



Critical Visual Discourse Analysis of Moroccan EFL Textbooks: Uncovering Ideological Constructs in The Spotlight Series

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Abstract

There is no doubt that English language textbooks are not just pedagogical tools but powerful ideological artifacts that shape learners' perceptions and identities through carefully designed multimodal semiotics. In Morocco's multilingual educational landscape, the Spotlight textbook series (Volumes 1 and 2) occupies a critical space, negotiating local cultural values with global linguistic demands. This study employs Critical Visual Discourse Analysis (CVDA, henceforth), integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar with Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional CDA model, to investigate three core dimensions: (1) the representation of cultural identities, (2) the construction of gender roles, and (3) the framing of learner autonomy. Findings reveal systematic patterns of Western-centric cultural framing, where Moroccan elements are often exoticized, alongside gendered activity distribution that reinforces traditional roles. Additionally, autonomy is predominantly constructed through neoliberal self-governance paradigms, positioning learner agency as compliance rather than critical engagement. The study ultimately argues that these elements converge into a hidden curriculum that privileges certain worldviews while marginalizing local knowledge systems. By bridging visual semiotics and critical discourse analysis, this research contributes to critical applied linguistics and textbook studies, offering insights for culturally responsive and equitable material design in Moroccan EFL education and broader contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Representations are never innocent; they always stand in for particular perspectives and interests."(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

Nowadays, English language textbooks constitute powerful ideological artifacts that shape learners' worldviews through carefully designed multimodal semiotic resources(Alhamdan et al. ,2016). In Morocco's complex multilingual educational landscape, where language policy navigates between Arabization, Amazigh cultural affirmation, and global English acquisition, the new adopted *Spotlight* textbook series occupies a particularly significant position as a mediator between local cultural values and global linguistic competencies. With the adoption of these new textbooks, the present study aims to evidence in detail the various ways in which these textbooks construct meaning through their multimodal design, with particular focus

on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the representation of cultural identities, (2) the construction of gender roles, and (3) the framing of learner autonomy.

Relatedly, the significance of this research emerges from several critical considerations. First, as Morocco continues to position English as a key language for economic and educational development (Boutieri, 2016), understanding how cultural values are transmitted through EFL materials becomes increasingly important. Second, the visual turn in educational research (Jewitt, 2014) demands closer examination of how images and text work together to communicate ideological messages. Third, Morocco's ongoing educational reforms and gender equity initiatives make the study of textbook representations particularly timely and relevant.

This investigation is, indeed, theoretically grounded in an innovative synthesis of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar and Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional critical discourse analysis, mediated through Van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2001) Critical Visual Discourse Analysis framework. This integrated approach allows for systematic examination of both the surface-level features and deeper ideological implications of textbook design, addressing a significant gap in research on Moroccan EFL materials.

That said, the study examines the *Spotlight* textbook series through three central research questions: (1) investigating how visual-textual elements construct cultural hierarchies between Moroccan and Western identities, (2) examining gendered subject positions in illustrations and activities, and (3) decoding discursive framings of learner autonomy. This correlates with the corresponding objectives: a) to analyze patterns in cultural representation, b) systematically evaluate gender depictions and agency distribution, and c) critically assess autonomy conceptualizations. The hypotheses that this study put forward suggest that Moroccan cultural aspects are often portrayed as exotic compared to Western standards. At the same time, gender-related activities tend to reinforce traditional roles and unequal power; while autonomy is presented more as following rules than as thinking critically. In fact, the *Spotlight* series (Volumes 1 and 2) were selected for analysis due to their official status in Moroccan middle schools and their comprehensive coverage of the target themes. The research focuses on strategically chosen units that prominently feature cultural, gender, and autonomy content, ensuring both depth of analysis and curricular relevance.

In essence, this study makes several important contributions to the field of critical applied linguistics and educational research. First, it extends the methodological possibilities for textbook analysis by developing an integrated visual-textual analytical framework. Second, it provides much-needed empirical research on Moroccan EFL materials, addressing a significant gap in the literature. Third, its findings have practical implications for textbook design and classroom practice in Morocco and similar contexts.

The subsequent literature review section will elaborate the theoretical foundations of this study, examining key concepts in visual semiotics, critical discourse analysis, and their application to educational materials research. This will be followed by a detailed methodology section outlining the research design, data collection, and analytical procedures. The study's findings and discussion will then present and interpret the results of the textbook analysis, followed by conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that bridges visual semiotics and critical discourse analysis to examine the ideological dimensions of EFL textbooks. The analytical approach synthesizes two complementary but distinct theoretical traditions that together provide a robust foundation for investigating multimodal meaning-making in educational materials. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic theory of visual grammar provides the primary lens for analyzing textbook images. Drawing on Halliday's (1978)

systemic functional linguistics, they identify three meta-functions through which visual communication operates: the representational (depicting participants, processes, and circumstances), the interactive (establishing relationships between viewers and represented participants), and the compositional (organizing elements into coherent wholes). As Machin (2007) notes, this framework enables systematic analysis of how images construct particular versions of reality, making it particularly valuable for educational materials research.

