A Critical Analysis of Cultural Content in EFL Materials

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The following study aims at exploring and describing the type of cultural content found in English Language textbooks in Japan. Considering learner’s diverse language needs, it has become increasingly important that English as a Foreign Language be taught with accompanying communication skills including critical thinking, intercultural knowledge and understanding as well as a heightened sense of cultural awareness. For the purposes of this study, cultural awareness raising will be defined as any activity which actively seeks to engage learners and broaden their understanding, increase sensitivity and promote flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity. As most language learning contexts are limited to the classroom environment and communication opportunities with members of the target language community are few, it is essential that texts and materials provide this missing element of realism as accurately and objectively as possible. This has often been problematic especially when deciding whose culture to represent, and how to present cultural content without stereotypes or essentialist perspectives, while keeping information relevant and interesting. Most textbooks are marketed for wide audiences and therefore tend to generalise in terms of skills, acceptable subjects, or cultural content. “To market texts for any specific demographic in this context would be unprofitable.” (Oxford University Press, Marketing Director 2008).

In evaluating textbooks on their effectiveness in this regard, the following areas will be considered: Goals and outcomes, the extent to which content is used to raise cultural awareness or otherwise engage the students in a way that promotes interest and a positive understanding of the target language and relevant communities. Presentation, how cultural information is included, omitted or simplified. Practicality, including general factors determining how cultural content is balanced to accommodate immediate, short term concerns such as teachability, marketability and relevance. By analyzing various textbooks from both local and international publishers, this study provides a representative sample of materials, highlighting priorities, shortcomings and methods for raising cultural awareness in Japan. Widdowson (2005) has criticized typical EFL texts as failing to engage students while providing limited and unrealistic cultural information. He suggests that teachers use the culture that already exists in the classroom along with more authentic materials which will be of greater interest and relevance to the students. Most teachers however are not trained to do this and still rely heavily on the text books for content, inspiration and perspective. As a result it is quite difficult to break the cycle and create materials with broader objectives and cultural content.

In considering the implementation of a viable and appropriate cultural awareness raising method, a primary concern involves the content, usage, and goal of texts and materials. In the context of ELT in Japan, materials developing and publishing is a vast industry and there are a plethora of textbooks and related multimedia available for teachers and students. In the University context, few schools synchronize texts with goals or curriculum and lessons, content and subsequent syllabi are typically modeled after the textbook without considering students, levels, needs or goals. Although textbook writers and publishers,
in order to appear more innovative and flexible, have embraced technology and adapted materials and methods accordingly, including CD’s, DVD’s, downloadable content and media as well as extensive web support for teachers and students, efforts to modify texts to include more culturally sensitive and awareness raising content or methodology to coincide with user’s evolving needs as speakers of English as an International Language, have been largely neglected, other than at a superficial level (Stapleton 2000).

In order to be relevant and capture the interests of students, texts and materials are loaded with references to iPods, blogging, hybrid cars and other examples of the latest trends and technology. However, this, cutting edge innovation is largely limited to content as methods, for the most part, do not reflect the changing times or the needs of students (Takanashi 2004). English as a Global Language and Intercultural Communication are by no means new concepts and have long been regarded as essential components of language learning. Although these ideas have become quite popular in Japan over the past few years no serious advances towards incorporating them into viable cultural awareness pedagogy seem apparent. The mythical native speaker’s language and culture remain the benchmarks from which to gauge proficiency and competence while the notion of English as an international language with its many diverse cultures, forms and representations remains elusive and abstract. Cultural references in textbooks are in fact mostly limited to titles, unit chapters and arbitrary content or tourist information. When culture is presented it is usually either biased, oversimplified or without a validating context. Shi (2000) studied 40 texts used in College English classes in China and found that all information was either selected from western publications or focused primarily on western content. The limited nature of cultural information in Language is a general problem in the textbook publishing industry and there are several basic reasons for this which will be outlined and explained in the following:

1. Introducing target and learners specific culture is not cost effective when publishers are marketing their books for the widest audience possible. Peter Viney an author of several textbooks used throughout Japan states that “Some books are highly market-specific. But many textbooks are global, and you will find them being used in many countries simultaneously. Some learners prefer a book addressed to their particular problems, others like to feel part of a global pattern. Most of the major adult courses used in Japan are also used in other countries. There are some odd patterns, but the reason that Japanese characters in books tend to meet Latin Americans is because of the sales pattern of books in American English.” ELT Think Tank October 2000. http://www.eltnews.com/features/thinktank/006_pv.shtml

2. Designing books which engage students and provide relevant and unbiased information is very difficult and time consuming requiring much more research and piloting than usually carried out for standard textbooks.

3. Textbooks are designed primarily with teachers in mind, focus tends to be on simple and easily comprehensible input which requires minimal preparation or explanation by the teacher. It is after all the teachers who choose the textbooks and it would be a fair assumption that teachers will select a book which they are comfortable teaching over one that has cultural content with which they are not readily familiar.

4. Students goals for language learning a varied and diverse it would be equally useless to create a text geared towards an assumed target culture and designing culture general materials without understanding level, interests, background or goals.

