

Developing Intercultural Competence using the Textbooks

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Introduction

In the present post-method situation, ELT has become increasingly sensitive to the issue of culture. Teachers wanting to insert a 'culture' component into their language classrooms may feel confused:

On the one side, there exists a large body of EFL/ESL scholarship based in cultural anthropology which seeks to isolate the essences of various cultures and aid teachers in applying these insights in their work.

On the other hand, there has recently emerged a body of literature that is critical of much of this approach to teaching culture. Proponents of this critical perspective claim that much EFL cultural research has had the unfortunate result of misrepresenting foreign cultures by reinforcing popular stereotypes and constructing these cultures as monolithic, static 'Others', rather than as dynamic, fluid entities. Such representations are often considered by these critics to be politically-motivated constructs that serve to 'essentialize' and 'exoticize' this 'Other'.

As *Michael BYRAM, Bella GRIBKOVA and Hugh STARKEY* say, developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognising that the aims are:

- to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence;
- to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures;
- to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours;
- and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

The components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging

to a number of social groups. These values are part of one's social identities.

The role of the language teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop a knowledge of a particular culture or country.

When developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching we try to achieve several aims:

1. to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways.
2. to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures and enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours;
3. to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity.
4. to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience; learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, and this help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness',
5. and to develop in learners an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.

I consider these five points to be the most important aims for the incorporation of an intercultural syllabus in language teaching, but the problem many teachers meet when trying to introduce an intercultural dimension in their teaching is that they face with a set curriculum or programme of study based on a given textbook. We will see here how this can be modified and challenged by simple techniques which make learners aware of the implicit values and meanings in the material they are using.

Textbooks can be presented in a way that suggests that the materials are authoritative and definitive or in an intercultural and critical perspective. When developing intercultural skills, teachers can start from the theme and content in the textbook, and then encourage learners to ask further questions and make comparisons. Themes treated in textbooks can lend themselves to development in an intercultural and critical perspective. The key principle is to get learners to compare the theme in a familiar situation with examples from an unfamiliar context.

On the other hand, grammatical exercises in textbooks can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes or challenge them. For instance female subjects may be linked to stereotypically female activities or actions (Mary likes cooking; John likes football); stereotyping generalisations may be encouraged about groups (The French like...; Germans are.....; Older people.....). Teachers can encourage learners to comment on such statements and challenge them.

Most of the cultural information students get at school comes from course books. Course books will directly or indirectly communicate sets of cultural values. This is called 'hidden curriculum' (Cunningsworth, 1995; Holly, 1990). Many educationalists claim that hidden curriculum is more effective than the official curriculum. Risager (as cited in Cunningsworth, 1995) states that

Foreign language teaching textbooks no longer just develop concurrently with the development of foreign language pedagogy in a narrow sense, but they increasingly participate in the general cultural transmission with the educational system and in the rest of society (p. 90).

Since the underlying system is not explicitly stated, it requires us to look at course books in detail to understand the unstated values.

According to Newby (1997) and Freebairn (2000) (cited in Skopinskaja 2003: 42), most foreign language textbooks used in secondary education in European countries fall into two categories: international/global textbooks and local/locally produced textbooks.

The first type includes teaching materials that are produced for the international market. According to Pulverness (1995: 7), such textbooks "are centred on topics with fairly broad transcultural appeal" and contain material that could be set anywhere. Because of their universal nature they are widely used. Cunningsworth (1984: 62) maintains that the relative lack of culture specificity and transparent situations for presentation of language items make such material readily acceptable in almost any country of the world.

Local textbooks, on the other hand, include material that conform to the requirements of the national curriculum of a particular country. Local textbooks usually develop learners' awareness of their own cultural identity as well as including material that promote learners' awareness of the target culture (Skopinskaja 2003: 42).

Depending on their cultural component, textbooks can be grouped according to how language and cultural syllabi are related to each other:

- those which have a cultural syllabus but make no claims to be language coursebooks - offering themselves in a supplementary role;
- those which aim to be fully-functioning language coursebooks but claim to have a serious cultural syllabus;
- language coursebooks which make wide use of cultural input (but almost always have very little learner cultural output).

There are both internationally and locally produced textbooks that fall into the second category. The third group includes textbooks that are produced for the international market. They give learners information about other cultures either in separate sections or on separate pages.

They, therefore, comply with the main principle of the comparative approach that knowledge and understanding of one's own culture forms a basis for understanding the other .

Cortazzi and Jin (1999: 204-210) divide EFL textbooks into three large categories depending on their focus on culture:

- Textbooks based on the source culture: the textbooks that are produced at a national level for a particular country. (Learners are taught how to talk about their own culture to visitors to their country rather than be prepared to encounter other cultures. Although such textbooks help students to become aware of their own cultural identity, they do not develop students' intercultural awareness.)
- textbooks based on the target culture: these textbooks usually focus on one or two target cultures (e.g., the United Kingdom, United States). (Though widely used all over the world, they are often criticised for their commercial nature and seen as publishers' promotional materials.)
- textbooks aimed at the international target culture: books that include a wide variety of cultures set in English speaking countries or in countries where English is not a first or a second language, but is used as an international language.

Guidelines to Evaluate Textbooks

Evaluating textbooks is a complicated process. Therefore, various textbook evaluation checklists have been provided to help teachers to choose teaching materials that best meet the aims of the course as well as the needs of students.

