

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Persons with Disabilities in English Language Textbooks in Cameroon

Marcel Jaff Fornkwa (PhD)

Department of English, Faculty of Arts the University of Bamenda

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100238>

Received: 14 January 2026; Accepted: 19 January 2026; Published: 02 February 2026

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines English Language textbooks used in Cameroonian secondary schools with the aim of investigating the representation of people with disabilities in the textbooks. The study adopts the content analysis design to analyse the images, sentences and texts used in the textbooks in order to determine the space occupied by persons with disabilities and the ideological perceptions associated to them in the textbook. Data for the study are collected by observing the images and reading through the sentences and texts in the five English Language textbooks used in Form One, Two, Three, Four and Five of the Anglophone sub-system of education in Cameroon – *Prime English Book 1*, *Prime English Book 2*, *Innovative English Book 3*, *Prime English Book 4* and *Prime English Book 5*, respectively. The data are analysed based on the Critical Discourse Analysis framework at two levels. The first stage involves statistical recording of the various occurrences of people with disabilities in the images, sentences and texts, and classifying them according to the different types of impairments (visual, hearing, mobility, mental). The second stage of the analysis involves critically examining the different occurrences of people with disabilities in the textbooks in order to determine ideological perceptions associated with their presentation. The findings reveal the limited space attributed to persons with disabilities in English Language textbooks at both the pictorial and lexical levels. Besides, the rhetoric associated with their presentation in the textbooks is sometimes negative and derogatory. It is recommended that within the context of inclusive education advocated by the government of Cameroon, more space should be allocated to persons with disabilities in school textbooks coupled with a more positive presentation of these people. This would positively influence perceptions and attitude of other learners towards people with disabilities.

**Keywords:** Representation, disability, impairments, perception, space

## INTRODUCTION

Disability can be defined as the intersection of impairment of body structure or function, limitations in engagement in activities, and/or participation in social life (WHO, 2002). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines persons with disabilities as ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (UN CRPD, 2006).

These definitions of disability take into consideration various perspectives, which include:

### a. A medical condition

Disability is first of all considered as a health condition or impairment that limits a person’s physical, sensory, or cognitive functions (WHO, 2001). A person with disability therefore has an identifiable impairment related to either his/her physical, sensory or mental condition.

According to the WHO and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), physical impairments refer to conditions that affect a person’s physical functioning, mobility, dexterity, or stamina. These can be categorized according to the affected body system or function, and include: musculoskeletal impairments such as amputations, arthritis, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, muscular dystrophy, scoliosis, fracture or bone

deformities and joint disorders; neuromuscular impairments such as multiple sclerosis (MS), Parkinson's disease, stroke, peripheral neuropathy, and myasthenia gravis; sensory-motor impairments related to vision and hearing; cardiovascular and respiratory impairments such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart conditions and chronic fatigue syndrome; congenital impairments such as spina bifida, limb deficiencies and osteogenesis imperfecta; trauma-related impairments such as traumatic brain injury, burn-related impairments and fractures or soft tissue injuries; and other physical impairments such as chronic pain conditions, obesity-related impairments and cancer-related impairments.

Sensory impairments affect the ability to process information from the senses. The various forms include visual impairment, which can be a reduced or a complete loss of vision (ranging from partial to total blindness); hearing impairment, which can be a partial or a complete loss of hearing; olfactory impairment, which is loss or reduction in the sense of smell; gustatory impairment, which is reduced or altered sense of taste; tactile impairment, which is reduced or altered sense of touch; proprioceptive impairment, which is difficulty sensing body position or movement; and vestibular impairment, which is the disruption in balance and spatial orientation (Asghar, 2023).

Mental impairments, often referred to as mental disorders or psychiatric conditions, encompass a wide range of conditions that affect thinking, feeling, behaviour, or mood. According to WHO (2022) these include mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, characterized by excessive fear, worry, or avoidance; depression disorders, involving persistent sadness, loss of interest, or hopelessness; bipolar disorders characterized by extreme mood swings or changes in energy and activity levels; post-traumatic stress disorder, triggered by exposure to traumatic or stressful events; schizophrenia, which involves disruptions in thought processes, perceptions, and reality testing; eating disorders, which involve abnormal eating behaviours or preoccupation with food or body image; disruptive behaviour and dissociative disorders characterized by disruptions in memory, identity, or perception of reality; and neurodevelopmental disorders, which typically arise during the developmental period, and involve significant difficulties in the acquisition and execution of specific intellectual, motor, language, or social functions.

