

The elusive perfect textbook : Cultural sensitivity as a factor in materials selection/modification/creation

著者(英)	James Rogers
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The elusive perfect textbook:

Cultural sensitivity as a factor in materials selection/modification/creation

James Rogers

Abstract

A good textbook can provide a strong base from which to build a course, so instructors should take prudence in its selection. One of the many factors that should be considered when making a selection is cultural sensitivity.

This study examines suggested textbooks for Advanced English II Level 5 in the fall 2008 semester at Kansai Gaidai University in regards to cultural sensitivity. It is assumed that a universally ideal textbook does not exist due the multiple variables that every teacher, group of learners, or course creates. Therefore, the findings are taken one step further to suggest research paths and methods that teachers can utilize to modify any shortcoming that they find in their own textbooks.

The results showed that all of the textbooks had deficiencies that point to trends instructors should be aware of, although some textbooks were more ideal than others. Also of note would be content found that should be deemed inappropriate for the Japanese learner. More importantly, this study sheds light on what instructors can look for when scanning textbooks in regards to cultural sensitivity, thus filling a gap in textbook evaluation that stems from instructor time constraints. Larger implications include points of interest for publishers/materials writers and self reflection for instructors who, unbeknownst to themselves, may have been exposing their students to cultural colonialism through the materials they use.

Keywords: English textbook, inner circle country, outer circle country,
expanding circle country

Introduction

ESL textbooks play central roles in many language classrooms, and are powerful stimuli for generating learning (Rubdy, as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 38). Others agree, as Hutchinson and Torres (1994) consider the ESL textbook as playing “a vital and positive part in the everyday job of teaching and learning of English” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 37). This is also supported by Sheldon’s (1988) view of the textbook as “the main tool of the trade” and “the

visible heart of any ELT programme” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003 :37). If the textbook is to be considered as such, then its selection becomes a crucial decision that a teacher must take prudence in making. One may then ask what criteria need to be considered in choosing an ideal textbook. Individual learner needs and goals, teaching styles, course objectives, etc. are just a few of the many variables that teachers must consider. Textbook selection does involve a serious undertaking. Cunningsworth (1995) deems coursebook selection “a challenging task” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 37). Furthermore, Hutchinson (1987) states that “the selection of materials probably represents the single most important decision that a language teacher has to make” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 37).

Any textbook used to teach English as an international language should consider the “diversity of contexts in which English is taught and used” (McKay, 2002: 128). Unfortunately, research has found that many textbooks tend to concentrate their focus on countries whose native language is English, what Kachru (1985) refers to as *inner circle* countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), despite the growing role of English as an international language (as cited in Matsuda, 2002: 182). At one point in time, concentration on the English used in these countries (and some more than others) was a logical approach toward ESL education. Before and during the early stages of Western colonial development, British English was the more rational choice due to it already being well established and the British Empire’s considerable influence and power. It is also understandable that Japan would choose American English as the more desirable medium of communication during the American occupation. Current uses/users of English now complicate matters, though. From an economic perspective, the fact that China has usurped the United States in 2007 as Japan’s biggest trading partner indicates that there has been a change in the target users if English is to be viewed strictly as a tool for international business (*China tops US over Japanese trade*, 2007). Matsuda (2002: 183) states: “In addition to the increase in its functions, the worldwide spread of English has changed the demographics of the population of English users.” She further stresses that we must now ask ourselves if learners are really studying English for the purpose of learning an inner circle country’s culture, and whether English even really belongs solely to these countries anymore (Matsuda, 2002: 183). One author raises the point that there are three nonnative speakers of English in the world for every native English speaker (Rohde, 2003). Teachers and materials creators must therefore begin to consider communication between/within not only the inner circle, but the *outer circle* (India, Singapore, etc.) where English has been more recently institutionalized and the *expanding circle*, (Japan,

Korea, etc.) where English is being learned (Matsuda, 2002: 183).

