



# Who can break the stereotype wall?

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look at building awareness in the classroom.

A father is driving his son to a job interview at a large trading company in the city. Just as they arrive at the company's parking lot, the son's phone rings. He looks at his father who says, 'go ahead, answer it!'. The caller is the trading company's CEO who says, 'Good luck son, you've got this'. The son ends the call and once again looks at his father, who is still next to him in their car. How is this possible?

This riddle, which may seem simple, reveals a deeply ingrained social belief. When it was first used as an experiment, none of the 20 respondents, all professionals in their fields, were able to deduce the solution. The fact that the CEO is actually the boy's mother challenges a common gender stereotype that top leadership positions are usually associated with men. A stereotype is an idea that is quickly formed about a person or a group of individuals without any effort to learn

more about them. It is an oversimplified generalisation that is frequently based on a 'hunch' rather than actual knowledge or experience. Although it is natural for the human mind to make connections between existing thoughts and new experiences, stereotypes can be harmful because they may hinder people from developing interpersonal relationships with others whom they perceive as different. According to Zhang *et al.* (2023:1) stereotypes 'stem from a basic cognitive need to simplify and process the complex world', however they can be 'pervasive' and 'persistent'.

Gender stereotyping is only one type of implicit bias. An implicit bias is an unconscious tendency to choose one gender, race or another group over another (Savranski, 2022). This illustrates what Banaji and Greenwald (2013) define as a brain 'blind spot' and can result in discrimination and erroneous assumptions. In the classroom, teachers are frequently given curricula that may unintentionally perpetuate certain

stereotypes and are rarely given the support they need to challenge traditional depictions of gender, race, class and so on. Yet, it is important to provide learners with sufficient opportunities to explore and understand the nature of stereotypes which are well rooted in learners' belief systems (Whitford, 2024).

In our chapter for the edited book *Sustainability in English Language Teaching* (Block & Stroia, date forthcoming) we proposed a three-stage approach to help teachers integrate stereotype awareness into their teaching practices through activities that promote the understanding of stereotypes, their deconstruction and the creation of alternative scenarios (Block & Stroia, forthcoming). In this article, we aim to explore three other creative activities that teachers can use with learners of different ages, levels and cultures, to raise their awareness of existing stereotypes and help them develop the necessary skills to challenge these.

## Revealing the ‘blind spot’ through riddles

Riddles serve as a great activity for teachers who want to go beyond a superficial examination of stereotypes. There are a number of tested classical riddles that present a scenario in a confusing, thought-provoking way to uncover learners’ biases and assumptions. For younger learners, teachers might want to adapt these riddles to make them more engaging, for instance by using the role of a surgeon or a detective instead.

A father and his son were out for a walk when they were attacked by a mugger. The father was severely injured while the son, hurt but alive, was taken to the police station. The detective walked in, took one look at the boy, gasped and said, ‘That’s my son!’. How can this be possible?

After teachers show this riddle to students, they allocate some individual thinking time and then encourage learners to share their reasoning in small groups or pairs. Later, when all the possible answers are discussed as a whole class, teachers encourage learners to reflect on why the riddle is tricky, why people may make assumptions and what the implications of such stereotypes might be. While engaging with these riddles, learners also practise English comprehension, vocabulary and discussion skills.

The authors of this article explored the use of riddles in a joint project that they conducted with their multinational learners. An interesting finding was that Young Learners reported a wide range of solutions, from more sensible ones (e.g. the detective is not the biological father but the stepfather) to surprisingly more inventive answers (e.g. the detective was a clone, or the future version of the boy travelling back in time to investigate his past). Learners were taken by the flow of their creativity which seemed to have deviated them from the deceptively simple answer: the detective was the son’s mother. This led to a rich discussion on unconscious biased thinking, which was the main reason why they could not see the obvious solution. When one of the authors (Armanda) explored the same riddle with adult learners and educators, the findings were similar... not even adults were able

Stereotype category	Prominent figure	How the stereotype was challenged
Gender	Serena Williams	dominated tennis while fighting stereotypes about women in sports
Race	Barack Obama	first African American president of the US
Class	J.K. Rowling	from living on welfare as a single mother to becoming one of the best-selling authors
Disability	Stephen Hawking	world-famous physicist who challenged the belief that disability limits intellectual contribution
Culture	Malala Yousafzai	a Pakistani activist that advocated for equal education to both men and women