All these physical, sensory and mental impairments limit an individual's ability to function and engage in activities with other persons.

### A social construct

Disability arises not from the impairment itself but from societal barriers (UPIAS, 1976). These barriers can include societal discrimination against people with identified impairments, or the lack of accessibility in the surrounding environment for persons with identified impairments. This view emphasizes that society disables people by failing to accommodate their diverse needs, thereby preventing them from fully and effectively participating in society and on an equal basis with others (European Commission, nd.).

Discrimination against people with impairments (ableism), which ranges from direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, harassment to victimisation (Acas, 2023), can be manifested in various forms. These include: attitudinal discrimination such as stereotyping, pity or infantilisation and exclusionary attitudes; institutional discrimination in the form of inaccessible infrastructure, employment barriers, educational barriers, healthcare disparities and policy gaps; systemic discrimination such as economic exclusion, underrepresentation and social welfare bias; interpersonal discrimination like micro-aggressions, bullying or harassment and social isolation; environmental discrimination such as digital inaccessibility, transportation barriers and urban oversights; internalised ableism and intersectional discrimination (WHO, 2023; Medical News Today, 2021). All these forms of discrimination contribute in disabling people with identified impairments.

In Cameroon, people with impairments can be identified in the general population across the ten regions of the country (Cockburn et al, 2017; Loaiza & Cappa 2005). Some studies have estimated the prevalence of impairments at 4.7% in the population (Simo Fotso et al, 2019). This could however vary depending on the region and age group. More recent studies could indicate more specific statistics.

Over the past years the government of Cameroon has been adopting, designing and implementing policies on the effective protection, promotion and integration of persons with disabilities in the country. For example, the

Prime Minister's decree number 20018/6233 of 26 July 2018 lays down the procedures for the promotion and protection of persons with disabilities with regards to their education and vocational training, employment, access to infrastructure, housing, transport and communication, access to political, sport, artistic, cultural and leisure activities, and their medical management. Cameroon has equally ratified some international instruments on the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified on 28 December 2021 in Cameroon. Besides, Cameroon's Ministry of Social Affairs actively engages in actions aimed at the identification, protection and promotion of persons with disabilities, one of such being the issuance of biometric disability cards to entitle persons with disabilities to some services. Moreover, the Cameroon government is fully committed to the promotion of inclusive education, which aims at integrating children with special needs into mainstream classrooms despite the multiple challenges faced in the implementation of the national policy.

It is therefore within this context that we have decided to investigate the space and the ideological perceptions attributed to people with disability in English Language textbooks in Cameroon.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This review focuses on Critical Discourse Analysis as an appropriate framework for this study, and on some empirical studies that have been done on the representation of persons with disabilities in school textbooks.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), popularised by scholars such as Norman Fairclough (1995), Teun A. Van Dijk (1995), and Ruth Wodak (2002) is a methodological approach to studying language and communication, focusing on how discourse (spoken or written language in use) reflects, reproduces, and challenges power relations in society. According to Van Dijk (2015, p.466), "Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately to resist social inequality." CDA therefore goes beyond mere description of language to uncover hidden ideologies, inequalities, and social structures embedded in texts, conversations, media, and other forms of communication.

Critical discourse analysts thus have a role of investigating peculiar social ideologies that manifest inequality and abuse of social power to the detriment of the minorities or the underprivileged in society. Their main focus is to present the various ways in which these inequalities are enacted by the privileged and resisted by the underprivileged. Consequently, studies in CDA are not only limited to the description of text and talk but involve relating them to the societies in which they are produced because the main concern is to understand how the discourse is constructed and the reasons for incorporating certain linguistic structures, rather than others, in realizing particular texts or talks (Van Dijk 1995). This theory is therefore appropriate to use as a yardstick to investigate the representation of persons with disabilities in school textbooks.

The representation of persons with disabilities (PWD) in educational textbooks and children's literature has been a growing area of scholarly interest, particularly in how it influences attitudes, inclusion, and societal perceptions. Research often highlights underrepresentation, stereotypical portrayals, and the potential for positive impacts through inclusive content. Several studies reveal that PWD are frequently underrepresented or depicted in stereotypical ways in textbooks, which can marginalize students with disabilities and reinforce negative biases. For instance, a mixed-methods analysis of school textbooks found limited and often tokenistic representations, potentially hindering inclusive education (Jensen, 2023).