Considering that most EFL materials are predominantly skill based, eliciting largely irrelevant behavior out of context in order to prepare learners to enter, interact with and ultimately communicate
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with members of specific target cultures. Many texts addressing cultural content are limited to offering overt, “tourist culture” or teaching abstract and irrelevant facts which are often presented with bias and consequently do little more than reinforce stereotypes, and exaggerate or misrepresent the culture (Kramsch, 1993, Byram, 1997, Moran, 2001). “To date the teaching of culture largely consists of the passing on of information regarding various dimensions of the target culture, such as geography, education, food and drink, tourist highlights, politics, the economy, etc. “(Sercu, 2002:62). With regard to cultural content in TESL or TEFL, the majority of materials and texts are based on models of American Culture and are thus geared towards developing a very limited, loosely defined and not necessarily appropriate brand of cultural awareness (Fenner 2001). Clarke and Clarke (1990) report that there is much stereotyping and bias in British EFL materials especially in areas of gender, race, class, and religion. They conclude that Britishness seems to be the standard, and cross-cultural perspectives in communication are deemphasized or denied. Although much has been written in criticism of such approaches and materials there are few suggestions on how to improve methods, materials or models in a way that would lead to the development of an acceptable, appropriate and viable pedagogy. In order to counter balance the majority of center based materials being plied on the expanding periphery of non-native EFL contexts, Canagarajah (2002), has called for a rethinking of the publishing process which has teachers playing a key role in researching, developing and implementing unique materials for their particular environments. Considering the growing demand and increasing need for more well rounded globally aware, communicatively competent societies, relatively little has been published on how best to achieve this. Although trends have begun to lean towards further exploring cultural content in language learning as “a pedagogy of difference”, (Giroux 1993) this does not indicate any kind of paradigm shift and much is left to be explored.

The EFL text book remains the dominant medium for providing language learners with examples of target language usage, cultural content and information, however, most texts remain one dimensional, biased and fail to engage the learner in any meaningful way. The modern student is used to multitasking and interacting with easily accessible and relevant information characteristic of evolving media such as blogs, online social networks, video games or chat rooms (facebook, youtube or twitter). Teachers cannot compete with the cultural influences students are exposed to outside the classroom teachers need to feel that they are contributing to these influences not competing with them. (Fenner 2001:51). Therefore, there is a greater need and challenge for texts to capture the learner’s interest with engaging content. Méndez García (2005) in a study of intercultural communication materials concluded that it is important to acquaint the learner with the target language culture for the purposes of:

- enhancing students’ knowledge of the world and their knowledge of foreign communities;
- familiarizing them with the most salient behavioral patterns of the target societies;
- promoting attitudes of respect and tolerance;
- fostering reflection upon one’s own culture;
- emphasizing the relative role of one’s cultural assumptions or developing real intercultural communication in an intercultural world.

If students are able to master these skills, they will be much better equipped to take initiative and responsibility for developing their own cultural awareness raising strategies and actively engage and interact with the cultures they encounter in the real world.

In order to determine, evaluate and describe the cultural information included in many EFL materials the following will report on a critical analysis and comparison from a sample of representative, best selling or popular EFL texts from 9 publishers, 4 local and 5 international, actively creating materials for the Japanese EFL context.
The following study examined examples of cultural information in textbooks and evaluated them based on the following criteria:

1. Do the texts actively seek to engage the students through language or cultural content?
2. Do the texts offer an unbiased perspective of culture?
3. Do the texts consider the learners culture?
4. Is there any connection or reference made to the learners own culture in order to establish relevance?
5. Is culture used purely as a source of facts to learn about or is it presented as stimulating material which students can learn from?
6. Do the texts further basic stereotypes or is material presented objectively for students to make their own discoveries and interpretations?
7. What are the goals of the text books? What is the actual purpose of including cultural content?
8. Are the goals of the text a linear approach to developing native like proficiency or a more holistic approach to understanding the diverse culture and communication styles of English as an international Language?

The EFL textbooks considered in this study were selected based on their representativeness of the most commonly used materials in Japan. These included a sample of texts from major publishers both local and international, A sample of texts which claim to raise cultural awareness or have such an implied meaning in the title or texts which are purely skills based and do not intentionally include or actively seek to present cultural content, and a sample of texts which are aimed primarily at developing English Communication skills focusing on listening and speaking abilities and exercises most commonly associate with the “conversation class.”

Using the questions outlined above, this survey will organize analyze and described cultural content and methodology by relating results and information to the following five criterion:

- **Goals:** Skills, knowledge, understanding or awareness. Systemic knowledge of the formal properties of language like semantics and syntax or schematic knowledge like culture (Socially acquired knowledge) Widdowson 1990
- **Tasks:** Active; Allows students to reflect, engage, process or synthesize cultural information Passive; Students are just subjected to arbitrary tourist information through teacher centered passive learning, which they cannot connect with in any meaningful way, not relevance or connection to their culture, perspective or reality.
- **Presentation:** Intentional or unintentional, As content material only not specifically for raising awareness. As examples of culture for raising awareness In connection with learners realities and cultures for relevance, Direct or indirect, implied or stated
- **Perspective and Representation:** Center or Peripheral, Biased, stereotypical, ethnocentric, or diverse
- **Cultural Artifacts:** People, Objects, Places, Language, Activities

**Method and Analysis**

**International Publishers: Conversation Texts**


One of the most popular and longest selling of the widely used Impact Series. This text aims at stimulating discussion and critical thinking on “timely topics” relevant to unspecified students. Although no clear cultural goals are stated, the topics provide and underlying cultural awareness theme, as many of the characters have non western names and the scenarios are often set in international venues. The introduction does claim to promote and understanding of diverse values, international English and Global communication, however the methodology and content remains dominantly western based.
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Goals: Cultural awareness, critical thinking, speaking and listening.

