

Representation of Culture in EFL Textbooks and Learners' Preference

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Abstract: This research represents the importance of culture in English as Foreign Language (EFL) Textbooks and learners' preference in the English classrooms. The study analyzes the cultural representation in three types of culture: source, target, and international of English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks used in English classrooms at public universities in Saudi Arabia. Through the method of content analysis, it was discovered that a cultural representation balance was not maintained, indeed, as the contents were skewed toward target culture representation. Analyses of the study data, including a survey taken by EFL learners (N= 120), showed that source culture was the least interesting for these participants. The analyses also showed that skill development and target and international cultural training were prioritized by the study subjects. The findings of the current study suggest the need for thoroughness in developing rigorous frameworks for EFL textbooks' cultural integration, and for future experimental trials focusing on culture and foreign language research.

Keywords: *Culture, EFL, Intercultural competence, Source culture, Total English.*

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely recognised that language and culture are interrelated, intertwined and interdependent aspects of social life. Languages provide some of the most precise and comprehensive reflections of the complexity that is every world's culture. In a way, languages bear a cultural code seamlessly embedded in them, which adds an extra layer of difficulty in

mastering them. Current research shows that the connection and relationship between language, culture and thought are more profound than one may expect. For instance, Imai, Kanero and Masuda (2016) summarise recent evidence in regard to cultural psychology and cognitive linguistics. The researchers show that the language that a person speaks influences the following mental faculties: (1) knowledge representation; (2) memorisation; (3) ecological

reasoning; and (4) higher order semantic processing (Imai, Kanero & Masuda, *ibid*: 71).

The impact of culture on individuals' linguistic and other mental faculties does not end there. Imai, Kanero and Masuda (*ibid*) provide further evidence to make the case for a strong connection between language and culture. In particular, a person's cultural background and upbringing determine such aspects as attention, categorisation, causal attribution and inferences of other individuals' attitude (Imai, Kanero & Masuda, 2016). From the researchers' insights into the nature of language and culture, it becomes clear that learning a second/foreign language is impossible without coming into close contact with its cultural aspects. Another possible conclusion from the evidence presented is that English as a foreign language (EFL henceforth) learners may experience interference with their own cultural background when learning about foreign cultures.

With the rise of globalisation and cultural interconnectedness, it has become inevitable to heed the cultural aspect and emphasise the intercultural competencies (ICCs hereafter) in the EFL classroom. As Mahmood, Asghar and Hussain (2012) predict, developing ICCs as one of the language learning goals will become even more prominent in the future due to the current globalisation trends that are unlikely to dampen any time soon. Further, Mahmood, Asghar and Hussain (2012), amongst other researchers, argue that culture provides grounds for meaningful content, learning materials and class-discussion. Introducing cultural elements in the EFL classrooms may help teachers recreate practical situations, partaking in which could enable learners to become better intercultural communicators.

The importance of cultural knowledge is now officially recognised by some of the most influential institutions. One of them is the Council of Europe which has included ICCs to be part of its Common European Framework of

Reference for Languages (CEFR). In alignment with the most prominent language institutions, education policy-makers and practitioners are now overwhelmingly adapting their materials to include more information about culture (Mahmood, Asghar & Hussain, 2012). While this new trend might seem to be progressive, there is still a number of issues to be resolved.

According to Liu (2016), despite the vast diversity of EFL curriculum, textbooks and other learning materials, there is no common standard for how culture should be represented and introduced in the EFL classroom. The first problem that may arise is the problem of conceptualisation of culture itself. Delaney (2017) shows that culture is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of concepts, including social customs and beliefs as well as arts and knowledge. Given the breadth of the category, it may not be exactly clear which aspects should take priority over the others.

Another issue that requires further investigation in the field of EFL is what ICCs exactly include. According to Byram et al. (2002), the three key components of intercultural competence include knowledge, skills and attitude. Knowledge is factual information about a particular culture or a country; typically, knowledge is objective and does not contain any ideological undertone (Byram et al. 2002). Skills can be described as an English learners' abilities to process cultural knowledge and apply it when necessary. Attitude has more to do with a person's ability to come into contact with other cultures, preserve their own identity and respect others.