Analysis

The determination of whether a textbook is culturally sensitive or not definitely has the potential to fall into the subjective realm. Sheldon (1988) points out that textbook evaluation is “fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity and that no neat formula, grid, or system will ever provide a definite yardstick” (as cited in Ellis, 1998: 221). Although, research done by Matsuda (2002) does provide some very concrete, objective questions that one can use to examine a textbook to determine whether it is culturally sensitive in regards to English as an international language. It should be noted that while Matsuda’s (2002) research concentrated on the nationality of the characters presented in Japan’s Ministry of Education approved listening and speaking textbooks for secondary education, this study will examine reading and writing textbooks.

Another difference is that the textbooks examined in Matsuda’s (2002) research were all made by Japanese publishers for Japanese secondary students, while the textbooks this study will examine do not specifically target any country’s users and the publishers all originate from inner circle countries.

This study will ask three questions to determine whether or not materials are culturally sensitive in regards to English as an international language and in regards to the target users (Japanese university students). First, it will be determined whether a passage focuses mainly on inner, expanding, outer, or neutral characters/themes/locales. If it is noted that a passage contains more than one focus, then it will be viewed as being mixed. Second, the contents of mixed passages will be examined to determine what characters/themes/locales are being mixed (inner/expanding, inner/outer, expanding/outer). The results will then be compared to the current status of English as an international language and the needs of the target users in regards to whether the contents provide a balanced, culturally sensitive portrayal of the language, or what Rubdy (2003) refers to as “an awareness of and sensitivity to sociocultural variation” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 37). The results of these two initial questions will therefore be quantitative. The final question will be qualitative, determining whether any passages contain elements that may be deemed inappropriate (offensive, insensitive, stereotypical, condescending, etc.) in regards to the target users. This is an important question to ask since the presence of such inappropriate content helps to “enshrine” such views,

regardless of whether they were previously held or not (Rubdy, as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 37).

The examination of the textbooks was done by this author, the end user. The rationale for having an inside evaluator versus an outsider (a non-ESL instructor) is that “stakeholders will be able to bring an insider’s perspective to the evaluation” (Alderson, 1992, as cited in Ellis, 1998: 224). The specific needs of learners are crucial in regards to materials, and thus “calls for major strategic decisions based on informed judgment and professional experience” (Rubdy, as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 37). My extended experience with Japanese students and knowledge of Japanese culture are invaluable in that they enable me to judge what could be construed as culturally insensitive regarding more subjective questions. Therefore, having an inside evaluator for this study is advantageous.

The following suggested textbooks will be evaluated:

Table 1

#	TITLE	AUTHOR(S)	PUBLISHER	YEAR
1	Reading Keys Book A (Bronze)	M. Craven	Macmillan Language House	2003
2	Paragraph Writing	D. Zemach & C. Islam	Macmillan Language House	2005
3	Themes for Today - Reading for Today Series 1 Book 1 (2 nd Ed.)	L. Smith & N. Mare	Thomson Learning/Heinle	2004
4	Active Skills for Reading: Book 1	N. Anderson	Thomson Learning/Heinle	2003
5	Writing from Within Intro	C. Kelly & A. Gargagiano	Cambridge University Press	2004
6	Northstar: Reading and Writing. Basic Low Intermediate	N. Haugnes & B. Maher	Longman	2004

There were 9 suggested textbooks for the course, but only the above 6 were considered for this study. All About the USA: A Cultural Reader (2nd Ed.) by M. Broukal & P. Murphy, Addison Wesley Longman, 1999 was excluded due to its fundamental focus on a particular inner country. If this textbook were added to the study, it would no doubt skew the results. 121 Common Mistakes of Japanese Students of English by James H.M. Webb, The Japan Times, 1999 and Heinle Graded Readers Level A, Thomson Learning were also excluded due to the fact that these are not textbooks in the traditional sense. It should also be noted that all textbooks included are modern, having been produced within the last five years.

To determine what content within these textbooks was to be included in this evaluation, a limit on what was to be considered a ‘passage’ was set at a minimum of 20 words. All sentences

needed to be cohesive, as would be in a story, a letter, etc. Lists, activities where parts of the passage were grammatically incorrect, etc. were excluded. The numbers of words in each passage are approximate numbers, calculated by counting the amount of words in an average line in each paragraph and then multiplying that figure by the amount of lines with similar lengths. Lines with dissimilar lengths were then counted in a similar fashion separately.

Results

As was mentioned earlier in this paper, the assumption that no ideal textbook exists holds true in that the results were across the board when comparing textbooks.