Text: Impact Topics, Unit: 9 The Boyfriend, Theme: International Marriage

The goal of this unit is to stimulate thinking on cross-cultural differences by highlighting certain, problems and stereotypes which surface as a result of an intended international marriage. By providing a dialogue on a thought provoking topic, the purpose here is to motivate students to think in English and engage in conversation and discussion by sharing their ideas and opinions on the subject. Sarah and her father are discussing her plans to marry her boyfriend Kimo. None of the characters are given any cultural identity or orientation apart from Kimo who is, through his non-western name, somehow supposed to embody and arbitrary otherness. By assuming western, cultural values it is difficult for peripheral students to identify with the conversation, the characters or the situation. The father flatly refuses Sarah’s wishes to marry by stating “Kimo is not one of us…” but fails to qualify such direct statements or anchor them with clues from the students own culture. The text attempts to be neutral and thus culturally appropriate or sensitive, however the nature of the conversation, the tone and the register are obviously white, North American and thus lose their relevance to students who have no related experiences. It would be better if no cultural assumptions were made and students were left to project their own images onto the characters and the situation by naming them and describing the scenario themselves. As it is this example only serves to further any perceived dichotomy of us vs. them and despite its intention runs counter to any goals of cultural awareness raising.

The only critical thinking, stimulating activity asks the students to decide and elaborate on which differences such as skin color, religion or language are the greatest barriers to human relationships. This is particularly dangerous as it provides no opportunity for reflection or understanding and only serves to reinforce any previously held reservations of otherness.

In subsequent units, characters have names ranging from Luis, Keiko, Kan, Kwan, Mark, Susan, Dr. Moon, Hye-Jin, Mali and Yeon-Suk without any reference to culture or significance of the name. Yet all characters seem to embody western values despite the intended intercultural atmosphere implied in an exotic name. The only characters in fact with Japanese names, Akira and Keiko, are put in a scenario so completely un-Japanese in nature that the whole unit becomes nonsensical and ridiculous to Japanese students. When Akira and Keiko kiss in front of the university library. By having Japanese characters performing actions which are strongly considered social and cultural taboos makes the topic lose its credibility and relevance. The students no longer take it seriously and the motivation for discussion and reflection evaporates behind the only question which arises; Are they really Japanese? The effect of this is so great that it is not even possible to engage in a discussion on the origins of values, or appropriateness.

Similarly, In Unit 6, Housework, Kwan and Hye-Jin are an unmarried couple living together. They are having problems because Kwan refuses to do housework so Hye-Jin writes to a local newspaper for advice. Although this may provide an opportunity to analyze cultural differences in gender roles, despite the characters both being from the same culture, it skates over bigger hurdles like the acceptability of living together before marriage or the airing of personal problems in a public forum. The magnitude of these widely held cultural taboos overshadows the main theme and causes the whole exercise to be incomprehensible to most students.

Unit 3 of the same series is titled “Who needs the local language?” involves a discussion of two expats men regarding learning a local language versus only relying on English. Although the unit potentially offers some perspective raising opportunities in considering the role of English as a global language and minority languages, the story does not go beyond the characters personal bias. Unfortunately no reference is made to the cultures associated with the languages, cultural nuances or communication differences. Considering that this is an EFL text, there is not even an example
to support either case or promote the learning and understanding of English. The unit concludes with exercises titled “becoming international” these ask the students to hypothesize on the best way to become an international person by choosing statements they agree with such as; study culture and customs, learn language or make international friends. Unfortunately these statements are so broad and obvious that they do not allow for much reflection from the students. It would be much more useful here if the information and impetus for cultural learning came from the students. The final exercise has the students plan a trip to a country and is an ultimate example of promoting tourist culture and reinforcing stereotypes. By having the students decide what they should bring, what they will eat and where they will stay based only on their existing knowledge of a country. Each unit also contains a section called “Culture Corner” which is intended to promote cultural learning by providing facts, statistics and other trivia about specific countries. This information ranges from a list of percentages of men who do house work in various countries, how to say I love you in 10 different languages, to the top 10 problems people have learning a foreign language, these are at best stereotypical and without context, references or qualifying information, misleading and ambiguous. The units reviewed in this series have the potential for being strong instruments of cultural awareness raising by including interesting subjects and themes for promoting reflection and critical thinking. However the format, language and presentation fail to engage students and in many cases even have the opposite effect. A text of this type would be much more successful if the information and scenarios were more authentic and the excises more open ended, in this way the students would be able to bring their own realities to the lesson and thereby compare, contrast and speculate on the origin and reason behind certain cultural differences. This would also provide the realism and relevance required in cultural learning. If the students are able to invest their own cultural values and information into the process then they will be more motivated to actively participate in inquiry and discussion as well as learn from each other.

