that has been conducted in various countries over the past few years has consistently revealed a lack of social diversity representation and a tendency to perpetuate stereotypes (e.g., Can et al., 2017; Gonzáles-Palomares & Rey-Cao, 2022; Hodgkinson et al., 2018). Research on the representation of people with disabilities in the Middle Eastern context is also limited, particularly in the Saudi context. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate the representations of people with disabilities in Saudi textbooks. In addition, this study aims to contribute to the discourse about representation in disability studies, particularly within the context of Saudi Arabia, and to provide recommendations for future policies and practice.

### *1.2 Importance of the Problem*

Textbooks play a crucial role in the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), as they are considered to be one of the primary sources of information for learners. Textbooks that are visually and textually inclusive and diverse contribute to creating a welcoming and supportive classroom environment (Kaddour & Ahres, 2023). As Olson (1980) pointed out, students spend 75% of their time engaging with textbook content and read an estimated 32 000 pages throughout their academic journey. Therefore, these publications serve as social constructs that reflect prevailing societal values, norms, and attitudes, and shape the images of various groups of individuals within a society through textual and visual representations. It is thus essential to evaluate the quality of textbooks given the unquestionable impact of textbook content on learners (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023). In addition, educational institutions have a responsibility to prepare students for life in a rapidly evolving society (McDiarmid & Zhao, 2022). This preparation begins at the pre-school phase and extends through to the university level—and sometimes beyond (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). In this context, raising awareness about the importance of disability representations and the rights of people with disabilities them is crucial.

### *1.3 Aims and Research Questions (RQs)*

The primary aim of this research was to examine the representations of people with disabilities in Saudi EFL textbooks and to understand how these representations aligned with the principles of inclusive education. In addition, the research aimed to explore the types of disabilities that were represented in these textbooks and the extent of such representation.

To achieve these objectives, the research was guided by the following RQs:

RQ1. What types of disabilities are represented in Saudi EFL textbooks?

RQ2. To what extent are people with disabilities represented in Saudi EFL textbooks?

### *1.4 Significance of the Research*

There were two justifications for undertaking this research. First, the theoretical importance of the study lies in the scarcity of research on the representation of disability and disability inclusion within the context of school textbooks in Saudi Arabia. This research will contribute to the current literature in the field of Saudi discourse analysis studies of textbooks (Aljuaythin, 2018; Sulaimani, 2017; Sulaimani & Elyas, 2018). Furthermore, the

representation and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in textbooks has a significant impact on the successful integration of students with disabilities into the general education environment in which their peers do not have such disabilities. In addition to the academic contributions of the study, the findings are expected to provide additional ideas about this topic that may be useful for future research in this rapidly evolving field. Second, the results of the study can contribute to assisting curriculum developers, educational experts, and teachers to utilize textbooks to raise students' awareness of disabilities and people with disabilities from an early age.

We construct our understanding of human diversity through interpersonal interactions and exposure to diverse people in print and media, starting in early childhood; school textbooks play a significant role in influencing disability representations, as they serve as a common reference point for students (Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazza, & Leboeuf, 2015; Sleeter & Grant, 2017; Vidal-Albelda & Martínez-Bello 2017). Adequate representation can have a positive influence on self-image and motivation; it can also break down prejudices and reduce the stigmatization of those with disabilities (Cheng & Beigi, 2011); this positive impact will be reflected in students' attitudes toward building an inclusive society later in life.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Understanding Disability: What is Disability?*

There are many different definitions of the term “disability.” In general, any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to perform certain activities and to interact with the world around them is called a disability (World Health Organization, 2022). Disabilities can vary widely, and can be related to vision, hearing, motor skills, cognition, health, mental health, or a combination of any of these. Some disabilities may be temporary, while others may be permanent; some are experienced from birth, while others may occur later in life. Disabilities are commonly described as being either visible or non-visible. Visible disabilities include those conditions that require a visible accommodation (e.g., walker, cane, wheelchair), or that involve visible physical characteristics (e.g., Down syndrome, blindness). Non-visible disabilities encompass conditions that are not immediately obvious (e.g., traumatic brain injury, autism spectrum disorder/ASD, hearing loss); although individuals with non-visible disabilities may experience less stigma and marginalization, they may also not receive the necessary support and accommodation because their disability must be disclosed in order for it to be acknowledged. Altman (2014) defined disability as follows:

The term “disability” has become a shorthand expression or an umbrella term that is used to represent the variety of the different aspects of the disability process. It has been used to identify the active or residual impairments that result from disease and injury, as well as the physical, mental, or emotional functional limitations or difficulties a person has as a result of the residual impairments (as described), and also the participation restriction the person experiences when the environment is not supportive (p. 3).

### 2.2 *Conceptual Framework: Models of Disability*

The way in which disability is conceptualized has evolved over time, with various theoretical models influencing how individuals with disabilities are perceived and treated in society. The most commonly discussed models include the medical model, the social model, the economic model, and the human rights model. These models serve as a framework for analyzing how textbooks represent disability (Jensen et al., 2023).

