

A Study on Textbook Evaluation Criteria for the Teaching of Culture in English Language Teaching*

JIANG Bo

Harbin Engineering University, Harbin, China

Textbooks play a significant role in language teaching and learning. If language teaching is closely connected with the teaching of culture, a textbook is also a most essential constituent to the teaching of culture. This study focuses on common textbook evaluation criteria for the teaching of culture: realism, topics, stereotyping, task design, and extra information. Since these criteria appear to be unsupported with theoretical or empirical grounding in research, this paper attempts to evaluate them and proposes recommendations with a view to creating an analytical tool for future analysis of culture teaching in English language textbooks.

Keywords: intercultural communication, intercultural learning, second language learning, foreign language education

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of culture in English-language teaching and in particular the role of text books in the teaching of culture. Many authors (Garinger, 2002; Miekley, 2005; Saluveer, 2004) have written papers about the aspects to which a textbook should pay attention and have done so in the form of a checklist. Although not many of them lay their major emphasis on the teaching of culture, they all stress in their papers that a few cultural aspects should be considered in textbooks. Drawing on all of the available material, it would seem that the concerns that may influence the teaching of culture can be summarized as follows: realism, topics, stereotyping, task design, and extra information. The criteria are intended as advice to text-book authors and to teachers or institutions selecting textbooks.

While the literature offering advice is fairly plentiful, few researches have been found which examines and validates the items on checklists and, as a result, the advice appears to be unsupported with theoretical or empirical grounding.

We propose therefore to begin an evaluation of the items in the summarised list so that a more analytical tool can be created for future analysis of textbooks with an emphasis on the teaching of culture.

* This paper is the research achievement of Key Project of Educational Science Planning (No. GJB1316018), the Teaching and Learning Reform Project at Harbin Engineering University in 2016 (No. JG2016BZD30), and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (No. HEUCF161206).

JIANG Bo, associate professor, doctor, Foreign Language Department, Harbin Engineering University.

Is the Cultural Information Presented in the Textbooks Realistic?

Concern for realism in the portrayal of culture in ELT text books would seem to be connected to communicative needs, although an overlap with the moral and educational imperative of the “bureaucratic approach” seems to be indicated in, for example, Saluveer (2004) who suggests that cultural information can help students understand a society better, and in Miekley (2005) who seems to want to focus on learning about culture, rather than using cultural knowledge for communicative purposes.

Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1993) seem to lean in two directions (as do Byram and Feng, see above, Feng & Bryam, 2002), underlining the need to represent culture as well as the need for cultural information in those who seek to communicate with English speakers from target cultures.

Realism is frequently connected to the associated concept of authenticity. While the term “authentic materials” is the subject of many definitions (e.g., Guariento & Morley, 2001; Jordan, 1997) most agree that authentic materials are the materials produced for social purposes in a community of native speakers, as opposed to materials specially produced for language teaching.

The idea that these materials must have been produced for a community of native speakers is a restriction frequently imposed (Harmer, as cited in Kilickaya, 2004). In this way, the “global perspective” in ELT is ignored. If, on the other hand, “authentic materials” were to extend to any materials produced in English, as agreed by Feng and Byram (2002), irrespective of intended audience, learners of English would have a greater opportunity to understand the English language as a global phenomenon, mixed, as it is, with other languages or elements from other languages and reflective of a great number of cultural settings. Further, by using authentic materials produced for and in the learners’ home setting, students would have the opportunity to study what McKay (2002) has called “source culture” and, still following McKay, therefore help to gain intercultural communicative competence in a much wider sense than the mere ability to interact with, or behave as, native speakers.

The realism criterion therefore needs to be carefully examined in the light of students’ (and institutions’) needs in learning (teaching) English. A simple equation with a simple notion of authenticity seems not to be adequate.

Is a Variety of Cultural Topics Selected?

Textbooks are normally intentionally or unintentionally divided into units according to cultural topics, for example marriage, education, love, and family. However, there is often more than one cultural topic or message illustrated in one text. There can be 10 general unit topics in one book, but many other minor cultural topics in each text of that book.

The importance of a variety of topics has attracted the attention of textbook writers for many years. Early in the 1980s, scholars (Saluveer, 2004; Sheldon, 1988) clearly stressed the importance of different topics in textbooks. Many scholars (Pfister & Borzilleri, 1977; Saluveer, 2004) wrote papers about suitable topics for language teaching. Pfister and Borzilleri (1977) suggest five major categories. Byram (as cited in Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) offers seven categories, and Chastain (as cited in Saluveer, 2004) divides the aspects of culture into more detail by proposing more than 35 categories. No matter how the division is made, whether it is on large topics such as family, social sphere, politics, environment, or small topics such as shopping, cooking, and advertisements, a book normally only has a few texts, so it is not possible to cover all the topics.