Text: My First Passport, Angela Buckingham, Oxford University Press, 2005

Among the most successful books in the passport series, this text, subtitled “English for international communication,” is geared towards preparing students for experiences abroad. The goals in the introduction explicitly state that the focus is on survival English for Japanese students interacting in a foreign culture or welcoming foreign visitors to Japan. There are set themes and language functions such as asking directions, talking about food, customs or family and these are set in three different contexts, Hong Kong, Canada and Japan. The characters in the dialogues are all Japanese students interacting in various situations with members of their host family. The exercises are mostly teacher centered activities requiring students to fill in blanks, listen to a dialogue and then practice the phrases while substituting various vocabulary words. Although there is cultural information included in the scenarios such as descriptions of the host families house, routines, family structure and relationships, there is no opportunity for the students to reflect on these. Each unit follows essentially the same pattern of introducing and practicing language chunks to be used in certain situations when travelling abroad and is therefore, virtually indistinguishable from any standard English phrase book. There is nothing in the lessons to indicate an effort to promote international English or cultural awareness. For a text that claims to provide survival skills for experience abroad there is no provision made for the unexpected or unpredictable characteristics of language and social interaction. Students are led to believe that the phrases they learn will be appropriate in the scenarios described in the text however in reality this is highly unlikely. Flexibility in communication, negotiation of meaning and learning to be appropriate by observing, evaluating and interacting are arguably the most important survival strategies for cross cultural communication. By failing to include these elements the text actually serves to limit the student’s awareness and ability to participate fully and successfully in any given,
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Evolving communication scenario. The appendices of the text do offer some grounding in the learners own culture by translating and explaining critical elements in Japanese as well as providing a section entitled “my story” where the books characters reflect on their own experiences and how they learned from them. The best example of this involves a student visiting an American family’s home and being surprised that, contrary to her expectations, everyone is asked to take their shoes off before entering, as is done in Japan. The lesson she states here is that it is best to follow what everyone else does or ask specifically how to behave before assuming an action is appropriate. This type of exercise is an example of cultural awareness raising as it clearly demonstrates reflection on differences, reevaluation of previously held beliefs and active learning from rather than about culture.

Text: World Link, Susan Stempleski, Thomson and Heinle, 2005

World Link is a skill based text focusing on developing English fluency with an international flavor. The goals stated include vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, and autonomous communication. Each unit follows a similar format starting with the introduction of a theme and some key words followed by an activity asking students to describe a picture and create a dialogue based on the scenario depicted therein. For the most part the activities are open ended and require students to think using English in creative and realistic ways. In terms of language learning such a method can be quite successful as the students are required to imagine a context and decide how to use language appropriately. The cultural aspects of this text are largely ignored accept on an overt and trivial level designed to provide the international “World Link” dimension alluded to in the book’s title. The examples of this included in unit 6 Communication, consisted of a list of greetings in varies countries, advice on what certain gestures mean in different cultures and a set of pictures depicting various people engaged in non-verbal communication actions. As these are all out of context and without qualifying information they are of limited use to the students, these examples do not provide anything to learn from and will only serve to build up stereotypes and expectations of what people in such and such a country do. Again many of the characters have non standard names such as Pilar and Jesus and these only confuse and distract the students from the issues. The arbitrary inclusion of non-western names without context or clarification does not provide the students with any useful cultural information. This text should apply the same open ended approach to cultural awareness raising as it does to language learning, in this way students could engage the content from their own perspectives and creatively evaluate and adapt their communication strategies accordingly.


The interchange series is a staple of the EFL textbook lineup, having been in print for almost 20 years. The most recent edition stresses English for International Communication and differs from previous versions in its inclusion of cultural information and more international scenarios. Most of the characters are of different backgrounds with usually at least one a native speaker from the U.S. or U.K. In unit 5 Tell me about your family, Ryan from America and Soo-Mi from Korea are having a conversation on family, marriage, divorce and gender roles

Students are asked to paraphrase the facts stated by each character in the dialogue (ie) What does Ryan say about families in the U.S.? The rest of the unit focuses on understanding statistics with selected information on American family trends and overgeneralizations regarding other countries such as in Australia 87% of married couples have children. Whether true or not such a statement without context or qualification only creates an arbitrary image in the students mind regarding the target community, without understanding the circumstances involved or evaluating, comparing or learning from the cultural information.

The writing exercise which follows, encourages students to reflect on cultural information. This section begins with a sample statement “In my country most
people get married at age…” Such examples are too general and abstract to be of any usefulness to the student’s cultural or linguistic learning. Such an exercise for the purpose of cultural awareness raising should be less matter of fact and more open ended and subjective. Perhaps instead asking questions like; What are important family values and how do they effect marriage trends? How and why might these be different cross culturally or individually? The final section of the unit consists of a reading comprehension exercise on the changing American family. Here students read vague statements from five Americans regarding family matters and are asked to describe the different problems in each family. Although this exercise requires reflection on the culture it is biased in nature and does not provide an opportunity for contemplation or objective comparison with the students own realities. Such activities are only useful if the cultural information comes from the students and is evaluated within context in order to fully appreciate and understand the causes, effects and interpretations which constitute awareness.