The traditional conceptualization of disability is referred to as the medical model (Hodkinson, 2015); according to this model, disability is seen as “a problem within an individual,” meaning it is defined as a defect in or the failure of a bodily system, which is seen as inherently abnormal and pathological (p. 23). This model views disability as an individual tragedy and as being located within the body, leading to the stigmatization and marginalization of the individual with the disability (Withers, 2020). Critics have argued that the medical model reinforces negative stereotypes by emphasizing what people with disabilities cannot do rather than recognizing their abilities and contributions (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006).

In contrast to the medical model, the social model distinguishes between impairment and disability, asserting that societal barriers—attitudinal, structural, and environmental—create disability by hindering full participation (Rice, 2006). This model shifts the focus from individual impairments to systemic obstacles. Building on the social model, the human rights model emphasizes the inherent human dignity of people with disabilities and recognizes their cultural and social identities (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). It moves beyond identifying societal barriers to advocating for the fundamental rights and respect to people with disabilities. The economic model examines the financial implications of disability, considering its impact on employment, productivity, and social costs (Jensen et al., 2023). It particularly emphasizes how impairments affect an individual's capabilities in labor and employment, including the costs of accommodations and support services.

### 2.3 Research on the Portrayal of Disability in Textbooks

Over the past decade, research on representation in school textbooks, including those for EFL and English as a second language (ESL), has mainly focused on areas other than disabilities, such as gender (e.g., Aguilar, 2021; Andini, Hidayat, Husna, & Alek, 2023; Putri, Simpen, Suparwa, & Malini, 2024), culture (e.g., Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2021; Derakhshan, 2024) and/or national identity (e.g., Alzubi, Al-Mwzaiji, & Nazim, 2023; Gheitasi, Aliakbari, & Khany, 2022; Hussain, Sandaran, & Saeed, 2023). However, far less research has been conducted on the representation of people with disabilities (e.g., Sigurjónsdóttir, 2015; Tiisler & Wolff, 2023), particularly in the context of EFL (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023; Hodkinson, Ghajarieh, & Salami, 2018; Kasimi & Ulum, 2022).

Research on the inclusion of disability-related content has shown that people with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in school textbooks (Cheng & Beigi, 2011; Hodkinson et al., 2018; Pogorzelska, 2016); moreover, when this population is represented, the types of disabilities that are highlighted are typically limited to physical ones, such as those that involve the use of wheelchairs (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023; Reichenberg, 2017). These findings suggest that it can be reasonably asserted that textbooks generally fail to communicate about other types of disability (e.g., intellectual disabilities, being deaf or hard of hearing, visual impairments). While the authors of these textbooks have made strides in presenting people with disabilities in a positive way as being successful, creative, and independent, disability-related topics remain overlooked (Pogorzelska, 2016). These narrow portrayals could potentially lead to negative attitudes toward those with various types of disabilities.

Similarly, Can et al. (2017) found only limited representations of disability in 12 Turkish elementary school textbooks covering a broad range of subjects (i.e., life science, social sciences, science and technology), and noted that these representations were mainly of children with physical disabilities. González-Palomares and Rey-Cao (2022) reached similar conclusions in their analysis of disability-related content in 6773 pictures taken from Spanish intermediate-level physical education textbooks. These authors found that the representation of people with disabilities was limited to people with physical disabilities; thus, their findings were consistent with those of previous studies (Táboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012; Vidal-Albelda & Martínez-Bello, 2017).

Furthermore, research has revealed a concerning pattern of isolation, as people with disabilities are often shown interacting only with others who also have disabilities, which potentially perpetuates a narrative of separation from wider cultural communities (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023). More specifically, the textbooks partially marginalized people with disabilities by presenting them as members of a common group or community (Pogorzelska, 2016). This lack of representation not only perpetuates stereotypes, but also fails to provide an empowering and inclusive environment for this population. Scholars have also found that people with disabilities are frequently presented as being active in elite sporting activities (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023; Táboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012), thus suggesting that the depiction of people with disabilities as heroes in elite roles—such as actors, scientists, and Paralympic athletes—may reinforce stereotypes (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023).

Several studies have investigated portrayals of the medical and social models of disability in textbooks. For example, Shume (2023) analyzed the representation of disability and inclusion within an intermediate school science textbook. The findings revealed that the portrayal was influenced by the medical model, presenting disability as a finite deficit of individual learners. In a similar vein, Hodkinson et al. (2018) examined the representation of disability in textbooks across diverse educational contexts: EFL textbooks from three intermediate and four high schools in Iran, alongside 96 primary school textbooks from England. The researcher found that the portrayal of disability was extremely limited in both countries. Notably, the English textbooks showed an evolution in perspective; while a 1970s textbook employed language that undermined respect for individuals with disabilities, a 2000 textbook addressed disability in terms of discrimination and bullying, reflecting a shift toward the adaptation of the social model. In contrast, the Iranian textbooks depicted disability as a medically defined deficit, directly impacting educational performance. This portrayal failed to offer an empowering—or even accurate—representation of disability.