Figure 1: Exploring social concepts

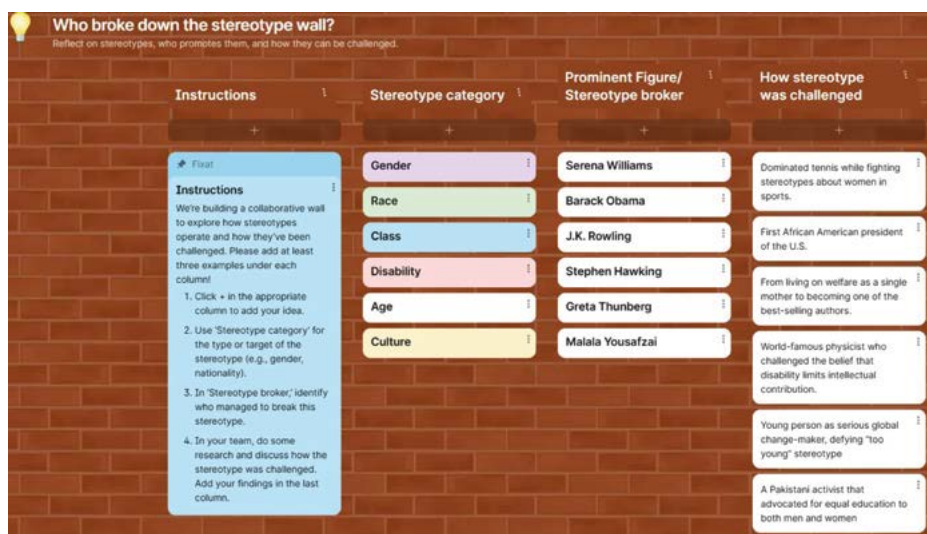


Figure 2: An Example of a digital game: who broke down the stereotype wall?

They also give learners the tools to recognise unconscious bias, question preconceived ideas and practise fairness in their everyday interactions.

to detach themselves from the ties of unconscious assumptions about gender roles, similar to the experiment conducted by Savranski and his team (2022).

### Breaking the stereotype wall through collaborative activities

Other types of activities can foster critical thinking among learners. A task which they may find highly appealing is identifying different stereotypes and then matching famous people with social assumptions or beliefs they have challenged. First, students

use colour-coded sticky notes to create a wall of stereotypes grouped according to gender, class, culture and other categories. This is followed by matching real-life examples of people who broke this wall of stereotypes. Teachers can provide a list of social media prominent figures, historical figures, actors, authors and even fictional characters from books and films (Figure 1). Older or more advanced learners, instead of being given a predetermined list, can be challenged to conduct prior research or brainstorm people from their local community. To complete this task, learners are using



English to read and present information, strengthening language skills while exploring social concepts.

## Aboard the ‘Stereotype express’

Decision-making tasks can also increase students’ awareness of stereotypes. Teachers can invite learners to imagine they are preparing for a special train journey, the Stereotype express, where they can choose their travel companions. Students are given a list of different people, such as a homeless person, a young monolingual lady, a gypsy woman, a rock singer, a young mother with a baby and a dark-skinned man. Working first individually and then in small groups, learners need to decide on their three train companions and provide a valid reason. During the task, however, teachers need to keep in mind that apart from neurocognitive mechanisms that determine stereotypes, culture and informal and formal learning contexts also play an important part in stereotype formation (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, the activity should be supported with a carefully designed set of questions that encourage students to critically think about their context and experiences.

- What image came to mind when you first thought about these passengers?
- Where does this image come from? Media? Culture? Personal experience?
- How would you feel if no one wanted to share the train compartment with you?
- What are the consequences of judging someone based on first assumptions?
- How do judgements impact on our relationships with others?

Using such reflective questions, learners can go on an exploratory journey that delves into deeper understandings of the people around them, thinking in justice-focused ways (Whitford, 2024). Moreover, in articulating their choices and reasoning in English, they are also practising speaking and constructing coherent arguments in the target language, using modals of deduction (*must be; could be*) and cohesive devices (*firstly; therefore*).

## Conclusion

Encouraging stereotype awareness is both an educational responsibility and a societal duty, essential for reducing inequality and promoting inclusive societies (Block & Stroia, forthcoming). The three activities explored in this article are easily adaptable to different classroom contexts, are not time-consuming to design, and combine English language learning with pressing social issues. They also give learners the tools to recognise unconscious bias, question preconceived ideas and practise fairness in their everyday interactions. Ultimately, teachers have the responsibility to nurture learners’ capacity to move beyond ingrained biases and cultivate fairer behaviours, helping them ‘outsmart the machine’ in their heads (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Through these small but meaningful steps, classrooms can become spaces where social change begins.

## References

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