As seen from the classification by Byram et al. (2002), the key ICCs are interconnected and should be taught as such. As Byram et al. (2002) writes, it is the role of the language teacher to help to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values insofar as dissipating key facts about a particular culture or country. According to Byram et al. (*ibid*) even though ICCs have long

been an integral part of language education, the focus has been mainly on cultural knowledge. Students are often merely given unrelated, sporadic facts about a country: the information that does not easily find any further application and is often forgotten. This issue should not remain untackled: it is only reasonable to include all three elements in language education.

Now that the key ICCs are clarified, a logical question may arise as to which culture should actually be taught as part of the EFL curriculum. As Pennycook (2007) suggests, English teaching materials have long been gravitating toward solely representing the culture of English-speaking countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Pennycook (2007) argues that the overrepresentation of the anglosphere in textbooks is indicative of the colonialist legacy. Byram, Esarte-Sarries, Taylor and Allat (1991) argue that English learners' training to know how to behave appropriately in an English-speaking culture should not be the end-all be-all of cultural training. Byram et al. (2002) emphasise the importance of achieving the purpose of both facilitated and improved international and intranational communication through learning English.

Before moving ahead to defining the focus of the study, it is imperative to introduce the key terms used in this study. The theoretical framework employed here builds on the ideas put forward by Byram et al. (2002) and Cortazzi & Jin (1991). Cortazzi and Jin (1991: 204) define the types of culture that are encountered in ESL / EFL textbooks:

- (1) source culture, or native culture of the learner;
- (2) target culture, or the culture of the countries where English is spoken as a first language (examples: the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, etc.);
- (3) international culture, or the cultural amalgamation of English and non-English

speaking countries. The representation of international culture concerns itself with demonstrating the possibilities of English use as well as developing foreign language skills in the multicultural context.

According to Byram et al. (2002), foreign languages need to be introduced through the representation of target culture. If this is accomplished, then students have a better chance to comprehend the use of language in its original setting. However, Kachru (1992) argued that while the benefits of source culture presentation in EFL textbooks might not be evident at first glance, they become apparent upon further analysis. According to the researcher, there is hardly such a thing as "global practice" of English; the phenomenon that is observed now can be more rightfully conceptualised as "glocalisation of English."

Wesche (2004) marries the two points by putting forward an idea that appears to be a compromise between the global and local use of the English language. The researchers claim that English should be taught in a method that English learners could conceptualise their own culture using a foreign language. At the same time, in order to integrate into the original English-speaking settings, they need to be able to temporarily erase a part of their identity to adopt a strange cultural code (Wesche 2004). Ideally, the contents of EFL curriculum and syllabi should strike a balance between these two points.

Overall, adequate culture inculcation into young generation is a challenging issue. This study acknowledges the complexity of the task and seeks, in line with researchers such as Ishihara and Cohen (2014), to raise awareness of stakeholders, teachers and students. It also draws on the classification of culture representation types put forward by Byram et al. (1991). This is carried out relying on the assumptions made by Byram et al. (1991), Kachru (1992) and Wesche (2004) and sharing the belief in the importance of equal representation in EFL syllabi and

curriculums.

Some researcher have conducted the study about represent the culture in the textbooks. There is a clear rationale behind paying attention to textbooks as one of the sources of cultural knowledge in both teachers and learners. As Liu (2016) assumes, textbooks influence teaching in a profound way. Textbooks facilitate the process of lesson planning by providing a wide variety of resources and tasks to cover a multitude of topics. Because of the great selection of textbooks available, the issue emerged as to how language educators and applied linguists should assess their adequacy and appropriateness (Demir & Ertas 2014). This study seeks to apply an existing theoretical framework of cultural representation to a popular EFL textbook.