This two book series of “communication across cultures” is a conversation style text that takes a more active approach to cultural awareness raising. The introductory J-Talk (L. Lee, K. Yoshida and S Ziolkowski 2000) text has obvious cultural themes, which are related to the students own culture and explained using examples in Japanese. This is helpful for the students and allows them to think about and reflect on issues, language and culture. However the exercises and content are oversimplified and so extremely limited and arbitrary in nature that they fail to engage students on any deeper level. Unit 2, Kiss, Bow or Shake hands, directly addresses questions of appropriates in cross-cultural communication. The unit begins with an exercise asking students to interpret four pictures in terms of the gestures, situations and relationships depicted. This would seem like a worthwhile exercise for raising awareness except that the suggested responses are provided and there is nothing left for the students to think about or bring to the discussion. The subsequent exercises consist mostly of multiple choice and fill in the blank activities and are cultural in content only. The focus is on language and vocabulary not on understanding or reflecting on the communication theme. The final exercises follow the same pattern asking the students to match gestures with their corresponding meaning and country. The choices are seemingly arbitrary as there is nothing to link the trivia with any deeper understanding of people, culture or communication. Canada, China, Japan and India are selected seemingly at random and the various gestures used in each country are described as prescriptively as grammar rules. The final activity involves the students selecting a country and role playing a conversation using gestures as if they were from that country, the other students watch and try to guess which country is being modeled. Such an activity runs the risk of trivializing cultural awareness and objectifying manners, customs, values, and communication styles as facts to be studied, practiced and remembered. This text takes a structural, grammar translation style approach to teaching culture when a more open ended interpretative and flexible approach to learning from culture is required.

The second text in the series Identity (J. Shaules, H. Tsujioka and M. Iida 2004) is slightly higher in level and offers a more in-depth inquiry into culture related topics. This edition similarly tries to actively address cultural issues and raise awareness. The goals are clearly stated as promoting discussion on cultural themes and the topics included range from Values, Communication Styles, Gender and Culture, Diversity, Politeness and Global Community. At a glance this text appears to be the ideal cultural awareness raising tool and the content is well researched and presented. If teachers are willing to skip the exercises and create their own plan for using the content in their classes this text could be quite useful. However as with the previous text in the series, the activities are very one dimensional and fail to engage the students or encourage any critical inquiry or reflection. Unit 2 “Values”, aims at understanding the underlying aspects
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of human behavior, culture and communication by highlighting what different people consider important. The first exercise involves listening to a dialogue between two students in London. Kijana an exchange student from Nairobi receives some bad news from his family and informs his roommate Matt that he will have to return to Kenya to manage the family business. Matt states that such demands are unfair and he doesn’t need to listen to what his family tells him to do. Following this the students are asked to check their comprehension and reflect on their own values by imagining how they would react in a similar situation. This is a good activity except that all the phrases and potential answers are predetermined and listed in a table. All the students need to do here is check the answer which best matches their opinion. The only introspective or critical thinking activity has the students elaborate on their preferences and choices for the future and for leading a happy life. Again most of the answers are provided and the amount students are able to contribute autonomously is limited. This is a clear example of text publisher’s efforts to produce more teacher friendly materials with easily presentable examples and checkable answers.


This comprehensive and highly internationally oriented text claims to “encourage students to make inter-cultural comparisons and share their opinions”. The book is basically a reading resource but also provides some opportunity for listening and speaking. The premise of the text is to give a complete overview of the English speaking world by providing 20 short essays written by people from the countries or regions where English is spoken. Each essay offers some facts, history, cultural information and perspective on the English language and the diversity of the people who speak it. The text is very clearly organized with each chapter presenting a short article, some quotes from famous citizens and some comprehension questions regarding the content of the reading. Each section concludes with a short listening activity which is usually authentic, such as a radio broadcast from Hong Kong before the colony was returned to China. After listening students are asked their opinions, make predictions regarding missing information and share their ideas on any cultural assumptions connected with the main theme. In principle this is a worthwhile activity however the amount and scope of the questions is too limited to allow for much meaningful consideration of the information presented.

In the section on English in South-East Asia, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia are highlighted. Each country is represented by a brief article that describes one of the unique features of the region or the people. There is no introduction or basic explanation of the country in terms of geography, history, religion, society or people. Such basic information would be helpful in providing background or the context required for relevance and meaningful interpretation and reflection. The reading on Malaysia for example is a short anecdote on arranged marriages, although his is interesting it serves only to galvanize the students into thinking that his may be the norm in Malaysia, whereas highlighting the diversity of the country may be more useful for an intercultural awareness perspective. Each section also provides a brief overview of how English came to be part of the culture which would make for interesting discussion and comparison however there is no opportunity for this and it is presented purely as trivia. The only opportunity for reflection and discussion comes from the curious nature of the articles which range in theme from war, business and politics to music, literature and food. These are however only loosely connected to the featured countries and it is not possible to learn about the region or from the culture that is being described.

Although this book is quite well researched and organized it is designed for the widest possible audience. It is a text that could well be be used in the 20 regions of English speaking nations listed. The drawback of this marketing strategy is that students individual needs, cultures, learning styles and preferences are not considered and the books basic format remains a generalized western methodology. The text is teacher centered and does not really allow
for the students to engage with the material or bring much of their own culture and experience to the activity or lesson. The materials and content encourage passive learning of information and are perhaps better suited for self study. Although the content is interesting it is mostly academic in nature and there is little opportunity to engage in communication, or reflect on cultural information in a way that would serve to raise awareness. For this book to be successful in this regard, it would need to be heavily supplemented by student specific, teacher created materials that might motivate students to engage and reflect on the issues covered in connection with their own realities. This would however defeat the purpose of having a textbook in the first place.