The study complements this visual analysis with Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, which examines texts at multiple levels: as linguistic artifacts (text), as instances of production and interpretation (discursive practice), and as elements of broader sociocultural processes (social practice). This allows researchers to connect micro-level textual features to macro-level social structures and power relations (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In the context of Moroccan EFL textbooks, this proves especially useful for analyzing how educational materials mediate between global English language ideologies and local cultural and policy contexts (Boutieri, 2016; Ennaji, 2005).

Indeed, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2001) notion of CVDA serves as the conceptual bridge integrating these approaches. At stake here is thus a bottom-up approach to the study of contemporary communication, which increasingly relies on multimodal ensembles where visual and verbal elements work together to construct meaning. This framework, further developed by Ledin and Machin (2018), provides methodological tools for examining how such multimodal texts naturalize particular ideologies through their design choices.

On a related note, Djonov and Zhao's (2017) have called for context-sensitive multimodal analysis in postcolonial settings. Building on this established scholarship, the present study innovates by applying an integrated visual-textual framework specifically to the Moroccan middle school EFL context and by proposing a systematic model for combining multimodal analysis with ideological critique.

Additionally, several scholars have demonstrated the value of combining these approaches in educational and textbook research. Mills and Unworthy (2017) have shown how integrated multimodal analysis can reveal hidden curricula in school materials, while Gray (2010) and Apple (2004) have applied it to expose neoliberal ideologies in global EFL contexts. In their turn, El Hammouchi and Boutoutla (2025) and El Aissati et al (2011) have examined gendered visuals and autonomy discourses in Moroccan EFL textbooks, revealing patterns of imbalance and cultural marginalization. Indeed, it is upon these grounds the current study attempts to unpack how ELT textbooks negotiate the complex interplay between global discourses and local realities, particularly in relation to gender representation (Sadiqi, 2014; El Hammouchi & Boutoutla, 2025), cultural identity (Zouhir, 2013; Ennaji, 2005), and student agency and voice (Boutieri, 2016; El Aissati et al, 2011).

In sum, the present study contributes to the existing literature in two significant ways: first, by applying these theoretical lenses specifically to the Moroccan middle school EFL context; and second, by developing an integrated analytical framework that systematically connects visual and textual analysis to ideological critique within a culturally grounded and policy-aware perspective. To demonstrate the usefulness of the proposed concept in a concrete context, the next section turns to provide more insights into this direction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a rigorous qualitative methodology to examine the multimodal construction of ideology in Morocco's *Spotlight* EFL textbook series (Volumes 1 and 2). The research adopts an integrated analytical approach that combines systematic visual-textual analysis with critical discourse studies, focusing on strategically selected units that prominently engage with three core thematic areas: cultural representation, gender construction, and learner autonomy. These units were purposefully selected as they contain particularly dense concentrations of the phenomena under investigation while representing essential components of Morocco's national curriculum.

The study is guided by three central research questions: *RQ1*: How do visual and textual elements in the *Spotlight* textbooks construct cultural hierarchies between Moroccan and global/Western identities? *RQ2*: What gendered subject positions are represented and reinforced through illustrations and activities in the *Spotlight* series? *RQ3*: How is learner autonomy discursively framed through the multimodal integration of images, texts, and pedagogical tasks in the *Spotlight* textbooks? Guided by three objectives, the study aims: *RO1*: to identify and critically assess patterns of cultural representation in the *Spotlight* textbooks; *RO2*: to analyze how gender roles and identities are depicted and reproduced through textbook visuals and activities; and last but not least *RO3*: to examine how the concept of learner autonomy is framed through multimodal discourse in the textbooks. In order to answer the above questions, the study presupposes the following hypotheses:

- *RH1*: The *Spotlight* textbooks eroticize Moroccan culture in ways that privilege Western cultural norms and values;
- *RH2*: The textbooks predominantly reinforce traditional gender roles through their visual and textual content;
- *RH3*: Learner autonomy in the *Spotlight* series is framed more as compliance with structured tasks than as critical or independent engagement.

The analytical framework unfolds through three progressively deepening phases of investigation. The initial descriptive phase establishes an empirical foundation through meticulous documentation and coding of all visual elements and their accompanying textual components, with particular attention to compositional relationships and multimodal cohesion. This systematic cataloging creates a detailed inventory of representational patterns using a coding framework (see Table 1 below) that captures both manifest content and latent meanings.