The need to explore English learners' attitudes toward cultural representation is motivated by recent research in EFL teaching as well as broader tendencies in education. Mellati and Khademi (2014) highlight the need for personalised learning paths in modern education. The researchers provide evidence suggesting that it is quite challenging to make generalisations regarding what would be the most effective approaches toward teaching student groups that are often heterogeneous (Mellati & Khademi 2014). On par with Noddings (2018), Tharp (2018) and Mellati and Khademi (2014) argue that investigating learners' preference should become one of the most essential steps toward humanistic education that allows for customisation and adjustment. Thus, solely relying on the opinion of an independent rater is not enough when analyzing the quality of a textbook with regards to cultural representation. Students can and should have a say in the process, which is why their preferences have become one of the essentials of this study.

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions were devised: (1) How is the anglophone culture represented in the

“Total English” textbook series? (2) Are there any differences in learners' preference regarding cultural representation in EFL textbooks?

METHOD

One of the best-selling textbooks used in EFL in language institutes including that of the study context has been selected. Initial investigation has shown that the selected textbook series were widely recommended for learners at all levels. For the present research, the focus was on the “Total English,” upper-intermediate (B2 in the CEFR). The motivation behind choosing textbooks of a higher-level draws on the literature research and theoretical frameworks used in this study. According to the assessment grid devised by the Council of Europe in its CEFR, at the upper-intermediate level, speakers can demonstrate high cohesion in their speech as well as differentiate between nuances and shades of meaning. Indeed, the cultural aspect of the language teaching and learning has a lot to do with handling subtleties and understanding context, which is apparently most likely to be possible once a speaker achieves relative fluency and proficiency. Hence, it was compelling that this study deals with speakers and materials that provide more space and opportunities for cultural investigation.

The selected textbook was analysed for embedded cultural representations and the frequency of cultural representation occurrences was measured and tabulated. Cultural representation was discovered through content analysis which concerned itself with investigating the contents of conversations, texts, articles and readings with the purpose of finding the elements of cultural representation. Admittedly, cultural representation is a nebulous concept that may still be challenging to pinpoint even after operationalising it in this study. For the sake of reliability and replicability, a second rater was invited to redo the analysis (Golafshani 2003).

To examine the preferences of learners in EFL cultural representation, a nine-item questionnaire was developed, piloted and administered to a group of English language learners (N= 120). The purpose of the questionnaire was to pinpoint and measure students' reactions to different kinds of cultural representation in EFL textbooks. Their preferences, likes and dislikes had to be quantified in a comprehensive way, for which a five-point Likert scale was utilised. The second part was semi-structured interviews consisting of four questions regarding students' interest in culture training and their own approaches to becoming familiar with foreign cultures. The interviews were constructed to allow interviewees to self-reflect and to leave some space for unexpected insights or additional remarks.

As seen from the description of the research method, the present study employs mixed methodology. There is a certain rationale behind combining the two main types of methodologies for studying the chosen subject matter. Quantitative methods applied in this study include the processing of numerical data. The findings of data analysis in this case are bound to be more objective and inferential (Barnham, 2015). They will enable the researcher to see the associations between the studied concepts or the lack thereof. Qualitative methods used for this study are more subjective; yet, they provide their own advantages (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Interviews allow researchers to gain deeper insights into the subject matter. In the case of this study, it is compelling to understand how students themselves conceptualise culture. Besides, numerical data does not explain exactly what students are looking for in EFL curriculums and namely, in EFL textbooks terms of cultural representation. Thus, conducting a series of thought-provoking interviews was found to be beneficial for analysing personal reflections and understanding EFL learners' preferences. On the

whole, it is believed that a mixed-method case study research design would offer an effective way of gaining a more complete understanding of the present study's scope and focus.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings and discusses them in light of the study research questions. The findings of the study are in regard to the representation of culture in the examined EFL textbook and learners' preference of the study respondents.

Textbook Content Analysis

Table 1. Overall findings of the cultural aspects in the "Total English" textbook (in absolute and relative numbers).

