

Research Paper

## **An Examination of LGBTQ+ Representation in a Canadian ELT Newspaper**

Hilda Freimuth  
*Thompson Rivers University*

Leah Walter  
*Dalhousie University*

### **Abstract**

Up to 30% of the world's population is part of the LGBTQ+ community. Yet, representation in English language programs and classroom materials around the world appears to be minimal to non-existent. This study conducted a content analysis of LGBTQ+ representation in one locally produced ELT newspaper in British Columbia, Canada to investigate if a more localized publication with less pressure to appeal to a mass readership would yield greater representation. The study found that five instances of representation occurred in a four-year span of production of thirty-nine newspapers. This finding is significant in that very few examples of this type exist in the literature.

### **Introduction**

The drive towards greater inclusion and diversity in the field of English as an additional language (EAL) education has been commendable in the past few decades. Diverse racial and ethnic representation in many English language teaching (ELT) textbooks, once invisible, is now relatively common although more work still needs to be done (Bowen & Hopper, 2022). However, representation of gender and sexual identity, which has also been non-existent in ELT textbooks, has not fared as well in terms of an increase in visibility (Evripidou, 2020; Freimuth, 2022; Gray, 2013; Merse, 2015; Nelson, 2009; Paiz, 2019, Seburn, 2019). With up to 30% of the world's population identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning + (LGBTQ+) (Varrella, 2022), it is important to have representation of the community within ELT classrooms, textbooks, materials, and lessons. In fact, UNESCO has called for this inclusion in all school-related materials to build safer schools and greater inclusivity in educational programs worldwide (UNESCO, 2016). Seburn (2021) has argued comprehensive inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in materials not only makes learners from this community feel relevant but also makes learning more effective as a result. Bollas (2021) claimed this lack of learning is, in fact, a result of limiting a learner's additional language learning motivation. According to Seburn (2018), materials that do make an attempt to include the LGBTQ+ community either are as close to heteronormative as possible or are offered in a separate chapter, thereby otherizing or marginalizing the community itself.

In an attempt to build a sense of belonging in the ELT classrooms of British Columbia and Canada, representation of the LGBTQ+ community needs to occur in a number of ways. One of these is representation within the materials used for instruction. Whereas textbooks published for mass audiences in the United Kingdom and North America have shown little to no inclusion

of the LGBTQ+ community (Evripidou, 2020; Freimuth, 2022; Gray, 2013; Merse, 2015; Nelson, 2009; Paiz, 2019, Seburn, 2019), more localized publications could include greater representation as they may have less concern for profit. Moore (2020) asserted the concern for profit (mass audience appeal) is the main reason for the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in textbooks. So, would a more localized publication include more representation? In answer to this question, this study examines the content of a local ELT newspaper published in British Columbia—*The Westcoast Reader* (WCR)<sup>1</sup>. The WCR covers news stories from across the province in such a way that English language learners of varied English language abilities are able to read and understand the news articles. This type of localized publication in a province that supports and promotes the rights of the LGBTQ+ community through the B.C. Human Rights Commission (B.C. Government, 2022) should ideally have some representation in place. This study, therefore, examines the WCR to determine the amount of presence of LGBTQ+ representation within its papers.

### Literature Review

Two terms central to this study are diversity and inclusion. With these meaning different things to different people, the words require defining here. In terms of this study, diversity is defined as the presence of “a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations etc.” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2022). Inclusion, on the other hand, is the act of creating a sense of belonging for all people, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, and identity (Petriwskyj, 2010).