Steps	Aim	Analysis
<i>Description</i>	Inspecting image/visual text structure	Representation } Interactive } Structure Composition }
<i>Interpretation</i>	Applying Fairclough's Three Dimensional Model: PDC	Production } Distribution } <i>Spotlight</i> Series Consumption } visual-textual patterns and activities
<i>Explanation</i>	Analyzing Impacts of the Visual Discourse on visual and textual elements, gendered subject positions and learner autonomy.	Linking the discursive visual power to acts of patterns of cultural representation, gender roles and identities and concept of learner autonomy framing dynamics.

Table 1. The Three-Step Application of the CVDA Method (Fairclough, 1992)

Based on this foundation, the subsequent multimodal analysis phase applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar to examine each image-text combination through three interlocking dimensions: representational meaning (distinguishing between narrative action sequences and conceptual classifications), interactive meaning (analyzing gaze vectors and social distance markers), and compositional meaning (assessing information value and visual salience hierarchies).

The final interpretive phase employs Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of discourse (as shown in Table 1 above) to connect the identified visual-textual patterns to broader

ideological constructs, situating the findings within Morocco's specific socio-historical and educational context. This critical synthesis reveals how textbook design choices reflect and reproduce larger structures of power and knowledge, particularly through the lenses of postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy. The tripartite methodology, which progresses from descriptive documentation through systematic multimodal analysis to critical discourse interpretation, ensures both empirical rigor and theoretical depth in examining how ideology operates through textbook design.

This methodological approach offers four significant analytical advantages. First, it maintains fidelity to the integrated nature of multimodal meaning-making while enabling systematic deconstruction of composite texts. Second, it effectively bridges micro-level visual-textual features with macro-level social and educational discourses. Third, it provides replicable analytical procedures while remaining sensitive to contextual particularities of the Moroccan educational system. Finally, it achieves an optimal balance between structural analysis of semiotic resources and critical interpretation of their ideological effects. By focusing on strategically selected textbook units that represent core components of the mandated curriculum, the study ensures its findings maintain both scholarly significance and practical relevance for English language education in Morocco.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Cultural Hierarchies

The textbooks' construction of cultural meaning reveals a systematic privileging of Western modernity over (the Eastern) Moroccan traditions through carefully coordinated visual-textual strategies. Actually, the adopted multimodal analysis of the current paper demonstrates how these hierarchical representations operate across three distinct but interrelated dimensions, building upon and extending contemporary scholarship in critical pedagogy and postcolonial studies. Indeed, the representational dichotomy emerges most visibly in the contrasting treatment of cultural practices. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, Reda's account of his vacation in Switzerland highlights picturesque mountains, leisure activities like hiking and fishing, and last but not least the indulgence in chocolate and cheese. This constructs Switzerland as an idealized site of natural beauty, cultural sophistication, and personal fulfillment.

