

Cultural Representation in ELT Textbooks in Kashmir: A Case Study

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Abstract

Culture is considered as a significant dimension of language and language teaching. Given the central role of English language textbooks in Indian classrooms, it is important to study the representation of culture in these textbooks. The present study explores the cultural representation in general English textbooks used at the undergraduate level in the Union Territory of Kashmir. By analysing four textbooks, the study aimed at exploring the cultural representation of the textbooks by investigating the content of the textbooks, and the representation of people in terms of their race, gender and nationality. The study also explored the cultural content following the framework of cultural representation by Song (2013). The findings of the study revealed patterns of cultural bias and underrepresentation, highlighting the need for more inclusive and reflective educational materials. This research contributes to the discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy and calls for greater attention to diversity and equity in ELT materials.

Keywords: Language teaching materials; Culture; ELT textbooks in Kashmir

INTRODUCTION

Language learning in ELT goes far beyond mastering the linguistic structures only, encompassing means of communication effectively. With changes in approaches to language teaching, informed by the research in applied linguistics and social sciences, ELT has evolved over time from focusing on linguistic structures (Grammar translation method) to focusing on real life communication (Communicative approaches). Communication in real life does not occur out of context of which culture is a significant part, which means communication is not culture free (Cortazzi and Jinn, 1999). Successful communication with native speakers of a language, in this sense, means that the learners have an understanding of the target language's cultural knowledge. This issue makes the intercultural competence the focus of attention English learning-teaching. Familiarity with cross-cultural indicators through textbooks can help learners learn the target language effectively as they master the cultural contexts in which the target language is presented (Roohani and Molana, 2013). It means that the learners should learn about the cultures associated with the language and the people who use it but also learn to talk about

their own cultures in English (Atkinson, 1999; Kramsch, 1998). With the rise of EIL (English as an International Language), researchers are of the view that all cultures in the world are relevant in teaching English because there are more non-native English speakers than its native speakers and people who learn English have reasons other than communicating with its native speakers (Alptekin, 1993, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; McKay, 2003; Sharifian, 2015).

Research on cultural representation in ELT textbooks across the world has shown that there is an imbalance in the representation of cultures in the ELT textbooks (Aliakbari, 2005; Alonso & Ponte, 2017; Jindapitak & Boonsuk, 2018; Saemee & Nomnian, 2021; Deswila et al 2021; and Bose & Gao, 2022). There is an overrepresentation of cultures from colonizing nations or nations that wield colonizer like levels of power (Bose & Gao, 2022). The learners are at the receiving end of the information passed on by textbooks and often they find little opportunities to respond or challenge this information from the perspective of their own culture (Gray, 2000). Treating language as a value free code in language courses may deprive learners of the key dimensions of meaning and fail to equip them

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with necessary resources to recognize and respond appropriately to the cultural aspects of language in use (Pulverness & Tomilinson, 2003). A culture specific coursebook will only be of relevance to the learners understand the cultural background in which it is set and puts other learners, who are alien to the culture represented by the textbook, at a disadvantage (Cunningsworth 1984). English language teaching should include diverse global cultures in teaching materials (Nault, 2006) because it offers a more dynamic view of culture and language, enhancing ELT pedagogy (Baker, 2012) and prepares students for the superdiversity of languages and cultures in ELT (Baker, 2020).

PRESENT STUDY

Textbooks play a central role in English language Teaching in India. Textbooks are the main source of content and methodology around which the process of teaching-learning revolves. Both teachers and learners rely on the textbooks as the authentic source of language content, methodology to carry out various activities in the classroom and a checklist to measure their progress as provided by the various textbooks. ELT Textbooks in India are generally developed by government organizations such as NCERT and various state board textbooks for schools. Similarly, at the undergraduate level the ELT textbooks are developed by the postgraduate departments of English. These textbooks are not questioned as they are taken as the model textbooks for language teaching and learning and these textbooks symbolize the authority which the teachers must accept (Meganathan, 2010). There is not much research available on cultural representation in Indian ELT textbooks (Bose & Gao 2022).

The present study aims to analyse the cultural representation in the ELT textbooks in Kashmir at the undergraduate level. English is taught as a compulsory course at the undergraduate level in Kashmir. The textbooks are developed by the department of English, University of Kashmir and these textbooks are used in all the colleges associated with the university. Linguistically and culturally, Kashmir in itself is a microcosm

of India's linguistic and cultural diversity. Textbooks have a significant role in influencing the learners' worldviews because they enhance the students' understanding of different cultures and their own culture in relation to others (Song, 2013). On the other hand, biased textbooks lead to a biased worldview enhancing students to discriminate rather than appreciate the cultural diversity (Song, 2013). There has been no research on the cultural representation in the ELT textbooks in Kashmir. Therefore, it is significant to investigate how and in what forms the cultures are represented in the ELT textbooks at the undergraduate level in Kashmir.

This study draws upon the frameworks proposed by Cortazzi and Jinn (1999) and Song (2013). Cortazzi and Jinn (1999) proposed a framework to classify the ELT textbooks into three categories; (i) textbooks based on source culture (ii) textbooks based on target culture and (iii) textbooks based on international target cultures. To raise awareness of intercultural issues the teachers and students need to take a reflective or ethnographic approach towards the cultural content and if explicit intercultural elements are included in the textbooks, it would be a more useful development (Cortazzi and Jinn, 1999).