	Total Words	Cultural Words	Neutral Words
Absolute numbers	96570	2013	94557
Relative numbers	100%	2.084%	97.91%

Table 2. The number of words used in cultural representation encounters categorised by the type of culture (in absolute and relative numbers).

	Source Culture	Target Culture	International Culture
Absolute numbers	156	1240	617
Relative numbers	7,774%	61%	30,6%

Table 3. The number of cultural representation encounters categorised by the type of culture (in absolute and relative numbers).

	Source Culture	Target Culture	International Culture
Absolute numbers	6	35	14
Relative numbers	10,9%	63,63%	25,45%

Table 4. The number of source cultural representation encounters categorised by the type of ICCs (in absolute and relative numbers).

Source Culture	Knowledge	Skills	Attitude
Absolute numbers	0	3	2
Relative numbers	0%	60%	40%

Table 5. The number of target cultural representation encounters categorised by the type of ICCs (in absolute and relative numbers).

Target Culture	Knowledge	Skills	Attitude
Absolute numbers	17	8	10
Relative numbers	48,57%	22,85%	28,57%

Table 6. The number international cultural representation encounters categorised by the type of ICCs (in absolute and relative numbers).

International Culture	Knowledge	Skills	Attitude
Absolute numbers	3	8	3
Relative numbers	21,42%	57,14%	21,42%

As seen from Table 1 above, the contents dedicated to cultural representation in the selected textbook were scarce and only amounted to roughly 2% of the total word count. It implies that besides the increased awareness of the importance of the ICC development in EFL classrooms, this widely-used and popular textbook fails to meet learners' needs. The data presented in Table 2 is in proportion to the earlier findings by Byram et al. (2002) which argued that cultural representation in EFL textbooks is skewed toward the target culture (the cultures of English-speaking countries). The source culture was the least represented, at 7% of the word count and roughly 11% of all the cultural representation encounters. The second most represented culture was international (30.6% of the total word count and 25.45% of all encounters).

The selected textbook did not provide any exercises aimed at improving learners' knowledge about the source culture (see Table 4). However, it included dialogues and a few mentions in the reading texts that suggested communication skills development (60%) as well as cultural recognition (40%). The target culture was largely represented through exercises revolving around providing knowledge (48.57%). Skills and attitude exercises received equal attention and consideration from the textbook authors (22.85% and 28.57%). International culture was taught through skill development exercises (57.14%), which was mostly accomplished in the form of dialogues, therefore, aiming at the improvement of the speaking aspect. Knowledge and attitude about international culture were both underrepresented (21.42% each) (see Table 6). These findings are consistent with those of previous studies: target culture was not only overrepresented but was also mostly introduced through knowledge (texts, facts and pictures).

Learners' Preferences

Contradictory to what Byram et al. (2002) suggest for EFL curriculums in terms of cultural training, the study participants were largely disinterested in source culture representation. The exercises aimed at knowledge, skill and attitude improvement were evaluated at 1.8, 2.7 and 1.6 out of five respectively. As seen from these values, students showed mild interest in the task focusing on communication skills. This was confirmed through interview data analysis: "I can't say that learning about my own culture would be one of my goals of learning English" as one interviewee put it. Another interviewee highlighted the importance of communication about source culture over passive knowledge consumption: "I am not as interested in learning as in teaching others I think." The third interviewee, however, appreciated the rare instances of source culture recognition: "But

well, every time I hear someone speaking with an Arabic accent when we are doing listening tasks, it feels cool.” It seems that the lack of source culture representation in the selected textbook might not be a problem for students as this is not something they truly prioritise.

The exercises revolving around target culture were significantly more interesting for the study participants. The least popular was the knowledge exercise, graded at an average of 3.2. This shows a discrepancy between what students prefer and what the textbook provides. Interestingly enough, in the interviews, the students highlighted their interest in the UK and the US: “[...] I like reading the news, especially about the US.” This fact might imply that the problem was not with target culture representation as a whole but with the way it was presented: “But then again, you can’t fit everything in one textbook. I guess the teacher needs to be more flexible with it.”