Variety for variety's sake and the question of how many categories may be important in terms of how motivating a text book is but when considering the value of a text book in the promotion of culture learning, it would seem to be the topics themselves which need to be considered in their own right and on their respective merits. Some of the suggested topics would be of obvious use to someone learning English in order to integrate into, or simply feel at ease in, a target culture, while others would be more suitable for those learning culture for the purpose of pure educational enrichment. Others again, might make good sense when studying source culture from a global perspective.

Further, it may be more important to look at the way in which topics are dealt with than at variety and range: Whose culture is being constructed and how and whether a culture is perceived as positive or negative.

Do the Texts Create Stereotypes?

The question, as it is posed in selection advice, often appears to require a "no" answer for a text to be acceptable. The commonplace assumption that stereotyping is negative (compared to, say, generalization, which is positive) has, however, been questioned and stereotypes have also been considered as "a positive and negative set of beliefs by an individual about the characteristics of a group of people" (Jones, 1997, p. 170).

The more frequent, negative view of stereotypes is taken by e.g., Carrell and Korwitz (1994) who suggest that stereotypes may cause hatred or admiration towards a particular society and by Huhn (as cited in Byram, 1989), who advises that textbooks should avoid stereotypes because of the potential problems they cause: Stereotypes lead to prejudice (Tajfel, 1981).

A nuanced view holds that stereotyping can also be helpful: "Stereotypical representations are necessary in writing textbooks as they are starting points for teaching cultural studies" (Feng & Byram, 2002, p. 65) and, with careful explanation, stereotypes can help people to understand culture better (Byram & Morgan, 1994). Lippmann (1965) also agrees that stereotyping is necessary to orient us in the world: It is an efficient method to make the world around us simple.

If the ultimate goal of English Language teaching is an intimate knowledge of culture in the canonical literature and customs and traditions sense, then the idea that stereotyping can lead to hatred, admiration, or prejudice is not obviously central to the learning and teaching endeavour. Further, the selection of literary texts in line with national canons, and the presentation of aspects of society which have been tacitly approved as representative of the nation containing the native speakers might, in itself, constitute a form of prejudice.

If, on the other hand, the goal is communication in a native-speakerlike fashion, it could be argued, again, that hatred and prejudice are irrelevant, although it is conceivably more difficult to conform to native-speaker cultural norms when these are perceived as abhorrent.

It is only when (and if) it comes to learning English in a global perspective that the requirement to avoid hatred (and possibly admiration) and prejudice beings to make perfect sense. In order for global cross-cultural communication to work, an atmosphere of openness and an equally open attitude are necessary (see e.g., Mathur 2003, p. 147).

But the avoidance of hatred and prejudice might best be achieved by including, rather than excluding stereotypes and by dealing with them head on. As Byram and Morgan suggest, with careful explanation, stereotypes can be helpful (1994). Classroom approaches designed to promote intercultural communicative

competence teaching, such as discussion, role-play, and real intercultural communication may be able to turn potentially harmful stereotypes into helpful ones. Consequently, the writing and selection of textbooks might focus on whether there is the provision of tasks for learners to deal with stereotypes rather than whether or not stereotypes are presented.

Do the Exercises and Activities Consolidate or Further Explain the Cultural Information?

In the evaluation form written by the Indiana Department of Education (2007), the following questions are asked: “Are learners asked to identify, experience, analyze, produce, or discuss tangible (toys, dress, foods, etc.) and expressive (artwork, songs, literature, etc.) products of the target cultures?”, “Do learners have opportunities to participate in entertainment representative of the target cultures (e.g., games, story telling, songs, etc.)?”, and “Do the text activities associated with cultural images and information invite learners to observation, identification, discussion or analysis of cultural practices, products, and perspectives?”.

These three questions are asking whether there are relevant exercises for students to review, analyse, discuss, take part in, and then understand the cultural points in the text. All three rely on skilled mediation by teachers of text-book material: It would seem, however, that teachers of English are generally not trained to teach culture (Byram & Fleming, 1998; Saluveer, 2004). The trainer function of the textbook (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) is therefore to help an untrained teacher and learner through step-by-step instructions without which, this particular piece of advice is of limited worth. The three questions also seem to suppose the “bureaucratic” perspective on cultural competence.