The studies discussed above investigated representations of people with disabilities in different countries, although none of them examined the topic in the Saudi context. Most of the studies employed content analysis as the research method, either quantitatively (e.g., Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023) or qualitatively (e.g., Shume, 2023), or used a mixed-method approach (e.g., Kasimi & Ulum, 2022). Although the current research shares the general goal of previous studies—examining the representation of individuals with disabilities in textbooks—and employs a similar qualitative content analysis methodology, it distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on EFL textbooks at the primary, intermediate, and secondary school levels. Significantly, this research breaks new ground by analyzing the representation of people with disabilities within Saudi Arabian school textbooks, approved by the

Saudi Ministry of Education (MOE). To our knowledge, this area remains unexplored, marking this study as a pioneering effort within the Saudi educational context.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Qualitative Research Design: A Content Analysis Approach

This research employed a qualitative research design to explore in-depth the representation of disability in Saudi EFL textbooks. A qualitative approach is particularly effective for examining the meanings, interpretations, and contextual factors influencing engagement with educational materials (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To achieve this exploration, qualitative content analysis served as the primary method. This method enables the systematic description, categorization, and interpretation of disability representations through the identification of categories, concepts, and themes (Elo et al., 2014). It allows for the examination of underlying meanings and patterns, thereby providing insights into how disability is depicted in textbooks and its implications for educators and students (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The suitability of qualitative content analysis for this research is further supported by its key characteristics. As Morgan (1993) points out, the inductive nature of this method, where categories and themes emerge directly from the data, enables the researcher to remain responsive and adapt the analysis as new patterns emerge. Moreover, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicate that its strength lies in its interpretive focus, which enables researchers to understand not only what is presented but also how and why certain phenomena are constructed, thus shedding light on their potential educational implications.

Several studies, (e.g., Gulab and Khokhar, 2018; Abu-Hamour, Al Hmouz, and Aljarrah, 2019; and Kasimi and Ulum, 2022), have utilized qualitative content analysis to investigate textbooks. These studies demonstrated the method's effectiveness in identifying how textbooks represent disability and revealing both overt and subtle patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Given its capacity for detailed and systematic analysis, qualitative analysis was deemed suitable for the current research.

#### 3.2 The Data Collection Procedures

The content analysis was conducted on 12 EFL textbooks from the series We Can, Top Goal, Super Goal, and Mega Goal, designed for primary, intermediate, and high school students in Saudi Arabia (see Table 1). These textbooks, produced by McGraw-Hill Education and approved by the Saudi Ministry of Education (MOE), are provided free of charge to students and teachers in both print and digital formats. Electronic versions are accessible through the Madrasati platform, a free e-learning management tool offering a variety of electronic educational resources to facilitate learning and teaching, and contribute to achieving the curricula's educational goals.

At the primary stage, the We Can (2024) and Top Goal (2024) series, written by Matsuka and McDougall, consists of six textbooks. The Super Goal (2024) series, authored by dos Santos, is used in the intermediate stages (Grades 7–9) and consists of three textbooks, each is taught at one grade level. Finally, the Mega Goal (2024) series, also by dos Santos, is used in the secondary stages (Grades 10–12). All the textbooks are used throughout the relevant academic years.

Table 1. Summary of the EFL Textbooks

School Grade	Series Title	Units	Pages
Primary Stage	We Can, book 1	4 units	84
	We Can, book 2	4 units	86
	We Can, book 3	4 units	86
	Top Goal book 4-6	8 units	225
Intermediate Stage	Super Goal, book 1	16 units	272
	Super Goal, book 2	16 units	267
	Super Goal, book 3	12 units	275
Secondary Stage	Mega Goal, book 1	12 units	376
	Mega Goal, book 2	12 units	376
	Mega Goal, book 3	12 units	376
Total	12	117	2423

The analysis included visuals, passages, conversations, and exercises, to examine how disability was portrayed. This methodological decision was informed by studies highlighting the significance of textbooks as accessible resources for teachers to educate students about disability (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023; Kasimi & Ulum, 2022; Shume, 2023). Given that English is a core subject throughout primary, intermediate, and secondary education in Saudi Arabian public and private schools EFL textbooks play an important role in the Saudi national curriculum. Moreover, these texts provide a rich data for analysis, as they represent all the currently utilized EFL textbook series. Another reason for examining these textbooks was that early childhood awareness is essential in reducing negative attitudes and dismantling stereotypes surrounding disability and people with disabilities.

### 3.3 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness, as Elo et al. (2014) pointed out, ensures that research findings are “worth paying attention to” (p. 3) by demonstrating methodological rigor and analytical accuracy. To establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as key criteria of qualitative research trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the present research, the following steps have been taken:

(1) Systematic Data Analysis: The first researcher examined 12 EFL textbooks to develop a structured and comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomenon. NVivo software was employed to facilitate the coding and categorization of themes, thus ensuring a systematic and transparent approach to the data analysis.

(2) Independent Coder: An independent coder with expertise in qualitative content analysis was engaged to enhance the reliability of the coding process. The independent coder was provided with category descriptions, research objectives, and selected raw excerpts from the textbooks to assess the consistency and accuracy of the coding. Independent verification reduces researcher bias and strengthens the credibility of qualitative findings (Thomas, 2003).

(3) Institutional Review Board (IRB): The researcher received the IRB from Qassim University. Compliance with institutional ethical standards ensured the integrity of the research process.