Text: Culture in Action; Classroom Activities for Cultural Awareness, Y. Abe (etal.), Nan’un-do, 1998

This text is one of the older selections compared in this study and was chosen as it is one of the only titles which directly focuses on raising cultural awareness. In this way the goals are very straightforward and simple. Each unit presents a theme of self inquiry which requires students to reflect on a concept or question, hypothesize and generate information and ideas on a cultural value or artifact and then share their opinions. The communicative aspects are quite sparse limited to completing lists, ranking categories or filling in blanks. In terms of content, unit one addresses the question “What is culture?” Students hypothesize about this and are then asked to imagine where they would take a foreign visitor to Japan and why. Although this allows introspection and elaboration by considering foreign culture, students only have their own limited knowledge of what a foreigners is and will therefore most likely over-generalize, oversimplify and reinforce stereotypes through this type of exercise. Leading to answers like “I wouldn’t take an American guest to a tea ceremony because Americans don’t like to sit on the floor.” Unit two asks students to reflect on what it means to be Japanese. The question proposed is “Who is more Japanese?” This is followed by a list of qualities ranging from race, and place of birth to ability to read and write kanji. This may lead to appreciation and awareness of Japanese culture but will not prepare or help learners with understanding others who are different.

The cultural elements of this text focuses more on cultural theory and does not address any of the practical elements of communication or interaction which are the main purposes of raising cultural awareness. The text would be much better if it included some interactive tasks and activities from...
specific examples geared towards eliciting more practical skills. As an interesting supplement for advanced learners this book is ideal however on any other level the information provided is mostly irrelevant and inaccessible to students without an international background or experience with which to compare and contrast.

What is missing in this text is the perspective of “other” everything is grounded in or taken from Japanese culture and there is no possibility for comparison or development of awareness. Students are prompted to learn about and question their own culture but without countering examples there is no possibility for growth in an international sense nor true reflection or cultural appreciation. Students are prompted to learn about and question their own culture but without countering examples there is no possibility for growth in an international sense nor true reflection or cultural appreciation. Although the book does not try to stereotype or simplify other cultures, it in effect homogenizes all Japanese which is equally counterproductive. Students are left thinking Japan and Japanese culture are one paradigm and the rest of the world is different. This runs counter to the initiative of a cultural awareness pedagogy. If the teacher is required to provide this missing perspective then the purpose of having a textbook is questionable.


As with the previous text this title focuses on cultural content. The goal of this resource is however ambiguous as it is designed as a reader and the theme of culture is purely arbitrary and appears to have been added as an afterthought. The focus of the text is speed reading and comprehension. In this regard, content is irrelevant as the extent of inquiry and reflection is purely structural. The content material is however interesting in that it simplifies the research of intercultural communication pioneers Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede with clear examples. Students learn about cultural dimensions, communication styles, collectivist, individualist and high and low context dimensions however they are not encouraged to reflect on these concepts or apply them to either themselves or a different culture. Student interaction is limited to comprehension questions, true or false questions, fill in the blank or simple yes/no exercises. In concept this book could be very useful but requires a section which allows students to expand their thinking and extend information and concepts to the real world. Unit one which asks the question “What is culture? Provides some common and vague definitions such as shared values, beliefs and behaviors but this is obvious and doesn’t help to enlighten the learners with respect to understanding culture. The examples provided are similarly vague with statements like “Americans are well know individualists.” and “Norwegians are strongly dislike standing out...” There is no context or qualifying information and therefore this material serves only to crystallize stereotypes of perceived national differences and actually hinders the cultural awareness process that would otherwise be one of the main goals of teaching intercultural communication.


This text follows a similar trend as the previous two examples in that it proposes to develop cultural understanding and in that is mostly structural and analytical in its approach. A fundamental difference with this text is the focus on real communication in the form of dialogue as opposed to reading of pure text. Unit one begins with the standard question “What does culture mean to you?” Here however instead of providing an arbitrary or academic answer, a conversation between two students discussing this question is modeled. The students in the dialogue give their opinion, disagree and try to think of a common ground to reconcile their differences in opinion. Although the characters are Japanese in name, the dialogue, tone, manner and nature of the conversation is obviously American or western in nature. The characters provide some examples of what culture may or may not be and then simply decide to agree that culture is just shared customs, values and beliefs. At this point the text begins to follow the standard pattern of structure, testable skills and teacher centered learning. The exercises that follow the dialogue include a translation into Japanese a comprehension check and several cloze type vocabulary building and
matching activities. From this it becomes clear that the goal of the text is not what is implied by the title “Understanding Culture.” as there is no opportunity at all for the students to engage with the material or provide any of their own ideas or information on the topic. This is especially surprising given that the theme is: What does culture mean to you? Nevertheless, the book is not designed to provide any insight into culture or communication and is written as a purely skill based text geared towards developing vocabulary and reading comprehension.

For cultural awareness purposes, it would have been useful to have the students interact with the material and each other by either; acting out the dialogue, perhaps changing certain parts or including their opinions using the dialogue as a framework, reflecting on the content as it relates to their knowledge of Japan and other countries, speculating as to the accuracy or validity of the information, brainstorming some other ideas or generally engaging with the material in a deeper and more meaningful way.