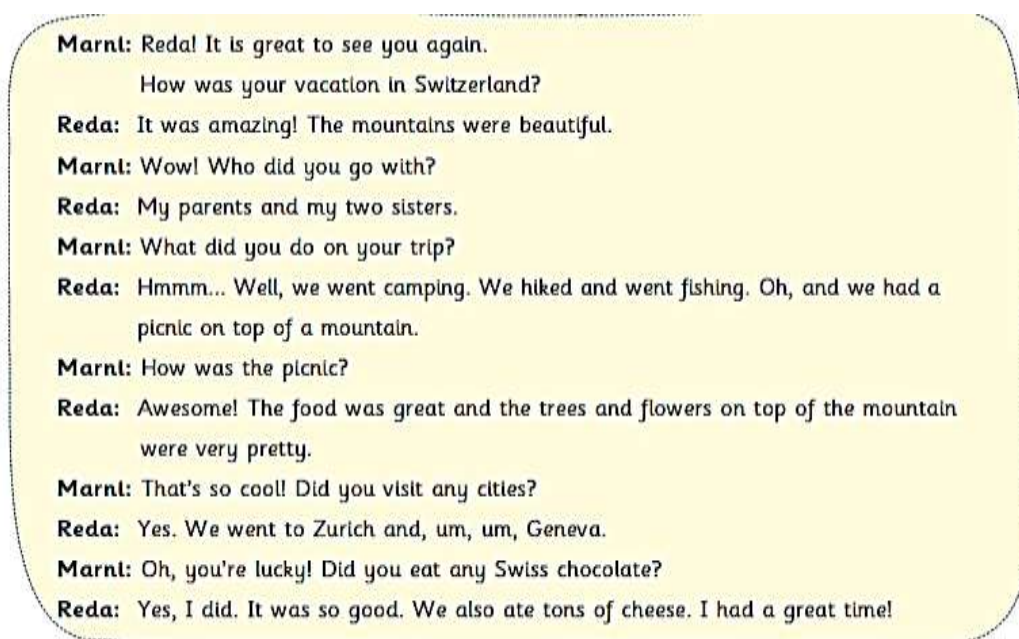


Figure 1. Screening Cultural Hierarchies Through Listening Activity

Source: Spotlight 1, p.57

Within this line of argumentation, Western Europe is framed as a space of privilege and refinement, reinforcing a subtle yet pervasive cultural hierarchy. In fact, such images and narratives construct a selective representation of social reality. This representation, which highlights how visual and linguistic choices systematically encode ideological values, operates not only at the *textual level* (discourse) but also *socially*. The point here is to normalize Western travel and consumption as aspirational, in contrast to Moroccan landscapes and cultural experiences which feature as marginalized or erased (despite their richness).

Viewed through this perspective, the discursive discrepancies/inequalities between the "global North/West" and "global South/East" are enacted through the privileging of Western cultural commodities (such as Swiss chocolate) and cities (Zurich, Geneva). In so doing, these discursive dynamics contributes to the reproduction of symbolic power structures that position the "global North" as culturally superior. Thus, the textbook not only conveys linguistic content but also naturalizes global inequalities through seemingly benign educational narratives that has been critically examined in recent studies on global ELT materials (see for instance Gray, 2010; Sadeghi& Sepahi,2018).

C. Speak
Tell your partner five activities you did last week.

What did you do last week?

Cool!

On Thursday, I went camping. Then on Friday I went surfing. On Saturday, I went skateboarding in the park with my friends.

How about you? What did you do last week?

D. Write
Imagine you had an AWESOME weekend and you want to tell your global friends about it!

Writing Strategy
Good writers plan what to say before they write!

1. Before you write, plan what you want to say. Fill in the chart with key words.

Day of the weekend	Part/time of the day	Where I went	What I did	How it was/ How I felt
Saturday	morning			

2. Now write about your weekend. Remember to use past tense verbs. Then draw a picture about the weekend.

Figure 2. Screening Cultural Hierarchies Through Speaking & Writing Activity

Source: Spotlight 1, p.57

With all this in mind, it becomes evident that Reda's story is not merely personal but discursively loaded, embedding Western dominance in the learner's imagination of value, place, and possibility.

Moving on, the visual-textual layout of Figure 2 above, in which students are encouraged to describe an "AWESOME weekend" for their "global friends," serves as more than a simple language exercise. Indeed, the visual dynamics here functions as a discursive space where cultural meanings are constructed, reproduced, and ideologically mediated. Accordingly, the featured speech bubbles and sample responses (camping, surfing, skateboarding) act as semiotic resources that construct a particular vision of social reality. Interestingly, this correlates with what Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) calls the "ideational metafunction". Indeed, these leisure activities, commonly associated with Euro-American middle-class experiences, index an aspirational lifestyle aligned with Western norms of recreation and freedom.

A more concrete way of highlighting this point is to investigate this task (Figure2), following Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, and see how it operates simultaneously on three levels: (1) textual, through the linguistic encouragement of personal narratives; (2) discursive practice, by enacting patterns of interaction that normalize Western lifestyles as desirable; and (3) social practice, by embedding dominant ideologies (Apple, 1990) of global modernity into everyday educational materials. In this respect, the phrase "global friends" ostensibly invites intercultural communication, but

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it implicitly invokes a Western or global-North audience as an imagined community that students must cater for through narratives that reflect “global” (i.e., Westernized) ideals. More to the point, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt’s (2001) CVDA gives us insights into how visual layout, representational choices, and task framing encode ideological values. This activity reflects the issue of the lack of Moroccan-specific cultural references: family gathering such as j’maa (communal gathering), Ifijta (festive meal/family feast), or market visits like souk/bazaar (traditional marketplace), moussem (seasonal fair), or local landscapes la3robiya (seasonal fair) or douar (small village settlement) as it suggests a systematic silencing of local identities (East) in favor of globally dominant (Western) scripts. This semiotic absence reinforces a cultural hierarchy, wherein Moroccan traditions are rendered invisible (margin) and irrelevant in the aspirational language-learning process. Therefore, what appears as a neutral pedagogical prompt is, in fact, ideologically loaded, i.e. promoting linguistic competence through the lens of cultural conformity to Western norms (center).