(4) Data Security: All the research data were stored securely on a password-protected device; backup copies will be maintained on Google Drive for a period of five years. This approach aligns with best practices for research data management and ensures the protection of the collected materials.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis can be applied in either an inductive or a deductive way (Elo et al., 2014). This research followed the inductive approach, which Thomas (2003) defined as a method that is designed to facilitate the understanding of complex data by developing summary themes or categories from raw data; he called this process “data reduction” (p. 2). In other words, its primary objective is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw data without the constraints of structured methodologies. The analysis followed the three key phases outlined by Elo et al. (2014):

(1) Preparation Phase: The first researcher reviewed the data and selected the unit of analysis. In this study, the data were categorized according to textual, visual, and activity-based elements based on their content.

(2) Organization Phase: Open coding was conducted, followed by the creation of categories and the abstraction of the data into broader themes. NVivo software was used to systematically manage and code the data, thus ensuring consistency and transparency in the analytical process (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

(3) Reporting Phase: The findings were structured according to the developed themes, which represented the key aspects of disability portrayal in the analyzed textbooks.

The qualitative content analysis identified several themes related to disability representation in EFL textbooks. However, the analysis mainly focused on two key themes that were most relevant to the study’s objectives:

(1) Visibility and Representation—Examining how disabilities are portrayed, including:

- Types of Disabilities: Cognitive, learning, physical, and sensory disabilities.
- Context of Appearance: Academic settings (e.g., classrooms, school environments), professional settings (e.g., workplace scenarios), and social settings (e.g., community, family, friendships).

(2) Extent of Representation—Assessing the frequency and depth of disability representation in the analyzed textbooks.

While the current study primarily followed a qualitative approach, basic quantification was applied to answer RQ2, as frequency counts and percentages were used to determine how many of the analyzed textbooks included

representations of disability. This method provided an overview of the prevalence of disability-related content without shifting the study toward a quantitative design.

In addition, using both NVivo software and human coding ensured the comprehensive exploration of the data.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Theme One: Visibility and Representation

#### 4.1.1 Types of Disabilities Represented

RQ1 was intended to determine the types of disabilities that were represented in the Saudi EFL school textbooks. The findings indicated that physical disabilities were the most frequently represented, while sensory disabilities received minimal attention, and representations of cognitive and learning disabilities were extremely limited.

##### (1) Dominance of Physical Disabilities

An analysis of the textbooks, including both textual and visual materials, revealed that physical disabilities were the most frequently represented. However, the overall representation remained relatively limited, as only six instances of physical disability were identified in the 12 EFL textbooks. The majority of people with disabilities who were portrayed in these books were wheelchair users or people with mobility difficulties.

One example appears in *Super Goal* (Grade 7, p. 83), in which a teacher named Mr. Morris is represented as a wheelchair user (see Figure 1).

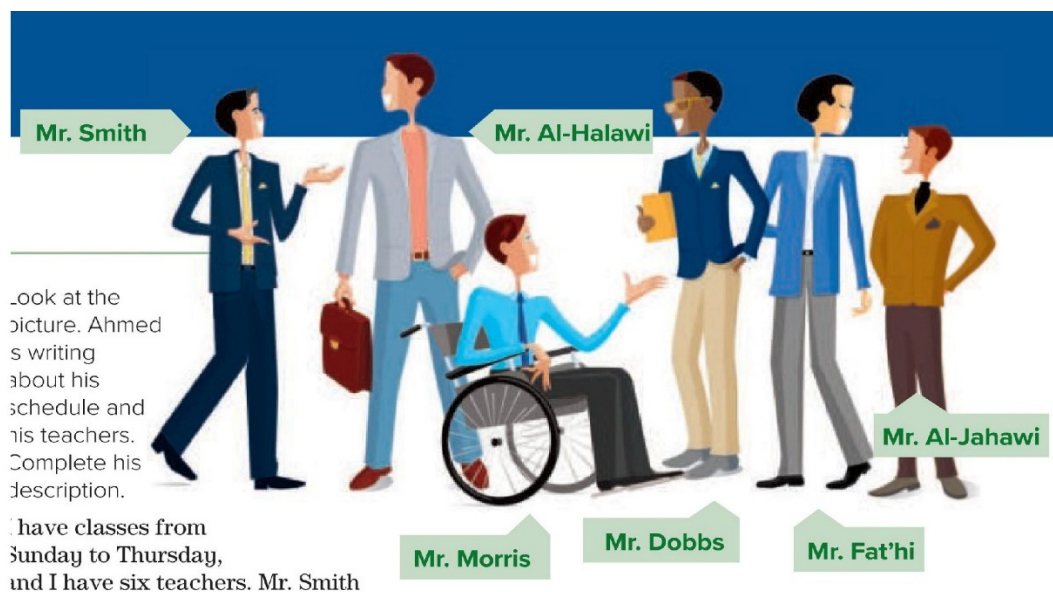


Figure 1. Mr. Morris

Mr. Morris is depicted as a French teacher teaching a grammar exercise focusing on the simple present tense and adjectives. His portrayal is positive and empowering, emphasizing professional success and social integration. He is engaged in conversation with his colleagues, reinforcing the notion that disability does not hinder workplace participation. In addition, he is described as “fun,” which helps to frame him as a well-rounded character who is defined by his personality rather than solely by his disability.