The implicit advice, provided by the Indiana Department of Education, to discuss or analyse cultural perspectives is taken up by Brislin and Yoshida (1994) who recommend, among other things, discussion of “critical incidents” in order to train learners in intercultural communicative competence: Cross-cultural misunderstandings can be presented to students for discussion or role-play.

Thus the question “Do the exercises and activities consolidate or further explain the cultural information?” seems to be a valid one for all three perspectives on competence: Whether a given culture is being studied in its own right as part of a general educational package, or in order for students to be able to interact with representatives of that culture or so that learners can take stock of their own cultural baggage in preparation for global citizenship, critical incident study would seem to be useful.

The question, asked more generally, is equally a valid one for all three perspectives: a well-designed task can be helpful in the understanding of stereotypes and improve intercultural communicative competence.

Is Extra Information About the Culture Integrated in the Books Given?

The advice implicit in this question seems self-evidently sound: More information cannot but be helpful in any endeavour to impart cultural knowledge and skills. Information about the date of publication of texts and national provenance will, in all cases be useful in establishing recency or historicity where these are issues; information about provenance will, quite obviously, be useful where a specific target culture is intended.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to present a compendium of current advice to English language text book

authors and to those responsible for choosing books for their students. We have also sought to evaluate such summarised advice against criteria which might reflect the reasons for teaching culture in the first place. It appears clear to us that some of the advice is limited to one perspective on teaching culture while other advice might be applicable to several different perspectives. Further, while some advice may simply be not very practical, other advice is plain obvious or of dubious worth for the teaching of culture (though it may be of value for other aspects of English language teaching). At all events we have tried to make the case for taking the time to reflect on advice, rather than taking it at face value, before using it in the selection of teaching materials.

References

- Brislin, R., & Yoshida, T. (1994). *Intercultural communication training: An introduction*. California: Sage Publication.
- Byram, M. (1989). *Cultural studies in foreign language education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., & Esarte-Sarries, V. (1993). *Investigating cultural studies in foreign language teaching*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., & Morgan, C. (1994). *Teaching and learning language and culture*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Carrell, D., & Korwitz, J. (1994). Using concordancing techniques to study gender stereotyping in ELT textbooks. In J. Sunderland (Ed.), *Exploring gender: questions and implications for English language education* (pp. 73-82). New York: Prentice Hall International.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. X. (1999). Cultural mirrors: Materials and methods in the EFL classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 196-219). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feng, A. W., & Byram, M. (2002). Authenticity in college English textbooks-an intercultural perspective. *BELC Journal*, 33(2), 58-84.
- Garinger, D. (2002). *Textbook selection for the ESL classroom*. Center for applied linguistics digest. Retrieved March 23, 2008 from <http://www.cal.org/resources/Digest/0210garinger.html>
- Guariento, W., & Morley, J. (2001). Text and task authenticity in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 55(4), 347-353.
- Indiana Department of Education. (2007). *Standards-based textbook evaluation guide*. Retrieved December 23, 2007 from <http://www.doe.state.in.us>
- Jones, J. (1997). *Prejudice and racism*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Jordan, R. R. (1997). *English for academic purposes: A guide and resource for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kilickaya, F. (2004). Authentic materials and cultural content in EFL classrooms. *The Internet TESL Journal*, X(7). Retrieved December 23, 2011 from <http://iteslj.org/>
- Lippmann, W. (1965). *Public opinion*. New York: The Free Press.
- Mathur, A. (2003) What knowledge is of most worth. In W. Pinar, D. Trueit, W. Doll, and H. Wang (Eds.), *Internationalization of curriculum studies* (pp. 137-177). New York: Peter Lang.
- McKay, S. L. (2002). *Teaching English as an international language*. Oxford: OUP.
- Miekley, J. (2005). ESL textbook evaluation checklist. *The Reading Matrix*, 5(2). Retrieved May 29, 2008 from http://www.readingmatrix.com/reading_projects/miekley/project.pdf
- Pfister, G. G., & Borzilleri, P. A. (1977). Surface cultural concepts: A design for the evaluation of cultural material in textbooks. *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, 10(2), 102-108.
- Saluveer, E. (2004). *Teaching culture in English classes*. Retrieved June 3, 2009 from <http://hdl.handle.net/10062/922>
- Sheldon, L. E. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT Journal*, 4(4), 237-246.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.