By the same token, Figure 3 below illustrates more these ideological constructs on multiple levels: first, textually, by framing careers in ways that privilege Western roles (e.g., flight attendant) as universal, while Moroccan roles (e.g., tour guide) are exoticized; second, discursively, by normalizing Western lifestyles as desirable (e.g., "visiting new places" as leisure vs. the tour guide’s labor); and third socially, by embedding ideologies of global modernity that position Moroccan culture as secondary. On the surface, the task promotes intercultural exchange but implicitly centers a Western audience, reinforcing Anderson’s (1983) idea of "imagined community" that students must cling to. In their turn, Van Leeuwen & Jewitt’s (2001) CVDA further reveals how visual and textual omissions, namely the absence of Moroccan daily life (e.g., family gatherings, local markets), muzzle local identities in favor of Western-dominated scripts. Furthermore, the flight attendant’s neutral, professional depiction contrasts with the tour guide’s exoticized duties (e.g., "explaining history"), reinforcing a hierarchy where Western norms represent modernity, while Moroccan roles remain tied to tradition. This occurrence seems to support Said’s (1978) Orientalism thesis, where non-Western cultures are rendered as "other" and service-oriented.

Lesson 4 *Are you good at working with people?*

In this lesson, I will:
 - Listen for details and take notes about different jobs.
 - Talk and write about skills I'm good at/not good at yet.

A. Listen: Career Fair
 Students are at a career fair. They are asking people about their jobs.
 1. Listen to the conversations and complete the student's notes.

1 **Job:** Flight Attendant
Where they work: At the airport and on an (a) _____
What they do:
 Help the (b) _____
 Keep people (c) _____
 Help with bags and serve (d) _____ and drinks
Skills:
 Good at (e) _____ to people
 Good at staying calm in emergencies
Enjoys:
 (f) _____ and visiting new places
Doesn't like:
 (g) _____ for a long time

2 **Job:** (a) _____ in Morocco
Where they work: An office in (b) _____
What they do:
 Take people on (c) _____
 Show famous places and explain the (d) _____
Skills:
 Good at (e) _____ to people
 Good at (f) _____ the history of the places
Likes:
 (g) _____ people from around the world
 (h) _____ people her favorite places
Doesn't like:
 Working on the (i) _____

Figure 3. Ideological Constructs in Listening & Speaking Activity

Source: Spotlight 2, p.25

Thus, the lesson’s seemingly neutral language tasks are ideologically loaded, promoting linguistic competence through cultural conformity to Western norms (Kubota, 2004;

Pennycook, 1998). The lack of balanced representation perpetuates a colonialist dynamic, where Moroccan identity is either exoticized or erased in favor of global (Western) aspirational narratives. This observation directly supports the first research hypothesis (RH1): *The Spotlight textbooks exoticize Moroccan culture in ways that privilege Western cultural norms and values.*

The next round of discussion will shift focus on how various gendered subject positions are constructed and reinforced through textual and visual content, with particular attention to what may be termed gendered activity regimes.

4.2. Gendered Activity Regimes

Most scholars argue that EFL materials often naturalize the gendered division of labor by visually scripting women into service-oriented positions, such as cooking or cleaning, depicted in intimate, indoor domestic spaces (Amare & Manning, 2007; Sunderland, 2000). Arguably, women appear in over 90% of textbook illustrations involving dishwashing, whereas men are typically assigned performative or outdoor tasks like taking out the trash, shown upright, active, and spatially distanced from the domestic core (Lee, 2014).

Departing from this basic assumption, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) assert that composition, angle, and proximity are not neutral choices; rather, they encode power and ideology. Traditionally, women are depicted in close-ups performing detailed, repetitive chores in spatially confined zones (e.g., kitchens, bedrooms), while men are distanced from the viewer and placed near thresholds or outdoor environments, symbolically suggesting agency and autonomy.

However, Figure 4 below introduces a notable subversion of these entrenched patterns whereby male figures are consistently shown engaging in tasks traditionally coded as feminine (for instance washing dishes, setting the table, sweeping, and even arranging utensils in the kitchen). Specifically, these visuals depict the boys performing these chores with focused, non-reluctant expressions and central positioning in domestic spaces, which therefore subtly challenges the gendered subject positions that this study initially hypothesizes. This contradicts the proposition that the *Spotlight* textbooks predominantly reinforce traditional gender roles; rather, this lesson offers a rare egalitarian moment where domestic responsibility is not feminized but distributed across gender lines.

Of relevance here is a more clearly articulated acknowledgment that this reversal supports the idea there are many EFL materials (the case of *Spotlight 2*) which reflect contemporary shifts in social roles, suggesting how visual-textual materials can serve as vehicles of progressive, gender-inclusive pedagogy (Robiyansah, et al., 2020).

Lesson 6 I'm cleaning my room.

A. Look, Read, and Match
 Read the texts. Draw a line to match the texts to the pictures.

Do you want to hang me? Sorry, I can't.
 What are you doing? I'm cleaning my room.