The literature shows that while there has been a great effort made in terms of diversity and inclusion of racial and ethnic representation in ELT textbooks, little representation of the LGBTQ+ community exists (Evripidou, 2020; Freimuth, 2022; Gray, 2013; Merse, 2015; Nelson, 2009; Paiz, 2019, Seburn, 2019). It appears diversity of gender and identity are not even minimally represented in ELT materials despite findings of this lack of representation twenty years ago. Back in 1999, Thornbury (p. 15) claimed representation was “nowhere to be found. They [the LGBTQ+ community] are still firmly in the coursebook closet. Coursebook people are never gay.” De Vincenti et al. (2007) found this to be true of French, Italian, and Japanese language materials used at an Australian university as well. In 2013, Gray conducted a study in the United Kingdom on LGBTQ+ representation in a number of ELT textbooks. This study also confirmed a dearth of representation. Paiz’s (2015) findings also drew a similar conclusion. Seven years later, another study on five textbooks that are part of a popular North American ELT series found, yet again, zero representation of the LGBTQ+ community even though fifteen instances of possible inclusion (e.g., the LGTBQ+ coming of age ceremony in Japan) were noted (Freimuth, 2022).

The reason for this lack of representation likely lays with the publishers and their fear of lower profit margins (Moore, 2020). In fact, when authors try to include representation, the publishers often censor the content (Goldstein, 2015). This lack of representation, therefore, is linked to reaching as wide an audience as possible. This focus on a wide audience then begs the question: Do ELT materials produced for a more localized audience house greater

---

<sup>1</sup> The name of the ELT newspaper that is the subject of this article has not been anonymized to let readers know how useful this newspaper is and to encourage them to use it with their learners for its inclusivity.

representation? A thorough search of the literature revealed few studies on this worldwide, let alone in Canada. One study that was found on localized ELT materials at a state university in Turkey showed mis- and under-representation (Selvi & Kocaman, 2020). But what about places where LGBTQ+ communities are supported? Is there greater representation in localized ELT materials then? To answer this question, a number of issues of one ELT newspaper for English language learners in British Columbia were examined.

### Method

The method of investigation chosen for this study was content analysis. This approach is one kind of qualitative or quantitative research method used to analyze data in text form, be it derived from narratives, interviews, observations, or print media (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is a research tool that enables the researcher to determine the presence of something, such as certain words or themes. Therefore, content analysis allows for the easy analysis of print media (such as newspapers) and for the counting of instances (such as LGBTQ+ representation) within the material. This type of newspaper analysis is not new and was born out of the need for ethical standards in newspapers in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century (Krippendorff, 2019). It continues to be used today as it allows for a relatively simple, systematic way of analyzing newspapers and other written texts.

The WCR was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is free to many English language learning programs in British Columbia and thus widely used. For those institutes or individuals that do pay, a minimal fee of twenty dollars is charged annually. The paper is also based out of a large urban centre. With funding from the B.C. Government (Westcoast Reader, 2022), this newspaper should, ideally, be free to include a fair representation of all peoples in British Columbia without profit margin concerns. Copies of the WCR available to the principal investigator through the university in which they work were used in this study. This totalled thirty-nine newspapers ranging from March 2018 to June 2022, with no publications taking place in July and August. Each newspaper was first analyzed by the principal investigator. Instances of LGBTQ+ representations (e.g., Pride Parade) were highlighted and recorded in a table. Upon completion of the analysis, a university student from the LGBTQ+ community completed the analysis as well, without having access to the data generated in the first round. The two findings were then compared to ensure reliability. No discrepancies were found in the two data sets. Instances were then added up for a total count. Instances were not analyzed for positive or negative representation of the LGBTQ+ community, only for presence.

### Findings

The findings showed a total of five instances of LGBTQ+ representation over a span of four years. Issues for May 2018, October 2018, May 2020, June 2020, December 2020 were not included in the data set as they were unavailable at the time of research. The years of 2018, 2019, and 2020 all had one instance of representation each while 2021 had two and 2022 had zero to date. The content analysis of the readers revealed the following data (Table 1):