**Text: Canadian Holiday, L. Yoffe (etal.), Ikubundo, 2000**

This text differs from other domestic publications in that it is purposely designed to prepare students for travel and interaction with a specific target culture. There is a story that unfolds throughout the book which follows the main character, a Japanese University student named Midori, as she prepares to visit Canada and subsequently interacts with a variety of different Canadians during her travels. The content is in dialogue form highlighting Midori’s Canadian experiences as she converses with people like Pierre, Renee and Bruce to find out about Canada. Although the communication is realistic in that it provides a context and some relevance as many students will likely make similar excursions, the content is quite arbitrary and borderers on stereotypical. Much of the interaction is prescribed language that could be found in any English text book published anywhere in the past 30 years. There is very little cultural information other than references to geography or climate. Such facts tend to be common knowledge or commonly held stereotypes that most people already know and associate with Canada. The content also fails to prepare students for real communication with Canadians or, illustrate the diversity of the population. Communication is treated as a difficulty highlighting the typical problems Japanese are expected to have regarding decision making, travel and interaction with foreigners. This does not show students how they may overcome these difficulties or explain why they might occur but seem to serve only as entertainment or to create the “Canadian” atmosphere implied by the book’s title. The activities are similarly of a structural nature and consist of vocabulary building and reading comprehension exercises. As with previous texts, there is no opportunity for critical thinking, evaluation or reflection on the content or cultural information. The students are presented with images of culture as dynamic as the random vocabulary words featured in each scenario. In this way the material becomes very dry and unrealistic, serving only to reinforce the expectations of travelling abroad rather than prepare them for the unexpected.

It would be much more beneficial if learners discovered through Midori that if they went to Vancouver that; their host families may not be of white Anglo-Saxon heritage but perhaps Sikh, Lebanese or Korean, there are many languages spoken besides French and English and if they were to walk around downtown, no one would look at them and assume they were tourists. It is after all the challenging of commonly held assumptions and preconceptions that is cultural awareness.

**Conclusion**

The majority of texts reviewed in this survey, fall short in meeting the specifications required for effective cultural awareness raising, highlighted at the outset. Although several titles do address some of the criteria, the combination of these elements, more so than the inclusion of any one of the parts are what foster and develop optimal intercultural inquiry, awareness and understanding. Considering the eight
points used for evaluation, very few texts provided
either an opportunity for reflection or relating cultural
elements back to the students own culture or even a
means for the students to expand on the content and
extend it to experiences in the real world in a way
that would promote cultural awareness. From the
eight questions proposed for evaluation, the following
conclusions can be made.

1. **Do the texts actively seek to engage the students through language or cultural content?** Many
texts have goals aimed at engaging the students
with interesting an relevant language and
content however much of this is out of context
and ambiguous. The approach of presentation
and inquiry of exercises and activities is
often too limited and one dimensional for
deeper understanding or self motivated and
autonomous learning.

2. **Do the texts offer an unbiased perspective of culture?** Several texts do try to maintain
an unbiased or neutral perspective of culture
however the methods underlying culture such
as communication styles and values tend to be
heavily western based.

3. **Do the texts consider the learners culture?**
Most texts do not consider the learner’s
culture as this would be unfeasible in terms of
marketability for international publishers and
undesirable for many local publishers who
have obligations to meet specific requirements
for teacher centered materials and assessment
criteria.

4. **Is there any connection or reference made to the learners own culture in order to establish relevance?** Establishing relevance does not
seem to be a high priority for justifying content.
Reference to learner’s cultures is usually in the
form of translation or allusion to an expected
difference or stereotype.

5. **Is culture used purely as a source of facts to learn about or is it presented as stimulating material which students can learn from?**
Many texts especially those produced by local
publishers tend to focus on structures and any
cultural content is typically used as information
or reading material to practice and learn
language structures such as vocabulary and
reading comprehension.

6. **Do the texts further basic stereotypes or is material presented objectively for students to make their own discoveries and interpretations?**
Most texts do nothing to dispel previously held beliefs and stereotypes and many texts
indirectly reinforce the notion that Japanese
have a natural difficulty in international
situations because cultures are so different
and unique. Students are encouraged towards
acceptance rather than inquiry.

7. **What are the goals of the text books?** What
is the actual purpose of including cultural content? The goals and purpose for including
cultural content tends to be varied. In the case
of international publishers several texts actively
seek to help learners understand cultures.
However with the local publications the goals
remain structural and the inclusion of cultural
content is for the most part arbitrary.

8. **Are the goals of the text a linear approach to developing native like proficiency or a more holistic approach to understanding the diverse culture and communication styles of English as an international Language?** None of the
texts considered in this study had goals far
reaching enough to be of any help in answering
this question. Most materials remained either
teacher or classroom centered and were not
directly open to more autonomous learning
outside of the classroom. The nature of cultural
awareness raising requires that much of the
enquiry and learning continue outside the
classroom.

For the most part, the texts reviewed did not
actively engage students. Cultural content and
materials were generally presented out of context and
without any representative or anchoring information
which the students could use to gain relevance from their own culture and experiences. Most characters in dialogues and stories, although either culturally neutral or with an intentional international image, all possess characteristics, communication styles, values and attitudes which are of a stereotypical western, North American nature. This is perhaps the most critical failure in these texts to raise cultural awareness. According to Takanashi 2004, T.E. Hall, Hofstede, communication styles, orientations, high-low context collectivism, tatema/hone, uchi/soto play a strong role in effecting classroom and English communication in general these need to be considered and accommodated if students are to actively participate in activities and engage with the content and subsequent cultural information. Forced dialogue in the classroom without a topic that the learners can engage in dies out quickly. Without personal involvement, it is doubtful whether the learners acquire the skills that they need. (Ricoeur 1992).