Table 2 Results of textbook evaluation

Textbook	Number of pages	Total words examined	Total passages	Average words per passage	Instances of Inappropriate content	Total mixed passages	Mixed passages content:		Total words focusing on:					Focus balance averages (20 = ideal)
							inner/expanding or outer	expanding/outer	inner circle countries	expanding circle countries	outer circle countries	Neutral	Mixed	
1	105	8119	60	135	5	6 (10)	6 (100)	0 (0)	3263 (40)	1142 (14)	320 (4)	2395 (30)	999 (12)	36
2	84	2814	25	112	4	1 (4)	1 (100)	0 (0)	1052 (37)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1632 (58)	130 (5)	58
3	<u>206</u>	3723	12	<u>310</u>	1	2 (17)	1 (50)	1 (50)	2014 (54)	403 (11)	0 (0)	650 (17)	656 (18)	54
4	162	10284	43	239	2	13 (30)	12 (92)	1 (8)	2076 (20)	1652 (16)	0 (0)	3226 (31)	3330 (33)	33
5	119	3938	62	63	0	17 (27)	16 (94)	1 (6)	1092 (28)	283 (7)	123 (3)	1464 (37)	976 (25)	34
6	202	<u>13225</u>	<u>70</u>	190	<u>6</u>	16 (23)	14 (87)	2 (12)	9309 (70)	273 (2)	0 (0)	762 (6)	2881 (22)	<u>77</u>
Totals	878	42103	272		18	55	50	5	18806	3753	443	10129	8972	
Averages	146	7017	45	175	3	9 (20)	8 (89)	1 (11)	<u>3134</u> (45)	625 (9)	74 (1)	1688 (24)	1495 (21)	49

* All figures have been rounded to whole numbers

** (): Percentage of total

*** Underlined text: Study high totals/percentages.

Bold text: Study low totals/percentages

While textbook 1 held the high total percentage for including outer circle country focus in its passages and had a decent balance between inner, expanding, outer, neutral, and mixed passage focus (36), it also had a large amount of instances of inappropriate content (5). The fact that textbook 1 held the high total for including outer circle country focus is of minor significance since it only amounted to 4% of total focus. So, while being highest among the textbooks evaluated for outer circle focus, it is by no means balanced. Another negative point was that in all of its mixed passages, inner circle countries were always present.

Textbook 2 also had a higher than average amount for inappropriate content (4), but what makes this even more noteworthy is the fact that this textbook had the least number of words examined. It was also the shortest book at 84 pages. This book also had the lowest percentage of mixed passages (4%) in relation to total passages, and in all of those passages the inner circle was present. Furthermore, this textbook had no words at all focusing on either expanding/outer circles, thus resulting in a second highest imbalance rating of 58. Textbook 2 did have the highest percentage of neutral focus (58%), but this should not be viewed as a positive as it did contribute to the imbalance mentioned above. Furthermore, this book had the lowest percentage (5%) of mixed passage focus.

While textbook 3 had the highest amount of pages (206), the fact that it had the least total passages (12) but highest average of words per passage (310 vs. the study average of 175) does point to a textbook architecture that may not have lent itself well to a balanced focus in regards to passage focus. This factor may have contributed to its second highest total percentage (54%) for inner circle focus, and thus the results may be misleading since a larger variety of passages would have given more opportunities for diverse themes/characters/locales. Even more misleading would be if this book's high and low percentages for mixed passage content (inner/expanding or outer 50%, expanding/outer (50%)) were taken to be of any importance. The fact that there were only 2 total mixed passages has made these numbers distorted, supported by a merely average percentage of total words for mixed focus (18% vs. 21% (the overall study average for mixed passages)). Textbook 3 also had no words at all focusing on outer circle countries. There was one instance of inappropriate content in this textbook.

While textbook 4 held the high percentages for not only words focusing on the expanded circle (16%), best overall balance (33), and for mixed passages (percentages of total passages (30%) and focus (33%)), it did have an imbalance within its mixed passages (12 containing the inner circle/expanding or outer, 1 containing expanding/outer). This textbook also had the lowest percentage of inner circle focus (20%). Despite its good balance, it didn't have any words

focusing on the outer circle and it did contain 2 instances of inappropriate content.