Similarly, *Mega Goal* (Grade 12, p. 246) presents a student named Philip, who has a physical disability due to a childhood car accident, resulting in his complete dependence on an electric wheelchair. Of note, this is the only representation that explicitly addresses accessibility challenges. The passage explains that Philip was unable to attend college in his area due to the lack of wheelchair ramps, leading him to pursue an online education at Cyber College. This portrayal highlights both the barriers encountered by people with disabilities and their ability to find alternative solutions. The passage presents an empowering narrative that emphasizes Philip’s determination and success in completing his first year of computer science.



Another representation in *Mega Goal* (Grade 12, p. 137) tells the story of Brian, a triple amputee who lost both legs and his right arm in an explosion. The story is presented in a speaking exercise in which the students were expected to discuss what motivates some people to persevere and to make the most of their lives. In the story, despite his injuries, Brian enrolled in one of the most competitive architectural schools in the U.S. and was from which he was going to graduate to graduate in 2014. This positive portrayal shows that people with disabilities were depicted as determined, resilient, and overcoming their disabilities to succeed in their careers.

The same exercise in *Mega Goal* (Grade 12, p. 137) presents the story of a woman, Martha, who was paralyzed by polio at the age of 11, and who spent most of her life in an iron lung. Despite her disability, she earned two college degrees and continued her academic journey using a custom-built intercom system. Her statement, “Something happens to all of us. Mine is more visible than yours, but you have to deal with your things, too,” offers a powerful perspective on resilience. Martha is represented as an achiever, reinforcing the idea that people with disabilities are capable of high academic accomplishments; thus, the depiction of Martha contributes to an overall positive and inspirational representation.

Another example appears in *Super Goal* (Grade 9, p. 12) in the representation of Ahmed Jamal, a 16-year-old student who was born with a crippling disease that made it difficult for him to walk. He is depicted as the captain and top scorer of his football team in the Special Olympics Junior League, and is awarded “Athlete of the Year.” His success is framed within the context of overcoming his disability, with statements such as “Ahmed is an example to all young athletes.” While the story serves as a positive example of inclusion in sports, the image presented in the story does not actually represent an athlete with a disability or Ahmed as a role model for young athletes, but depicts a non-disabled athlete instead (see Figure 2).

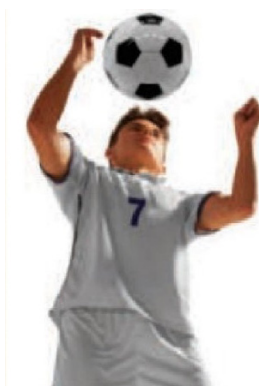


Figure 2. Ahmed Jamal

In addition to this positive representation of physical disability, a final instance of physical disability representation is found in *Mega Goal* (Grade 11, p. 200) in a reading passage entitled *Mind Over Matter*, which discusses advancements in assistive technology. The passage presents Matthew Nagle, a paralyzed individual benefiting from a brain-implanted chip that allows him to control devices using his thoughts (see Figure 3).





Figure 3. Matthew Nagle

The reading passage explains how Nagle benefited from a brain-implanted chip that allowed him to control devices using his thoughts. Moreover, the passage details how this technology enabled him to perform tasks such as turning lights on and off and opening emails, providing an example of how assistive devices can enhance the independence of people with disabilities. Of note, the passage explicitly states, “Technology has the possibility of dramatically improving the lives of disabled people.” The representation of assistive technology in this passage is largely positive, as it moves beyond a focus on limitations and highlights solutions that promote autonomy instead.

Overall, the results demonstrated that the representation of physical disabilities in Saudi EFL textbooks was predominantly positive, often portraying people with disabilities as being capable, resilient, and accomplished. These representations were mainly situated in academic settings (e.g., Philip, Brian, Ahmed, and Martha), and followed by professional settings (e.g., Mr. Morris).

## (2) Limited Representation of Sensory Disabilities

The findings indicated that sensory disabilities, specifically blindness and deafness, received minimal representation in Saudi EFL textbooks, as only three instances of sensory disability were identified in the 12 textbooks that were analyzed.

More specifically, the analysis revealed that people with sensory disabilities were mainly represented in historical contexts. For example, in the reading exercise about famous quotes in *Mega Goal* (Grade 10, p. 186), one of the most prominent representations of sensory disability was the representation of Helen Keller and her well-known quote, “It is a terrible thing to see and have no vision.” The text provides brief information about Helen Keller, a deaf-blind American author, activist, and lecturer. The text acknowledges Keller as being the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college, positions her as an inspirational historical figure, and emphasizes her intellectual contributions.

A similar representation appears in *Mega Goal* (Grade 11, p. 261), in which Keller is mentioned in a grammar exercise using the past perfect tense: The sentence states:

“Helen Keller was deaf and blind when she got her university degree.”

This statement reinforces her academic achievement despite her sensory disabilities.