Campbell (2000) argues that schools and teachers play an important role in preparing students for cultural pluralism. They do so by presenting a curriculum that reflects multiple perspectives on issues as well as diverse life experiences, both favourable and unfavourable, and by empowering students to identify the missing, misconstrued and misrepresented voices. If teachers are so inclined and have extra preparation time these examples offer and opportunity to analyse and explore the culture of the textbook. Discussing the types of bias, the reasons behind inclusion or exclusion of cultural information and perhaps a critical comparison of reality This will raise awareness of students own cultural learning strategies and allow them to actively consider the materials and culture they are exposed to and the effect it has on their communication ability. According to Ndura (2004) students must be made aware of textbook biases and their effect on their learning process, self-image and society. Instructional materials play the role of cultural mediators as they transmit overt and covert societal values, assumptions and images. Thus, they have the power to positively or negatively influence students’ perceptions of their new culture and their ability to acculturate and succeed. Consequently, careful examination of materials is necessary in order to maximise empowering learning experiences and reduce negative and confusing influences created by biased content. “Texts can be seen as representing the personal voice of culture”. (Fenner 2001:50)

A common problem in text books in Japan is that they are too prescriptive in nature. Most texts are crammed with exercises and explanations designed to be teacher friendly and avoid the problem of running out of materials to teach. However this runs counter to awareness raising goals and notions of communicative language teaching. For a student centered and controlled book which would foster autonomy and encourage student to actively engage with the content, simple is best. Texts need to be much more open-ended and flexible. Much of the content and ideas should come from the students and many of these activities would be more effective if the students had the freedom to do what they wanted with them. Kramsch (1998) defines people’s imagination as one layer of culture and this layer can be accessed by using stimulating texts. Text book writers and publishers should not be reluctant in producing materials with lots of blank space. Awareness raising activities cannot be teacher centered or controlled. Therefore the ideal text in considering this would merely provide a theme, some questions for stimulation and a task. Any explanation would need to be case by case or limited to elaborating on cultural information or guiding students in making connections to their own culture. EFL writers should try to build conceptual bridges between the culturally familiar and the unfamiliar in order not to give rise to conflicts in the learner’s ‘fit’ as he or she acquires English. Such bridges can be built, among other ways, through the use of comparisons as techniques of cross-cultural comprehension or the exploitation of universal concepts of human experience as reference points for the interpretation of unfamiliar data. (Alptekin 1993).

According to Honna (2000) English textbooks in Japan have long been deficient in the type and amount
of international content included. In comparison to other countries, texts in Japan tend to focus primarily on language structures and avoid the inclusion of any context or cultural information. This is largely a result of examination practices, the requirement for language to be quantifiable on a paper test and the experience and qualification of most non-native English teachers many of whom are uncomfortable teaching more abstract elements of language and culture. In recent years, to counter this, there has been a move to make materials more global. As a result many texts are saturated with cultural information without consideration of accuracy, purpose, presentation or practicality. Takanashi (2004) furthers this by stating that most materials are developed without considering Japanese learning styles and methods used for presenting content and eliciting responses are in direct conflict with the student’s fundamental learning and communication styles. Fenner (2001:54) proposes that, unless there is knowledge and understanding of both cultures, there is no dialogue between the two and it is difficult to obtain the necessary outside and critical perspective of one’s own culture as well as the target one, which must be a requirement for intercultural awareness.

Considerations and Strategies for overcoming bias in textbooks:

- Teachers need to increase their awareness of the various types of bias and their effects on students’ perceptions and learning experiences.
- Critically examine instructional materials
  - What are the short-term learning outcomes of the lesson?
  - What are the long-term positive and/or negative outcomes of the lesson?
  - What are the hidden messages contained in the lesson materials?
  - How do the lesson materials empower the students to become responsible citizens?
  - How do the materials empower the students to critically examine their life experiences and their relationships with others in their communities and the world?
- Do the lesson materials encourage the students to take charge of their lives and actively participate in the transformation of their world into one that is inclusive, equitable and just?
- Prepare supplementary teaching materials
- Teachers need to expose these issues, uncover relevant biases and actively engage the students in reflective and critical discussions of alternative perspectives and answers to perplexed questions.
- Listen to the students and absorb their unique experiences into the lesson.

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EFL 資料における文化の扱いへの批判的考察

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要約

この調査は EFL 資料における文化的な内容の検討である。言語学者の様々な目的を考えると、言語自体だけではなく、多文化理解や批判的考察などのコミュニケーション能力も教えることが徐々に重要になってきた。

言語学習機会が教室に限られている上、目標言語の母国語者との触れ合いが少ない。そのため、教科書や資料が現実性がないというこの欠陥を補うことが重要である。ただし、どちらの文化をどんな様に見せるかは困難な問題である。特にステレオタイプを避け、かつ文化を未身近で面白く見せることができるという考えられる。殆どの教科書と資料はより広い読者を対象としており、コミュニケーション能力や文化的な文脈を一般化する傾向がある。

よく、EFL 資料における文化への言及は章や本のタイトルや観光情報に限られている。さらに、文化は簡単にされすぎ、正当な文脈のない偏見に基づいたものである。

このような文化の狭い扱いがテキスト出版社産業の一般的な問題であるいくつかの理由をこの論文で述べる。

EFL 環境に影響を及ぼしている海外と国内の出版社の人気の EFL 資料を分析し、批判的な検討と比較を行う。

（2009 年 6 月 3 日受理）