In another study to identify and critically analyse disability as curriculum content in English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks used in Hungarian public education, Gulya and Fehervari (2023) found out that the presentation of people with disabilities in the texts and visual materials was extremely limited, focusing on the distinctive aspects of disability. People with disabilities were mostly depicted participating in a minimal variety of segregated and elite activities, while there was a marked lack of images of people with disabilities involved in everyday situations, as individuals, integrated into society, and as part of a given sociocultural environment.

Similarly, in a study examining the picture of disability and disabled people in 96 textbooks presented to primary-aged pupils in English schools, Hodkinson (2007) observed that textbooks contained a limited construct of disability, and argues that this construct suggests that there is a cultural dominance of nondisabled people within the textbooks commonly presented to primary-aged children. Another study by Cheng & Beigi (2011) investigated the visibility of people with disabilities in the illustrations of seven Iranian EFL textbooks at the secondary and high school levels and observed that people with disabilities were underrepresented in the analysed textbooks, which potentially places students with disabilities in disadvantageous positions and perpetuate invisibility of such students. In yet another study investigating the extent of representation of disabilities in texts and pictures in 78 Norwegian textbooks for Grades 5–10, Jensen et al (2021) discovered that people with disabilities were represented in less than half of these textbooks (49%) regarding texts, and in only 29% concerning pictures. When asked to explain the limited reference of disabilities in their textbooks, the authors of the books explained that they had either overlooked people with disabilities, or that the Norwegian National Curriculum did not explicitly mention this minority.

In the context of Cameroon, scholarly literature specifically focusing on the representation of people with disabilities in Cameroonian textbooks is relatively sparse compared to broader studies on disability rights, inclusion, and education in the region. Research indicates that PWD are often marginalized in Cameroonian educational contexts, including curricula and textbooks, which may perpetuate exclusion. A narrative review of inclusive education in primary and secondary schooling highlighted barriers such as inadequate teacher training and curricular content that fails to address disabilities authentically, potentially extending to textbook portrayals (Cockburn et al, 2017). This therefore justifies the need for this study to investigate the representation of PWDs in Cameroonian textbooks.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the content analysis design to analyse the five English Language textbooks currently used in Forms One, Two, Three, Four and Five of the Anglophone sub-system of education in Cameroon – *Prime English Book 1*, *Prime English Book 2*, *Innovative English Book 3*, *Prime English Book 4* and *Prime English Book 5*, respectively. These textbooks were chosen because English Language is a compulsory subject and is taught almost every day, thus, students are most often compelled to buy the textbooks. Besides, English Language textbooks usually contain texts and illustrations that reflect the daily realities and practices of societal life; especially given the Competency Based Approach to teaching, which is currently applied in Cameroonian schools.

Data for the study were collected by observing the images and reading through the sentences, dialogues and passages used in the textbooks, and recording all the occurrences of persons with disabilities. The data were analysed at two levels. The first stage involved statistical recording of the various occurrences of people with disabilities in the images and texts, and classifying them according to the different types of impairments. The second stage involved critically examining the different occurrences of people with disabilities in the textbooks in order to determine the ideological perceptions associated with their presentation in the textbooks.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented and discussed under two major sections: the statistical representation of persons with disabilities in the textbooks examined, and the ideological perceptions associated with their presentation in the textbook.

### Frequency of the representation of persons with disabilities

The examination of the selected textbooks revealed that persons with disabilities are represented in two main ways: pictorial representation and lexical representation.

## Pictorial representation

This relates to the representation of persons with disabilities in the images and pictures used in the textbooks. The table below presents the statistics of this representation in the textbooks examined.

Table 1: Pictorial representation of persons with disabilities

Type of impairment	Frequency
Mobility impairment	6

The statistics on the table above show that in all the five textbooks examined, persons with disabilities appear in only six pictures/images, and all indicating people with mobility impairment. This shows a gross underrepresentation of these people; given that these textbooks are replete with so many pictures/images illustrating people involved in various activities. This very poor pictorial representation is an indication of the fact that the inclusive education policy advocated for by the Cameroon government is yet to be fully implemented, specifically in the designing of school textbooks.

## Lexical representation

The main focus here is to determine the recurrence of words and phrases relating to persons with disabilities in the sentences and texts used in the textbooks examined. The table below presents the statistics of these words and phrases in the five textbooks under study.