Ferit Kilickaya gives the following guidelines in order to evaluate to what extent textbooks include the intercultural dimension:

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1. Does the book give any information, instructions or suggestions about how the book may be used and how the cultural content may be handled?
2. Does the book address specific learners or are there any characteristics of the learners that the book addresses to?
3. Does the book suggest any role that the teachers using it should have?
4. Do they include a variety of cultures or just specific ones such as British or American culture?
5. Do they represent the reality about the target culture or the author's view?
6. Where is the cultural information taken from? Author's own ideas or empirical research?
7. What subjects do they cover? Are these specific to the target culture? Are there any topics that might not be culturally suitable for the learners in class?
8. What cultural and social groups are represented? Is this adequate coverage of a variety of people or is this limited to a chosen people? If so, what kind of people are these? Are there any stereotypes?
9. Does the book include generalizations about the culture? Does it inform the audience of the fact that what is true of the parts is not necessarily true of the parts?
10. Is the cultural information presented with comments such as being good or being bad? Or is it presented without such comments?
11. Are there illustrations? If so, are these appropriate to the learners' native culture? Would additional information be necessary to explain them or are they self-explanatory?
12. What are the activities asked of the learners? Are they familiar to the learners?
13. Would a teacher using this book need specialized training to be able to use it or is there enough information given?
14. What are the learners supposed to do with the cultural information such as using actively or just be aware of it for a better understanding of the target culture?
15. What is your overall view of the textbook?

Saluveer (2004) offers Huhn's (1978) checklist to evaluate the intercultural dimension in textbooks reviewed by Byram (1997: 73-74) and Cortazzi and Jin (ibid.: 203). Huhn's list (cited in Byram) includes the following criteria:

1. factual accuracy and up-to-date information;
2. avoidance (or relativisation) of stereotypes;
3. presentation of a realistic picture;
4. freedom from (or questioning) ideological tendencies;
5. presentation of phenomena in context rather than isolated facts;
6. relevance of historical material to contemporary society;
7. presentation of personalities as products of their age.

On the other hand, Cunningsworth's checklist (1995: 92) for social and cultural values in textbooks considers how learners interpret the cultural contexts. He asks the following questions:

- Are the social and cultural contexts in the coursebook comprehensible to the learner?
- Can learners interpret the relationships, behaviours, intentions etc. of the characters portrayed in the book?
- Are women given equal prominence to men in all aspects of the coursebook?
- What physical and character attributes are women given?
- What professional and social positions are women shown as occupying?
- What do we learn about the inner lives of the characters?
- To what extent is the language of feeling depicted?
- Do the coursebook characters exist in some kind of social setting, within a social network?
- Are social relationships portrayed realistically?

Sercu (1998: 271-272) offers four sets of questions to evaluate the cultural dimension of a textbook. He considers representativeness and realism as the most important factors and suggests that the teacher should look at the following questions:

- What image is presented: a royal or a realistic one?
- Does the textbook only present a tourist point of view?
- Are negative and problematic aspects of the foreign culture touched upon?
- Does the textbook offer an authentic reflection of the multicultural character of the foreign society?
- Do situations occur in which someone with a good mastery of the foreign language is not understood because of differences in culture-specific reference frames?
- Are teachers and learners encouraged to consult additional material on the topics dealt with?
- Do the textbooks include materials/texts written by members of the different nationalities living in the foreign country or do they mainly present the white male point of view?
- Are mentality, values, ideas dealt with?
- Is a historical perspective presented and used to explain certain present-day features of mentality or national character?
- Is the information on the foreign culture integrated in the course or is it added at the end of every chapter or even in presented in a separate chapter at the end of the book?

Sercu maintains that attention should be paid to what is expected of the learners. It is important to find out whether the textbook only passes on knowledge or develops students' intercultural awareness.

Sheldon (1988, cited in Skopinskaja 2003: 43) maintains that “[...] coursebook assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity, and no neat formula, grid or system will ever provide a definite yardstick”.

In my opinion we should consider textbooks as sourcebooks rather than coursebooks and their role will be to facilitate teaching rather than to restrict it. It should also be borne in mind that cultural information given in textbooks outdated quickly, so we will have to rely on other sources in order to integrate the intercultural dimension in the syllabus. For example *realia* as newspapers, cinema, music,... but it is important when using authentic material to ensure that learners understand its context and intention. Materials from different origins with different perspectives should be used together to enable learners to compare and to analyse the materials critically. It is more important that learners acquire skills of analysis than factual information.

Conclusion

In sum, to make culture teaching an integral part of a language class, the teacher should set clear and realistic goals. Although all aspects (cognitive, behavioural, affective) are important, most scholars stress that the main goals of teaching culture should be developing intercultural understanding and communication. To achieve the goals the teacher should consider an appropriate approach as well as suitable techniques and activities for teaching culture. The choice of the latter depends on several factors, such as the situation in which the language is taught, the age and language level of learners and, lastly, the teacher and his/her preparation to teach culture.

Teachers also need accessible and reliable sources for teaching culture. Several studies have shown that the cultural dimension in textbooks varies to a great extent. In order to evaluate their cultural content teachers can use various checklists. However, in order to provide learners with up-to-date information teachers should also turn to other sources.

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