Textbook 5 also had mixed results. It had a decent balance and a large percentage of mixed passages (27%), but 16 (94%) of those passages had the ever-present inner circle country in their themes/characters/locales with only 1 (6%) being a mixture of expanding circle/outer circle themes/characters/locales. It is noteworthy that textbook 5 was the only textbook evaluated with no instances of inappropriate content. It also produced favorable results in its balance (34), being only one percentage point off from the study high (textbook 4: 33).

Textbook 6, despite having the highest total of instances of inappropriate content (6), did have the highest total word count examined (13,225). It is significant that out of its mixed passages, 12% involved only expanding and outer countries. If one is to disregard textbook 3's skewed results for this criterion, then textbook 6's 12% would be the high total. Regardless, this textbook did have the lowest score for overall balance (77), with its 70% focus on the inner circle contributing greatest to this. Its study low of 0% for outer circle focus (also shared with textbooks 2, 3, and 4) and study low for neutral focus (6%) were contributing factors.

On the whole, the results point to textbook 2 as having the highest percentage of deficiencies in regards to cultural sensitivity, with textbook 4 having the least.

The overall results of the study reveal that on average inner circle focus was highest (45%) and outer circle was lowest (1%). This correlated with Matsuda's (2002) research on secondary schooling textbooks in Japan, and points to a trend among not only textbooks for younger learners in Japan, but also ESL textbooks in general. Second highest was neutral focus (24%) and second lowest was expanding circle focus (9%). Mixed focus had a good average of 21%, though. These figures point to excessive focus on the inner circle, and a lack of focus on both expanding circle and outer circle countries if one is to assume that all of these countries deserve equal representation in regards to English as an international language. With an overall average of 49, the textbooks evaluated were unbalanced in their focus. Even if the focus was balanced overall, having a good average of mixed focus could give the wrong impression that this criterion was met adequately since the majority of mixed passages (89%) contained the omnipresent inner circle. Only 11% of mixed passages involved expanding circle/outer circle focus or a mixture of two different countries within those two groups.

As far as inappropriate content in regards to Japanese university students was concerned, there were 10 instances of passages giving monetary amounts in U.S. dollars. While the U.S.'s status as the world's super power is still of significance, one must admit that in recent years the Euro, Yen, and Chinese Yuan have gained serious ground in their influence on world markets.

It is wrong to assume that all non-American teachers and Japanese students know the value of U.S. currency, and that non-American teachers will not take offense in being required to teach about a currency that is not their own. So, in regards to these instances the rationale for them being inappropriate has less to do with Japanese university students themselves, but more to do with the origins of teachers within Japan. The second highest number of inappropriate content was the topic of prisoners (4). Three out of four of these instances portrayed prisoners in a positive light, depicting them as real people who are either suffering through the torture of prison or are deserving of redemption after serving their time. While no doubt an enlightened view, this topic is rather taboo for Japanese students and a more informed approach, such as presenting famous foreigners such as movie stars who are already admired in Japan that have struggled with law/drug problems in the past, may prove more successful. Other instances such as the topic of tattoos (1) and criminal activity (2) may also prove to be unpalatable for the Japanese learner. It is the opinion of this researcher that easing Japanese students into being exposed to foreign viewpoints on these topics with slightly lighter content may avoid any negative reactions since all three of these topics involve rigid cultural stigma in Japan.

Conclusion

This study has shown that out of the suggested textbooks for Advanced English II Level 5 in the Fall 2008 semester at Kansai Gaidai University, all textbooks were deficient in that their focus was mainly on inner circle countries, such as America, while providing insufficient focus on countries who study English (the expanding circle), such as Japan, and outer circle countries who have institutionalized English, such as India. When passages in these textbooks did mix country focus, a very high majority of these always had an inner circle country present as a character, theme, or locale, thus creating the stereotypical image of nonnative speakers learning English “in order to communicate with those from the inner circle” (Matsuda, 2002: 195). This inner circle focus and big brother-like presence does not correlate with current changes in world economics, current thinking on appropriate ESL content, current users of English, world initiatives for equality among races, the needs and goals of certain learners, and the variety of teacher origins. Matsuda (2002: 196) supports this view in her rationale that “exposure to outer circle and expanding circle countries...would help students understand that English use is not limited to the inner circle.”