Table 2: Lexical representation of persons with disabilities

Word/Phrase	Frequency
Handicap	2
Depression	5
Anxiety	2
Mental disorder/illness	4
Mad	1
Physically challenged	1
Disability	1
Schizophrenia	1
Eating disorders	2
Trauma	2

The statistics on the table above show that in all the five textbooks examined, only ten words/phrases relating to persons with disabilities could be identified. Four of the ten words/phrases (schizophrenia, disability, physically challenged and mad) occurred only once in all the five textbook, four others (trauma, eating disorders, anxiety and handicap) occurred only twice, one (mental disorder/illness) occurred four times, and one (depression) occurred five times. These statistics show a gross underrepresentation at the lexical level of persons with disabilities in the textbooks. Given that lessons in these textbooks are coined from real-life situations such as satisfying basic needs, family and social life, health, work, leisure, sports, community life, media, business,

environmental issues, citizenship, and science and technology, this underrepresentation suggests that persons with disabilities are not usually fully integrated in these areas of life, leading to what Hodkinson (2007) terms the cultural discrimination of disabled people.

Furthermore, a closer look at the words/phrases on Table 2 above shows that seven of the ten relate to mental impairments, just one (physically challenged) relate to physical impairment, while two (disability and handicap) are general. There is no mention of sensory impairments in all the textbooks examined. This further illustrates the limited consideration accorded to persons with disabilities when designing school textbooks in general.

### **The ideological perceptions of PWDs**

This section examines the ideological perceptions associated to the presentation of PWDs in the textbooks examined. A thorough examination of the few instances of the presentation of PWDs in the textbooks revealed three different ideological perceptions linked to their presentation.

#### **Projecting the inclusion of PWDs in normal life**

Some instances of the presentation of PWDs in the textbooks examined explicitly advocate for their inclusion in normal life activities. Examples of such instances include:

- a. On page 129 of *Prime English Book 1*, one of the pictures introducing the lesson on “Games and Leisure Activities” is that of physically impaired ladies on wheelchairs playing basketball. Furthermore, the Reading passage on “Taking Part in Sports and Physical Education” on page 130 emphasises that physically challenged young people are required to take part in sports and physical education activities in school because this will help reduce the risk of marginalisation. The world Paralympic Competitions are equally mentioned in this passage as an opportunity that empowers physically challenged people to overcome the sense of helplessness, inferiority and stigma.
- b. Similarly, the reading passage under the lesson “Doing Sports to Maintain Good Health” on Page 100 of the same foregrounds the idea that people suffering from mental impairments such as depression, schizophrenia and mood swings should engage in group or collective sporting activities. The laughter, singing, jokes and playing that are usually common to collective sports serve as an effective therapy to people with troubled minds or in depressed states. Sports is therefore presented here as an inclusive activity which should unify everyone irrespective of their mental conditions.
- c. On Page 56 of *Prime English Book 2*, one of the images introducing “Module 2: Involvement in Community Activities and Concerns” presents a physically impaired man on a wheelchair on stage and talking to a large audience. The image presented at the beginning of the module highlights the idea that everyone should be involved in community activities, and that even physically impaired people can assume leadership positions in the community.
- d. Furthermore, on Page 233 of *Prime English Book 5*, one of the three images for a picture composition exercise under the lesson “Using Internet for Study Purposes” is the picture of a physically impaired man on a wheelchair, putting on headphones and working on a laptop. The use of such an image for a picture composition exercise helps to construct a positive ideological representation of impaired persons. The picture represents the idea that impaired people can use the internet and ICTs in general just like any other persons.

#### **Presenting PWDs as those who need help**

Some other instances of the presentation of PWDs in the textbooks examined portray them as people who need help. Examples of such instances include:

- a. One of the images on Page 57 of *Prime English Book 2* shows two young people supporting an old woman using a walking stick to cross the road. As one of the images introducing the lesson “Rendering

Humanitarian and Community Services”, the image foregrounds the idea that PWDs need support and help from other people in the community in order to carry out their daily activities smoothly. Such support which should be humanitarian would help reduce the power imbalance and discrimination often faced by PWDs in their communities.