Another mention of sensory disability is found in *Mega Goal* (Grade 12, p. 121), in a grammar exercise referring to Edwin Robinson. The sentence states:

“When Edwin Robinson was struck by lightning, he had been blind and deaf for almost 10 years.”

Unlike the depiction of Keller, Robinson’s disability is framed as the result of an accident rather than a lifelong condition.

These findings suggest that sensory disabilities were primarily represented through historical figures with an emphasis on their exceptional achievements. While these depictions are positive and motivational, the absence of

contemporary or Saudi individuals with sensory disabilities represents a missed opportunity for more relatable representations. In addition, there were no images of people with sensory disabilities engaging in daily activities, education, or social interactions, potentially reinforcing the misconception that such disabilities are rare or are associated solely with historical figures.

### (3) Limited Representation of Cognitive Disabilities

One of the most notable findings in the analysis of Saudi EFL textbooks was the extreme underrepresentation of people with cognitive disabilities. Unlike physical and sensory disabilities, which appeared in passages, images, and exercises, there was only one type mention of cognitive disabilities. This occurred in *Mega Goal* (Grade 12, p. 202), in which an exercise prompts students to write an informational essay about a psychological condition or disorder, with attention deficit disorder (ADHD) being given as an example.

Apart from this, the findings revealed a complete absence of representation of people with different types cognitive disabilities. There were no explicit mentions of people with disabilities such as ASD, Down syndrome, or intellectual developmental disorders. This omission highlights a significant gap in disability representation in Saudi EFL textbooks.

### (4) Limited Representation of Learning Disabilities

Similar to cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities were rarely included in any of the analyzed textbooks. The only mention occurred in the *Mega Goal* (Grade 12, p. 202) writing exercise, which included dyslexia as a possible topic, in addition to ADHD.

The almost complete absence of depictions of cognitive and learning disabilities in these textbooks suggests a lack of comprehensive disability representation. While physical disabilities received some attention, the underrepresentation of cognitive and learning disabilities limits the inclusivity of the educational materials.

## 4.2 Theme Two: The Extent of Disability Representation

RQ2, which aimed to examine the extent to which people with disabilities were represented in Saudi EFL textbooks, is addressed in this section. The findings indicated that representations of disability in both the textual and the visual content were significantly limited.

### 4.2.1 Analysis of Visual Representations

An analysis of textbook images was conducted to assess the proportion of people with disabilities who were represented visually.

A review of the images in the textbooks revealed a near absence of visual representations of people with disabilities, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Images of People with Disabilities in Saudi EFL Textbooks

Grade	Images of people with disabilities
We Can Grade 1	0
We Can Grade 2	0
We Can Grade 3	0
Top Goal Grades 4-6	0
Super Goal Grade 7	1
Super Goal Grade 8	0
Super Goal Grade 9	0
Mega Goal Grade 10	0
Mega Goal Grade 11	1
Mega Goal Grade 12	0
Total of images	2

As shown in Table 2, only two images depicting people with disabilities were identified in the 12 textbooks that were analyzed. These two instances were found in *Super Goal* (Grade 7) and *Mega Goal* (Grade 11), while no images of people with disabilities appeared in any of the *We Can*, *Top Goal*, *Super Goal* (Grades 8-9), *Mega Goal* (Grade 10), or *Mega Goal* (Grade 12) textbooks. This suggests a substantial underrepresentation of people with disabilities in visual materials in Saudi EFL textbooks.

#### 4.2.2 Textual Representation of Disabilities

In addition to visual representations, the extent of textual representations was examined by analyzing the number of textbook pages that explicitly mentioned or described people with disabilities. Table 3 provides an overview of the findings.

Table 3. Number of Pages Representing People with Disabilities in Saudi EFL Textbooks

Grade	Total Pages	Pages Representing People with Disabilities	Percentage of Disability Representation
We Can 1	84	0	0%
We Can 2	86	0	0%
We Can 3	86	0	0%
Top Goal (4-6)	225	0	0%
Super Goal 7	272	1	0.37
Super Goal 8	267	0	0%
Super Goal 9	275	1	0.36%
Mega Goal 10	376	1	0.27%
Mega Goal 11	376	2	0.53%
Mega Goal 12	376	6	1.60%
Total Number of Pages	2423	11	0.45%

As illustrated in Table 3, the number of textbook pages that featured people with disabilities was minimal, comprising only 0.45% of the total pages across all the textbooks. Only a few textbooks, particularly those for the higher grades, included any representations, with the *Mega Goal* (Grade 12) series having the highest number of pages (six pages, or 1.60%).

#### 4.2.3 Disability Representation by Educational Stage

As illustrated in Figure 4, disability representation varied across the educational stages. The primary level was characterized by an almost complete absence of disability-related content; the intermediate stage showed a slight increase, while the secondary stage contained the highest level of representation.