B. Listens Chores
 1. Listen. Then listen and repeat.

1 wash the dishes
 2 put away the dishes
 3 set the table
 4 clear the table
 5 take out the trash
 6 cook dinner

C. Listen
 Listen to the conversations. Choose the best picture.

2. Tick (✓) the chores you do at home. Then ask your partner.

Do you do the dishes? Me too. Yes, I do.
 Useful Language: I do the dishes. Same. Different. Me too. Not me. I do too. I don't.

The worksheet includes illustrations of a boy dusting (7), a boy making a bed (8), a boy cleaning a room (9), a boy doing laundry (10), a boy walking a dog (11), a boy sweeping the floor (12), and a boy washing dishes (13).

Figure 4. From Normative to Subversive Gender Roles

Source: Spotlight 1, p.107

Thus, instead of replicating the gendered notion that domestic labor is inherently feminine, this visual narrative **normalizes male participation** in household labor, presenting a more equitable portrayal of shared responsibility. In so doing, *Spotlight 2* not only destabilizes normative gender binaries but also encourages learners to imagine gender as a fluid set of possibilities, not a static set of prescriptions. This disconfirms *RH2* which stipulates that the textbooks predominantly reinforce traditional gender roles through their visual and textual content.

Closely tied to the ongoing debates on how gender roles and identities are depicted and reproduced through activities, is Figure 5 below which showcases how both male and female children are engaging in identical musical activities such as playing guitar or keyboard. The parity in roles and instruments does not follow the typical gender bifurcation where boys are shown as dominant performers and girls as passive listeners or dancers. Instead, each child appears equally engaged, suggesting a move toward gender-neutral representations in both arts and sports activities, without clearly gendering the performers. Although some activities appear to feature boys (e.g., soccer, basketball), there are no explicit visual cues suggesting that these sports are exclusive to male characters. Note additionally that these illustrations avoid overly masculine posturing along several lines: (1) they do not depict girls in subordinate or stereotypically feminine positions such as cheerleaders or bystanders as commonly found in gender-biased EFL materials (Lee, 2014; Sunderland, 2000); (2) they do not reinforce femininity as there is no spatial hierarchy, no exaggerated angles that elevate one gender over another, and no symbolic props (e.g., aprons, dolls, or power tools) that cue traditional roles. Another link which is important to make here, and which slips again under Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001 radar, is that the composition and framing of this lesson reveal a subtle shift toward inclusivity. This is largely seen in emerging approaches in EFL textbook design that advocate for non-normative gender roles and gender-equitable classroom representation.



Figure 5. Deconstructing Traditional Gender Roles

Source: Spotlight 1, p.27

In sum, this visual disconfirms the hypothesis that Spotlight textbooks predominantly reinforce traditional gender roles. Instead, it suggests that at least in some units, the material adopts a more balanced and inclusive approach to representing gendered activity regimes, thereby offering learners a broader, less stereotyped vision of social roles. The last section tries to examine how learner autonomy is discursively framed through the multimodal integration of images, texts, and pedagogical tasks in the *Spotlight* textbooks.

4.3. Neoliberal Autonomy Constructs

This section examines how learner autonomy is discursively constructed through the interplay of images, text, and pedagogical tasks in the *Spotlight* series. The lesson under review, which introduces vocabulary for different professions, offers a good example of how arguably autonomy is shaped and constrained by multimodal design choices (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). As it can be noticed from Figure 6 below, the textual instructions: “Listen and point to the jobs. Then listen again and repeat”, followed by “Which jobs would you like to have? Use jobs from the Spotlight Activity and Exercise A” (Spotlight 2, p.15) impose a clear, linear structure that dictates the learner’s engagement. At first glance, these prompts may appear to offer learners opportunities for choice and self-expression. However, as Benson (2011) argues, such choice is often a form of *restricted autonomy*, where options are available only within boundaries pre-set by the teacher or the textbook. Here, learners are encouraged to imagine careers beyond those depicted, nor to critically assess the relevance or not cultural resonance of the options presented.



Figure 6. Framing Learner Autonomy
Source: Spotlight 2, p.15

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In particular, the images of professions are neatly boxed, equal in size, and uniformly labeled. According to Van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2001) compositional analysis, this visual framing positions the learner as a passive recognizer rather than an active interrogator of meaning. The neat symmetry and standardization imply that the learner's role is to absorb and replicate information rather than to challenge or personalize it. In this respect, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note that such image text relations tend to produce "viewers" rather than "designers" of meaning, which therefore further entrenches a consumer model of learning.

Admittedly, even where the activity invites personal reflection, for instance "Which jobs would you like to have?" The scope here remains narrowly confined to the predetermined list of professions in the textbook. This reflects what Little (1991) terms as *pseudo-choice*, where the illusion of freedom is maintained but the boundaries are rigidly controlled. The absence of tasks that demand independent research, creative production, or critical debate reinforces Van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of *prescriptive discourse*, in which multimodal elements converge to guide learners along a fixed cognitive pathway.