**Table 1***LGBTQ+ Instances of Representation in WCR*

<b>Number</b>	<b>Month + Year</b>	<b>Instances</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	March 2018	0	
2	April 2018	0	
3	June 2018	0	
4	September 2018	1 – RCMP Safe Place Program	1
5	November 2018	0	
6	December 2018	0	
7	January 2019	0	
8	February 2019	0	
9	March 2019	0	
10	April 2019	0	
11	May 2019	0	
12	June 2019	0	
13	September 2019	0	
14	October 2019	1 Rainbow Crosswalk	1
15	November 2019	0	
16	December 2019	0	
17	January 2020	0	
18	February 2020	1 nonbinary term	1
19	March 2020	0	
20	April 2020	0	
21	September 2020	0	
22	October 2020	0	
23	November 2020	0	
24	January 2021	0	
25	February 2021	0	
26	March 2021	1 gender neutral title / 1990 Gay Games	2
27	April 2021	0	
28	May 2021	0	
29	June 2021	0	
30	September 2021	0	
31	October 2021	0	
32	November 2021	0	
33	December 2021	0	
34	January 2022	0	
35	February 2022	0	
36	March 2022	0	
37	April 2022	0	
38	May 2022	0	
39	June 2022	0	
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>5</b>

## Discussion

The goal of this research was to determine if more localized ELT materials, in this case the WCR, feature more representation of the LGBTQ+ community than textbooks written for wider audiences by more substantial publishers. The findings indicated that yes, more representation exists although still limited in number (with only five instances). Something to note is that the calendar of holidays and celebrations in all of the issues did not feature the yearly Pride Parade or LGBTQ+ festivities across B.C.—an ideal place to promote greater inclusion. The reason for this omission is unknown and required further investigation and will be addressed later in this discussion. On another interesting note, the WCR appeared to be highly inclusive in terms of Indigenous content and ethnic diversity, which leads to the question—why is there so little LGBTQ+ representation, which is also part of being inclusive? While the representation is greater than that in standard ELT textbooks, for which the paper should be commended, five instances over four years is by no means extraordinary. If one third of the world's population (and thus by extension B.C.'s population) identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community in some way, perhaps one-third of all the newspaper's content should reflect this. It would certainly be a fairer representation. If so, then the representation in the papers would total around thirteen instances rather than five. However, the process of article selection—which draws from newspapers across B.C.—is unclear. Perhaps the representation in the various sources used is simply not there. Or the selection process does not take into account the need for diversity in gender and sexual identity to the same degree it does ethnicity and Indigenous representation.

In an effort to clarify how diversity is taken into account by the newspaper, the principal investigator reached out via email to the WCR for more information. The co-editor of the paper informed the principal investigator of the following. Firstly, the selection team consists of a journalist, teacher, and literacy practitioner who meet monthly to review possible stories for inclusion. Articles are chosen to reflect the diversity of the WCR readership, which include English language and literacy learners, elementary and secondary school students, new Canadians, multicultural senior groups, prison inmates, people with disabilities, and patients with stroke and brain injuries. In a recent survey of members, the WCR found that the majority of readers are especially interested in current B.C. Government news, the Canadian way of life, food, health, and nature. In an effort to show regional balance, the team draws from many different sources, including community newspapers from rural and remote areas of B.C. In response to the question regarding the missing Pride Parade event on the annual calendars in the WCR, the co-editor explained items on the calendar are statutory holidays, international days of observance, important dates in Canadian history, or seasonal occasions like Halloween. Local events specific to one location are not usually included, but the co-editor noted that the WCR would be happy to include Pride festivities. Perhaps this study will encourage the WCR to include greater LGBTQ+ representation in the future.

## Conclusion

This study's content analysis of thirty-nine issues of the WCR found five instances of LGBTQ+ representation—resulting in a resounding yes to the research question: Is there greater representation in localized ELT materials where LGBTQ+ communities are supported? While the number thirty-nine is relatively strong in terms of analysis, the newspaper is over forty years

old and has the potential for an analysis of hundreds of papers. A more comprehensive study could therefore be beneficial in the future. This future investigation could include a closer look at the distribution of LGBTQ+ representation over time and answer questions related to the first mentions of LGBTQ+ content and how the selection process and criteria have changed over time. This study's positive findings, as incremental as they may be, are important in terms of the literature. Few studies, if any, have found LGBTQ+ representation in ELT materials worldwide. It appears that Canada, in particular B.C., may be leading the way to greater inclusion in terms of localized materials for English language instruction, thereby being one of the first countries to answer UNESCO's call for greater inclusivity.