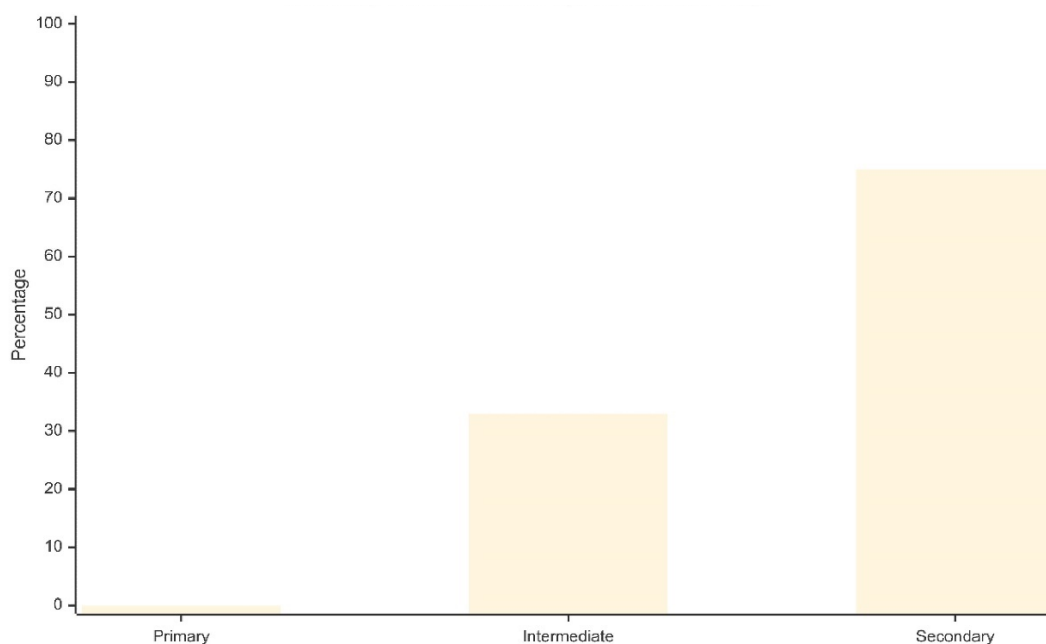


Figure 4. Disability Representation by Educational Stage

## 5. Discussion

Textbooks are powerful tools that reflect society as a whole. They should represent diverse groups, including children and adults, men and women, workers and non-workers, athletes and non-athletes, and both disabled and non-disabled people. In other words, textbooks should depict the diverse society we live in accurately by ensuring that all people are represented. According to the latest statistics from the General Authority for Statistics, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a total population of 32 175.224 people, in which 1 445.723 people with disabilities constitute 7.1% of the total population of Saudi Arabia. The number of people with disabilities was categorized according to visual disabilities (811 610), hearing impairments (289 355), ASD (53 282), Down syndrome (19 428), and mobility impairments (833 136) (Disability Report - Saudi Census 2022, issued by the General Authority for Statistics). Given these figures, ensuring accurate and diverse disability representations in educational materials is critical.

The findings of this study revealed that Saudi EFL textbooks fell short of representing disability. While the portrayals of people with disabilities were generally positive, they were extremely limited in scope and failed to capture the full spectrum of disability. The findings are consistent with research involving analyses of disability representations in textbooks in other countries (Cheng & Beigi, 2011; Pogorzelska, 2016; Can et al. 2017; Hodkinson et al., 2018; González-Palomares & Rey-Cao, 2022; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023), which has consistently found that people with disabilities are underrepresented. This section will explore the implications of these findings, and reflect on the models of disability, the absence of representation at the primary stage of education, and the broader societal impact of these representations.

### 5.1 Reflecting on the Models of Disability

The representation of disability in Saudi EFL textbooks can be analyzed through the lens of the medical, social, and human rights models of disability. The medical model, which views disability as an individual deficit or pathology, is subtly present in the textbooks, particularly in the emphasis on overcoming disability. For example, characters such as Brian and Martha are portrayed as inspirational figures who have triumphed over their physical impairments, thus reinforcing the idea that disability is a personal challenge to be overcome (Hodkinson, 2015). While these portrayals are positive, they risk perpetuating the supercrip narrative, which places the burden of success on the individual rather than addressing systemic barriers (Shakespeare, 2006). By contrast, the social model of disability, which shifts the focus from individual impairment to societal barriers, is largely absent from the textbooks. There was little discussion about the environmental or attitudinal barriers that individuals with disabilities experience, such as inaccessible buildings or discriminatory practices. For instance, Philip's story touched briefly on accessibility challenges when he was unable to attend college due to the lack of wheelchair ramps, but this issue was not explored in depth. This missed opportunity to highlight societal barriers limits the textbooks' potential to foster a deeper understanding of disability as a social construct (Oliver, 1990). The human rights model, which emphasizes the dignity and equality of people with disabilities, was also underrepresented. While the textbooks did portray people with disabilities as being capable and successful, they did not explicitly address the right of people with disabilities to participate fully in society. For example, there was no discussion of legislations or policies that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Including such content could help students to understand disability as a human rights issue, rather than simply as a personal or medical one (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

### 5.2 Positive but Limited Representations

One of the strengths of the Saudi EFL textbooks was the positive representations of people with disabilities, in contrast to other findings indicating that people with disabilities were depicted as being dependent and helpless (Cheng & Beigi, 2011; Gulab & Khokhar, 2018; Pogorzelska, 2016). Instead, characters such as Mr. Morris, Philip, and Martha were depicted as resilient, determined, and successful. These positive portrayals are important because they challenge stereotypes and provide role models for students with and without disabilities. However, the limited scope of these representations—focusing primarily on physical disabilities and exceptional achievements—means that they do not fully capture the diversity of disability experiences. For example, while the textbooks highlighted people who had overcome significant challenges, they did not depict people with disabilities in everyday roles, such as parents, friends, or community members. This is consistent with the study by Gulya and Fehérvári (2023), as the authors found that there were no representations of people with disabilities engaging in everyday, school, or leisure activities with friends and family: This narrow focus on exceptionalism risks reinforcing the idea that individuals with disabilities are only worthy of attention if they achieve extraordinary feats.