Ultimately, the lesson exemplifies the study's third research hypothesis: that learner autonomy in the *Spotlight* series is framed more as compliance with structured tasks than as genuine independent engagement. The multimodal orchestration of visuals, directives, and activity design prioritizes recognition over inquiry, and selection over creation. While students may appear to be exercising choice, the design ensures that such choice is always contained within the safe, predictable confines of the textbook's own cultural and pedagogical parameters.

Another instance of the dynamics of framing learner autonomy can be detected in Figure 7 below. In "Unit 1 Task – Choose One!" task that presents itself as a learner-centered activity, students are being offered three distinct project-based options: creating a job profile, interviewing someone about their job, or designing their own company. At first glance, this multiplicity of tasks seems to promote autonomy by allowing learners to select a project aligned with their interests. However, when examined through the lens of Van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2001) CVDA, it becomes evident that the autonomy provided here is tightly bounded within the constraints of prescriptive task design.

Hence, it can be asserted that the procedural instructions accompanying each task are highly detailed, specifying exactly what information to include and how to structure the output. For instance, the first option, "Create a Job Profile," requires students to provide details about the person's name, future job, skills, and personality traits. This reflects what (Lamb et al., 2017) term as *scaffolded autonomy*; a pedagogical approach where decision-making is supported but confined, ensuring alignment with predetermined curricular goals. While such scaffolding can support learners, it simultaneously limits the scope for divergent thinking or unconventional career narratives.

Unit 1 Task - Choose One!

Option 1: Create a Job Profile

Follow these steps:

- Include your name, photo or drawing of yourself, and contact information.
- Make a list of jobs you want in the future.
- List:
 - Your personality traits
 - Activities you enjoy
 - Skills you are good at
 - Skills you want to learn to get the job you want in the future
- Share your Job Profile with your classmates.



Job Profile
Imane El Baz

Career goals: computer programmer, video game designer
Personality: creative, outgoing, responsible
Activities: I enjoy playing video games and drawing.
Skills: I am good at using computers and working with people.

Option 2: Interview Someone about their Job

Follow these steps:

- Think of a friend or family member who has an interesting job.
- Write questions to learn about what they do. For example:
 - What do you do?
 - What do you enjoy about your job? What don't you like about it?
- What personality traits do you need for your job? (Do you need to be friendly, creative, hardworking?)
- What do you have to do in your job? Do you have to work outdoors / use a computer / get up early / work with people..?
- Make a poster, an audio recording, or a video about the job and present it to your classmates.

Firefighter



Firefighters go to homes or buildings when there is a fire. They put out fires and save peoples' lives.

Firefighters need to be brave, calm, and strong.



Option 3: Create Your Own Company

Follow these steps:

- Think of an idea for a company.
- What does your company do or sell?
- Think of a company name and logo.
- Make a list of what makes your company or product good.
- Create an advertisement for your company. It can be a flyer (a poster), a radio announcement, or a TV commercial (a video).
- Present your advertisement to your classmates.

Power Bottles & Brain Soda



Drink Brain Power! Easy re-fills!

We make re-useable bottles and fill them with Brain Power Soda.



Never worry about bad plastic bottles.

Fill your bottle with Brain Soda all over town!

Protect the environment!

Be the best student in the class!

Unit 1

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Figure 7. Learner Autonomy Shifting Dynamics

Source : Spotlight 2, p.39

Within this line of argumentation, the visual presentation reinforces these constraints. The inclusion of aspirational role models, such as a computer programmer/video game designer and a firefighter, functions as a symbolic framing of desirable careers. In line with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) notion of the "ideal-real" structure, these role models are visually elevated as exemplary figures, while learners are implicitly positioned to emulate them. This is not without its implications as such role model representation in educational materials often promotes *normative career narratives*, marginalizing professions, life paths (and communities) that fall outside the locally, socially valorized norms (Briddick & Briddick, 2022).

Furthermore, the tasks require outputs in specific communicative genres, mainly posters, recordings, or advertisements that have been predefined by the textbook. Van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of *genre control* is evident here since creativity is permitted only within the structural boundaries established by the instructional design. There is no space for learners to negotiate the genre itself or question the suitability of the communicative format for their chosen content.

Viewed through this perspective, the activity does not invite learners to examine why certain careers are desirable, or to interrogate the social, cultural, and economic factors shaping career opportunities. As Benson and Huang (2013) note, genuine learner autonomy emerges when students engage with content in ways that connect to their own lived realities and critical perspectives. In the absence of such opportunities, autonomy becomes performative; a matter of following instructions under the guise of self-direction.