## References

- B.C. Government. (2022). *Gender equity and LGBTQ2S+ resources*.  
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/gender-equity/resources#lgbtq2s>
- Bollas, A. (2021). A critical discussion of inclusive approaches to sexualities in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 75(2), 133–141. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccaa075>
- Bowen, N., & Hopper, D. (2022). The representation of race in English language learning textbooks: Inclusivity and equality in images. *TESOL Quarterly*. Early view.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3169>
- De Vincenti, G., Giovanangeli, A., & Ward, R. (2007). The queer stopover: How queer travels in the language classroom. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 4(1), 58–72.  
<https://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/v4sp12007/ward.pdf>
- Evripidou, D. (2020). Effects of heteronormativity on Cypriot EFL classroom participation: Students' experiences. *Gender and Education*, 32(8), 1019–1033.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1533920>
- Freimuth, H. (2022). Opening the coursebook closet: LGBTQ+ representation in an ELT textbook. *Proceedings of 4th World Conference on Teaching and Education*. Oxford, UK. <https://www.dpublication.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/34-6109.pdf>
- Goldstein, B. (2015). LGBT invisibility in language learning materials. *Language Issues: The ESOL Journal*, 26(2), 35–40.
- Gray, J. (2013). LGBT invisibility and heteronormativity in ELT materials. In J. Gray (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on language teaching materials* (pp. 40–63). Palgrave MacMillan.  
[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137384263\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137384263_3)
- Hsieh, H., & Shannon, S. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Merse, T. (2015). Queer-informed approaches and sexual literacy in ELT: Theoretical foundations and teaching principles. *Language Issues: The ESOL Journal*, 26(1), 13–20.
- Moore, A. (2020). Understanding heteronormativity in ELT textbooks: A practical taxonomy. *ELT Journal*, 74(2), 116–125. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccz058>
- Nelson, C. (2009). *Sexual identities in English language education: Classroom conversations*. Routledge.
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. (2022). Diversity. In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/diversity>



- Paiz, J. (2015). Over the monochrome rainbow: heteronormativity in ESL reading texts and textbooks. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, 4(1), 77–101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.4.1.03pai>
- Paiz, J. (2019). Queering practice: LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion in English language teaching. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*. 18(4), 266–275.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1629933>
- Petriwskyj, A. (2010). Diversity and inclusion in the early years. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(2), 195–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802504515>
- Seburn, T. (2018). LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the language classroom: Attitudes and considerations. *TESOL Ontario Contact Magazine*, 18–23. <http://contact.teslontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Tyson-Seburn.pdf>
- Seburn, T. (2019, July 31). This post will make you gay (or your mats anyway). *4CINELT*.  
<https://fourc.ca/lgbtqia2-coursebook/>
- Seburn, T. (2021). *How to write inclusive materials*. ELT Teacher 2 Writer.
- Selvi, A., & Kocaman, C. (2020). Mis-/under- representations of gender and sexuality in locally produced ELT materials. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 20(2), 118–133.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1726757>
- Thornbury, S. (1999). Window-dressing vs cross-dressing in the EFL sub-culture. *Folio* 5(2), 15–17. <https://tinyurl.com/yc55ebnb>
- UNESCO. (2016). *Out in the open: Education sector responses to violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression*.  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244756>
- Westcoast Reader. (2022). *About the Westcoast Reader*. <https://thewestcoastreader.com/about/>
- Varrella, S. (2022, June 21). *LGBTQ+ worldwide – statistics and facts*.  
[https://www.statista.com/topics/8579/lgbtq-worldwide/#topicHeader\\_wrapper](https://www.statista.com/topics/8579/lgbtq-worldwide/#topicHeader_wrapper)



The *BC TEAL Journal* is licensed under a  
[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).  
Copyright rests with the author(s).