### Presenting PWDs negatively

In one instance in *Prime English Book 5*, Page 83, under the lesson “Generating Income and Managing Money”, a speaker in a dialogue uses a derogatory statement to respond to another who wants to borrow money: *I can't continue to assist you financially as though you were a handicap*. This statement is derogatory in the sense that it projects the idea that impaired persons need financial assistance because they are not able to generate income by themselves. The use of the noun *a handicap* which means a condition of not being able to perform as a consequence of physical or mental unfitness foregrounds this biased idea. Given that the objective of the dialogue in the lesson is to drill students on strategies for making money, the use of such a statement in the dialogue is completely out of place because the statement tags impaired persons as handicapped thus having to depend on others for financial assistance. Such a derogatory presentation of impaired persons in a school textbook will only help to propagate negative ideologies about them to the users of the textbook, thereby leading to their marginalisation in real life.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that despite the inclusive education policy advocated for by the Cameroon government, there is a systemic discrimination and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in school textbooks. Results from the five English Language textbooks analysed depict a gross pictorial and lexical underrepresentation of PWDs in the textbooks. Besides, some instances of their presentation in the textbooks victimise them as invalid or handicapped, thereby propagating negative and derogatory ideologies about persons with disabilities. Other instances, however, present them as being able to engage in normal life activities. The study therefore suggests that PWDs should not only be accorded more space in school textbooks, but also that the rhetoric accompanying their presentation in the textbooks should be more positive, given that English Language textbooks are designed to reflect real life communicative events.

## REFERENCES

1. Acas. (2023). Types of disability discrimination. <https://www.acas.org.uk/disabilitydiscrimination/types-of-disability-discrimination>
2. Asghar, A. (2023). Sensory Impairments: The Effects on Social Interaction and Mental Health. *Journal of Communication Disorders, Deaf Studies & Hearing Aids*, 11 (1).
3. Cheng, K. & Beigi, A. (2011). Addressing students with disabilities in school textbooks. *Disability & Society*, 26(2):239-242. DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2011.544063](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.544063).
4. Cockburn, L., Cleaver, S., & Benuh, E. (2014). The Prevalence of Impairments and Disabilities in the North West Region, Cameroon. *Health Sciences and Disease*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.5281/hsd.v15i2.332>.
5. Cockburn, L., Hashemi, G., Noumi, C., Ritchie, A., & Skead, K. (2017). Realizing the educational rights of children with disabilities: An overview of inclusive education in Cameroon. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 8 (6), ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online)
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2025). Disability and Health Overview. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>.
7. European Commission (nd.). Persons with disabilities. [Commission.europa.eu](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions/income-and-living-conditions-disability).
8. Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
9. Gulya, N. & Fehervari, A. (2023). Addressing disability representation in EFL textbooks used in Hungarian public education. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 4 (2023) 100226. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2023.100226>.

10. Hodkinson, A. (2007). Inclusive Education and the cultural representation of disability and Disabled people within the English Education System: A critical examination of the mediating influence of primary school textbooks. IATERM e-journal, 1 (1), 1-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21344/iarterm.v1i1.805>
11. Jensen, M., Herrebroden, M. & Andreassen, U. (2021). The invisible minority: why do textbook authors avoid people with disabilities in their books? International Journal of Inclusive Education, 27 (12): 1287-1303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1889049>.
12. Jensen, M. (2023). Representation of people with disabilities in school textbooks: A mixed-methods study. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 27(8), 901-920.
13. Loaiza, E. & Cappa, C. (2005). Measuring Children's Disability Via Household Surveys: The MICS Experience. UNICEF: Philadelphia, PA.
14. Medical News Today (2021). Ableism: Types, examples, impact, and anti-ableism. Available at: [www.medicalnewstoday.com](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com).
15. Republic of Cameroon (2018). Decree No. 2018/6233/PM of 26 Jul 2018 Setting the Implementation Procedures for Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the Protection and Promotion of Persons with Disabilities.
16. Simo Fotso, A., Duthé, G. & Odimegwu, C. (2019). A comparative analysis of disability measures in Cameroonian surveys. Population Health Metrics, 17 (16). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12963-019-0198-4>
17. United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).
18. Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) (1976). Fundamental Principles of Disability.
19. Van Dijk T. (1995). Aims of critical discourse analysis. Japanese Discourse. (1): 17-27.
20. Van Dijk T. (2015). Critical Discourse Analysis. In Deborah T., Heidi E., Deborah S. (Eds), The handbook of Discourse Analysis (pp. 466-485). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch22>
21. Wodak, R. (2002). Aspects of Critical Discourse Analyis. ZfAL 35, 5 – 31.
22. World Health Organization (2001). International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).
23. World Health Organisation (2002). Mental disorders. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>.
24. World Health Organisation (2003). Disability. WHO fact sheet on disability and health. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>.
25. World Health Organisation (n.d.). International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). Available at: [https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/international\\_classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health](https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/international_classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health).