### 5.3 *The Absence of Representation at the Primary Educational Stage*

One of the most striking findings was the complete absence of disability representation at the primary educational stage. The textbooks for Grades 1–6 did not contain any references to disability, either in textual or in visual form. This omission is particularly concerning given the importance of early exposure to diverse representations in shaping children’s attitudes and perceptions. Research has shown that children begin to form attitudes toward disability at a very young age, and that these attitudes are often influenced by the media and the educational materials to which they are exposed (Ostrosky et al., 2015). According to Gulya and Fehérvári’s (2023) findings, literary works and classroom textbooks that include characters with disabilities have an impact on students’ views and attitudes toward people with disabilities; the authors found that the majority of characters with disabilities in Hungarian textbooks were portrayed in a stereotypical way, and that this portrayal had a negative effect on primary stage students’ attitudes toward people with disabilities.

The absence of disability representation at the primary stage represents a missed opportunity to foster inclusivity from an early age. Studies have consistently shown that early exposure to positive representations of disability can help to reduce prejudice and promote acceptance among children (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Ostrosky et al. 2015). By failing to include disability-related content in primary-level textbooks, Saudi EFL materials may be inadvertently reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting children’s understanding of diversity.

### 5.4 *The Absence of Cognitive and Learning Disabilities*

The near-complete absence of cognitive and learning disabilities in the textbooks was another significant limitation. This omission not only renders these disabilities invisible, but also perpetuates the stigma and marginalization that individuals with these conditions experience. For example, while ADHD and dyslexia were mentioned briefly, there were no meaningful representations of people with these disabilities in the textbooks. This lack of representation reveals a missed opportunity to foster understanding among students. Including more diverse representations of disability—such as characters with ASD, Down syndrome, or intellectual disabilities—would help to normalize these conditions and to challenge stereotypes. It would also give students who have disabilities the opportunity to see themselves reflected in their educational materials, which can have a positive impact on their self-esteem and sense of belonging (Ostrosky et al., 2015).

### 5.5 *The Role of Visual Representation*

The lack of visual representations of disability in the textbooks was another significant limitation. Visual materials are a powerful tool for shaping perceptions, as they provide concrete images to which students can relate and from which they can learn. The absence of images depicting individuals with disabilities in everyday settings—such as classrooms, workplaces, or social gatherings—reinforces the idea that disability is rare or confined to specific contexts, such as historical narratives or elite sports. Including more diverse and relatable images of individuals with disabilities would help to normalize disability and to challenge stereotypes. For example, depicting a student using a wheelchair in a classroom or a worker wearing a hearing aid in an office would send a powerful message that people with disabilities are active participants in society (Pogorzelska, 2016).

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlighted the strengths and limitations of disability representation in Saudi EFL textbooks. While the textbooks avoided negative stereotypes and provided positive portrayals of people with disabilities, these representations were extremely limited in scope and failed to capture the full spectrum of disability. The almost complete absence of the representation of cognitive and learning disabilities, the lack of visual representations, and the limited exploration of societal barriers all point to the need for more inclusive and diverse educational materials. To address these challenges, it is essential to take a more inclusive approach to textbook development; this includes incorporating diverse representations of disability, increasing the visibility of cognitive and learning disabilities, and using visual materials to challenge stereotypes and to promote empathy. By doing so, Saudi Arabia can move closer to achieving the goal of inclusive content, ensuring that all students—regardless of their abilities—feel valued and included in the textbooks.

### 6.1 *Recommendations for Future Research and Practice*

- (1) Future revisions of EFL textbooks should aim to include a more diverse range of disabilities, and should ensure that cognitive and learning disabilities are adequately represented, in addition to physical and sensory disabilities.
- (2) Curriculum developers should prioritize the inclusion of visual representations of disability in textbooks by depicting people with disabilities in a variety of everyday settings.

(3) Educators should receive training regarding how to use inclusive textbooks effectively, thus ensuring that they are equipped to teach about disability in a way that promotes understanding.

(4) Policymakers should consider revising educational policies to mandate the inclusion of disability-related content at all levels of education, thus ensuring that students are exposed to diverse representations from an early age.

By addressing these recommendations, Saudi EFL textbook developers can take an important step toward creating more inclusive educational materials that reflect the diversity of human experiences.

### Authors' Contributions

First Author: Gadah Brahim Aleidan is responsible of conducting the manuscript.

Second Author: Dr. Najlaa Rukayan Alharbi is responsible of thesis supervision.

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