The most popular exercise was the one focusing on the values of the target culture countries (the average of 4.8). Some other exercises that received high critical appraisal from the study participants were those revolving around international skills and attitude training. The latter is consistent with what all the interviewees highlighted when expressing their opinion about their English use. For example, one of them pondered: “I feel very good and inspired when I can speak English to people from other cultures.” Other examples include: “Having been raised abroad, I think I connected a lot with other students coming from foreign countries”; “I’m really into computer gaming, especially RPGs. So now we have this online team, and we’re all from different countries”.

Overall, the study participants expressed some disappointment with their current textbook as well as with how culture is taught to them. One interviewee shared that the knowledge that they were deriving was sporadic and not practical: “For example, at some point, we learned about

how governments works. I can’t say it was useless, but now if you ask me, I probably won’t tell you much.” However, they showed understanding and appreciation: “Our teacher is open to bringing us extra materials when we ask”. All in all, it is worth noting that the findings in this study are subject to at least two limitations. First, the interview sample size was relatively small (N= 10), an issue that could undermine the study’s findings generalisability beyond the study context. Participation in the interviews was however entirely voluntary. Therefore, one may assume that out of the 120 participants, those who consented to an interview (N= 10) had prior interest in learning about cultures. It is however possible that due to their interest and personal efforts, their cultural awareness may well be higher than average, which makes the group of the interviewees not exactly representative of the study’s broader population.

CONCLUSION

The present study revealed the lack of cultural representation balance in one of the most widely used EFL textbooks, “Total English.” Out of all types of cultures, the source culture was hardly represented while the contents mostly revolved around target and international cultures. The study participants did not show any significant interest in source culture representation. The most compelling exercises for them appeared to be those focusing on target and international cultures, especially if the purpose was skill development.

It is hoped that the results of the present research will be of use for education policy-makers and practitioners in the study context. One way this study could contribute to textbook development is to provide insights into the appropriate proportion between source, target and international cultural representation. At the same time, the findings suggest that knowledge, skills and attitude as the three pillars of the ICCs

should be paid equal attention in the EFL classroom and have their place in EFL textbooks. As it has already been mentioned, probably the most imminent problem with cultural representation is the lack of balance in EFL textbooks.

For EFL teachers, the findings of the study have two implications to be considered. First and foremost, EFL teachers should acknowledge the autonomy and self-agency of students when teaching the cultural aspects of the language. Three of the interviewees made it a point to tell that they are actively researching cultural information outside the classroom to boost their ICCs. This insight suggests that students already have a well-formed opinion about the importance of ICCs as well as a strong interest and motivation. They should compel EFL teachers to be more interested in English learners' preferences and transform the curriculum if possible to accommodate their needs.

The second valuable implication that EFL teachers might want to take into account is the importance of balancing cultural information. The findings of this study suggested that students were pleased and content to see the representation of their native 'source' culture even though the selected coursebook only provided very scarce fragments reflecting it. This should compel EFL teachers to focus on how students could use English as a foreign language in the context of their own daily lives. Another idea that could be put to good use is to reframe the 'source' native context in a way that it facilitates and motivates the learning as opposed to seeing it only as an interfering force. Lastly, EFL teachers as well as textbook authors should focus on the international aspect of English use and prepare students for integrating into society that is becoming ever more globalised and cosmopolitan.

All in all, it is recommended that further research be carried out toward a common

framework for analysing EFL textbooks for balanced cultural representation. It may turn out that the framework that has been successfully implemented in the current study is not generalisable to other types of textbooks. Therefore, further experimental investigations on this, and similar EFL textbooks, are encouraged. In addition, together with examining learners' feedback, tangible and analysable results will provide even more insights for transforming curriculum to be more adequate and matching learners' cultural needs. To conclude, although the current study is based on a sample EFL textbooks, it has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of the representation of culture and learners' preferences in the EFL context.

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