Active Skills for Reading: Book 1 by N. Anderson proved to be the most culturally sensitive

and Paragraph Writing by D. Zemach & C. Islam the least.

This study also revealed the presence of inappropriate content in regards to the variety of teacher origins and in regards to the target users' cultural norms.

As an aside, it is worth noting that before this study was done, the evaluated texts were reviewed for use in an upcoming semester, but without the specific focus that this study took. Interestingly, textbook 4, the most balanced textbook in regards to the above results, was chosen. Seemingly, if a teacher is already well informed in regards to criteria such as was considered in this study, an exhaustive study such as this each and every time one selects a textbook would clearly be excessive. Rather, publishers/editors/materials writers should make note of such concerns when materials are being created, therefore freeing up precious time for teachers to concentrate on their lessons.

Another interesting note would be the fact that one of textbook 4's passages (see Figure 1) actually covers one of the topics discussed in this paper: the status of English as an international language and its dwindling 'ownership' by inner circle countries. Such a passage is insightful and unique in that it openly discusses an issue that students may not even realize they are affected by.

Figure 1 Which English Will We Speak, Active Skills for Reading Book 1: 33

Although English is called the “international language,” there are actually quite a few varieties of English that exist around the world. English, of course, originated in England; but soon English spread to all of Britain, and different varieties began to exist. Varieties of English that are often taught to language students are British, American, Canadian, Irish, Australian, and New Zealand. Native speakers of English from these countries number more than 380 million.

There is a second group of countries that have their own varieties of English. Their histories have been directly touched by one of the English-speaking civilizations. Therefore, they use English in various important ways within their own government and everyday life. India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Kenya are examples of this group. The total number of speakers in this group is more than 300 million.

In a third group of countries, English is widely used as a foreign language. However, citizens use their native language within their own government and in everyday life. Some countries in this group are China, Russia, Japan, Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, and the countries of Western Europe. Some people calculate the number of speakers in this group to be as many as one billion — and it is growing fast.

This changing situation of English raises many questions. Will people continue to admire the English of countries such as Britain or the United States? Will another language replace English as the international language? Will new varieties of English develop in other countries such as China or Russia? Or, in future centuries, will a new international variety of English develop that doesn't belong to any one country — one that is spoken just as correctly in Asia or Africa as in Europe?

McGroarty and Taguchi (2005) point out that “relatively little progress has been made” in the evaluation of ESL textbooks (as cited in Frodesen & Holten, 2005: 211). Time limitations, as mentioned above, do prove to be an obstacle for teachers when doing preliminary evaluations. What teachers can do is take the criteria used in this study under consideration when they scan a potential textbook. Since no ideal textbook truly exists, these criteria should also be considered while they use the textbook in class and post-course. Rubdy (2003) feels that “a coursebook by itself has little operational value until the teacher populates it with his/her own ideas and experiences and brings it to life” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 49). Richards and Lockhart (1994) also support the view of post-course reevaluation by encouraging teachers to

adopt “a reflective approach” (as cited in Tomlinson, 1998: 222). Teachers can modify texts by adding, deleting, expanding, abridging, simplifying, reordering, and/or replacing materials (Islam & Mares, 2003, as cited in Tomlinson, 1998). Another tool could be Clark’s (1989) view that learners should also be involved in materials adaptation (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003). In these ways, even a deficient textbook can be used effectively.

This study has shown that attention needs to be paid to the issue of whether or not teaching materials are culturally sensitive. When materials are deemed inappropriate, they “need to be adapted in a principled manner to reflect needs within particular teaching contexts, current understanding of second language acquisition and good teaching practices” (Islam & Mares, as cited in Tomlinson, 2003: 100). If such steps are taken, they will no doubt bring the ESL community one step further towards the goal of providing students/teachers with culturally sensitive/appropriate materials in regards to the teaching of English as an international language. When that is achieved, it will help students to “raise their awareness of the sociolinguistic complexity of the English language” (Matsuda, 2002: 185) while avoiding misunderstanding and offense to both teachers and students, thus providing the basis for proper and culturally sensitive language acquisition.

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(James Rogers 国際言語学部講師)