In this light, the “Unit 1 Task – Choose One!” activity confirms the third research hypothesis: that learner autonomy in the *Spotlight* series is framed less as independent or critical engagement, and more as compliance with structured, teacher-defined tasks. The multimodal orchestration of prescriptive textual guidance, idealized visual models, and tightly bounded genre requirements channels learner action toward safe, predictable, and institutionally sanctioned outcomes, ultimately limiting the scope of genuine autonomy.

The evidence presented in this section suggests that the contradictory gender findings in this study highlight a significant methodological strength, revealing the complex and non-monolithic nature of ideological reproduction in educational materials. These findings challenge theoretical determinism, demonstrating that textbooks are sites of ideological contestation rather than seamless tools of domination. Significantly, these educational materials contain both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements reflecting a diversity of pedagogical philosophies among authors and publishers responding to market pressures and social movements. Moreover, these contradictions enhance methodological validity by showing that the analysis is indeed responsive to evidence rather than merely confirming predetermined hypotheses. Hence, in order to capture the full complexity of such ideological representations, a multi-unit analysis across textbook series is critically needed. This raises new research questions about the uneven distribution of progressive representations and how teachers and students interpret competing ideological messages in classroom practices. The contrast between consistent findings on cultural hierarchies and inconsistent gender representations suggests varying degrees of hegemonic stability across ideological domains. Accordingly, the analysis shows that global North-South hierarchies may be more naturalized in ELT publishing due to alignment with market demands, while gender representations have evolved under sustained critique. In fact, several factors explain these findings. First, publishers’ responses to market pressures may shape content decisions in ways that prioritize commercial viability over critical representation. Second, the collaborative nature of the production process can generate inconsistencies in representation across texts and visual materials. Third, certain topics remain particularly vulnerable to gender stereotyping due to entrenched cultural and pedagogical assumptions. Fourth, the “window dressing” hypothesis suggests that progressive representations may function primarily as symbolic inclusion, while deeper structural inequalities continue to persist. Additionally, shifts in communicative language teaching may encourage gender-equitable representations as they reflect contemporary social realities. Ultimately, these contradictory findings enrich the theoretical framework by illustrating textbooks as complex ideological assemblages that open the door for critical pedagogy, allowing teachers and students to analyze both progress and ongoing inequalities rather than assuming deterministic effects from educational materials.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the *Spotlight* textbook series, while officially endorsed for use in Moroccan middle schools, they actually operates as more than a mere pedagogical tool. The analyzed textbooks indicate how they reflect a site where cultural values, gender norms, and learner identities are actively constructed and negotiated through multimodal discourse. By applying an integrated CVDA framework, combining Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual

grammar with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA, the research has illuminated the ways in which visual and textual elements intersect to communicate layered ideological messages. The analysis confirms that Moroccan cultural elements are frequently positioned in ways that reflect asymmetrical cultural hierarchies, often privileging Western norms and aesthetics. Similarly, many activities and visual depictions tend to reinforce traditional gender roles, with limited evidence of equitable representation in agency and task distribution. Furthermore, while learner autonomy is nominally promoted, it is often framed within structured, teacher-directed activities that emphasize compliance over critical, independent engagement.

These findings underscore the ideological power embedded in EFL textbooks and highlight the importance of critically evaluating curricular materials, especially in multilingual and culturally complex contexts such as Morocco. The study contributes both methodologically and empirically to the growing body of work on textbook analysis, offering a replicable analytical framework and providing insights that are directly relevant to curriculum developers, policymakers, and educators. Moving forward, these findings carry significant implications for various stakeholders in Moroccan education. For *textbook authors and publishers*, the study underscores the necessity for systematic equity audits during material development. Such audits should include strict guidelines promoting balanced cultural representation (like pairing Swiss imagery with iconic Moroccan landscapes such as the High Atlas or Chefchaouen) and ensuring equitable gender representation in activities and tasks that foster genuine critical engagement. Developing diverse review panels comprising educators, cultural experts, and gender specialists could effectively identify problematic representations before publication. For *curriculum developers and policymakers*, the research supports a revision of textbook approval criteria to address ideological representation, ensuring that materials promote gender equity and avoid cultural hierarchies. This approach should align with culturally sustaining pedagogy that centers Moroccan experiences within the framework of global citizenship. In their turn, *teacher trainers and educators* are encouraged to focus on professional development in critical visual literacy, allowing teachers to capitalize on inconsistencies (particularly in gender representation) as opportunities for meaningful classroom discussions. Finally, for *researchers*, the study highlights the value of multimodal critical discourse analysis as an essential tool for ongoing textbook evaluation that aligns with national reform priorities and global equity commitments. This comprehensive approach not only enhances the educational materials but also contributes to a more equitable and socially conscious the Moroccan educational landscape.

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