Song (2013) divided into cultural representations in textbooks into three categories; (i) superficial interactions, (ii) hybridization, and (iii) critical reflections. 'Superficial interactions involves explanation or discussion of physical cultural products such as food, travel, and festivals. Hybridization refers to a mixture of more than two different cultural values, traditions, and customs. Critical reflections engage in further discussion or reflection of beliefs, history, values, or conflicts related to the cultures that interact' (Song, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The present study involved an analysis of four general English textbooks titled *English 1*, *English 2*, *English 3* and *English 4*. These textbooks are taught over the six semesters in the colleges affiliated with the University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

The textbooks contain only reading items and do not include any images. Following Cortazzi and Jinn (1999) the reading materials in the textbook such as poems, short stories, essays, biographies or plays were coded as belonging to target culture, source culture or international cultures. The coding was done on the basis of the author and characters, and setting and cultural contents of a text. The analysis also involved the identification of race, and gender from all the three culture representations. The race was divided into categories viz., Asian, White, and other (Black, Mixed Race).

This study also analysed and identified themes and levels of cultural interaction in the textbooks on the basis of Song's (2013) framework. The themes and levels of cultural interactions were recorded and analysed in terms of the three categories; superficial interaction, hybridization and critical reflection.

ANALYSIS

The analysis started with the coding of the texts belonging to target, local or international cultures. The texts were coded on the basis of the content of the texts, character and the author of a text. The text in which the content was not sufficient to code a text belonging to a particular culture, it was coded on the basis of the author. At the second stage of analysis, the

distribution of the race was analysed in the texts along with the distribution of gender (in terms of male and female only). The distribution of texts belonging to various cultures, race and gender was represented in terms of the total percentages. The third step in the analysis involved utilizing Song's (2013) framework to identify the cultural interactions in the four textbooks. The topics of the various texts belonging to the various levels of cultural interactions along with the referred nations were represented in a table.

The analysis reveals that there is a dominance of target culture texts (48%) in the four textbooks. The large number of the target culture texts is found in the textbooks *English 3* (with 60% target texts) and *English 2* (with 50% target texts) as compared to the local culture texts. The target culture texts include play, essays, travelogue, diary extract, autobiography, poems and short stories. The essays and the extracts from travelogues, diaries or autobiographies in these texts cover a varied range of topics such as cultural dynamics, advantages of travel, degradation due to war, struggles with physical impairments, racism in USA, creation of the Apple company, factors shaping human identity, and covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Number and Percentage Distribution of Three Types of Cultural Content in the ELT Textbooks.

Textbooks	Local (%)	Target (%)	International (%)	NA (%)	Total (%)
<i>English 1</i>	3 (37.5)	3 (37.5)	1 (12.5)	1 (12.5)	8 (100)
<i>English 2</i>	1 (16.67)	3 (50)	2 (33.33)	0 (0)	6 (100)
<i>English 3</i>	1 (20)	3 (60)	1 (20)	0 (0)	5 (100)
<i>English 4</i>	4 (40)	5 (50)	1 (10)	0 (0)	10 (100)
Total	9 (31)	14 (48)	5 (17)	1 (3)	29(100)

Similarly, in local culture texts the themes include caste system in India, personal and professional struggles of APJ Abdul Kalam, and globalization. The poetry of the target also covers a variety of themes ranging from specific to universal such as children's exploitation in 18th century England in 'The Chimney Sweeper', familial tradition of farming in 'Digging', women's domestic forbearance, and a father's love for her daughter. The local source poetry is also varied in terms of the themes they

present; for example, the sorrow of separation from beloved, a universal theme of love, in the poem 'Each Instant Your Separation Preys on Me' and 'Dacca Gauzes' in which the poet remembers familial heirloom owned by his grandmother.

Among the four textbooks the least number of local culture texts are English 2 and English 3 with only one text each from the local culture. However, there is a balance among the target

culture and local culture texts in the textbooks *English 1* and *English 4*. The texts from the international culture show the lowest representation in all the four textbooks with only

one text in each except in the textbook *English 2* which has two texts from the international culture.

Table 2: Race and Gender Distribution of Characters in Indian ELT Textbooks.

Textbooks	RACE			GENDER	
	South Asian (%)	White (%)	Other (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
<i>English 1</i>	47 (58.02)	31 (38.27)	3 (3.70)	67 (84)	13 (16)
<i>English 2</i>	36 (42)	49 (57)	1 (1)	72 (81)	17 (19)
<i>English 3</i>	4 (33)	4 (33)	4 (33)	22 (76)	7 (24)
<i>English 4</i>	5 (10)	40 (78)	6 (12)	40 (82)	9 (18)
Total	92 (40)	124 (54)	14 (6)	201 (81)	46 (19)

The representation of white racial group is dominant in the textbooks (with 54%) in total. *English 4* has a much greater representation of white racial group (78%) in comparison to the Asian (which is only 10%) and the other group (12%). The textbook *English 3* has maintained a balance in the representation of all the racial groups. The dominance of white racial characters in the textbook can be attributed to the colonial history of the country. Burney (2012) states that this can be understood as the residues and results of the aftermath of colonialism.

Each of the books represents male gender in much higher proportion in contrast to the female genders. This is not the case with these Indian textbooks only. Bose and Gao (2022) found that the NCERT textbooks also suffer from this bias, and are dominated by male characters (60%–76%). NEP 2020 emphasises awareness and knowledge of gender sensitivity and records that the Indian education system and successive government policies have progressed towards bridging gender gaps in all levels of school education. But, at the ground level textbooks in Indian education system contain a serious bias in representation of female gender.

In terms of gender, the representation of male genders is much higher than the female gender.

Table 3: Themes and referred nations in intercultural interactions

Textbooks	Superficial Interaction (Topics & Referred Nation)	Critical Reflection (Topics & Referred Nation)
<i>English 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Dreams, struggles: India ■ Memory, History, Heritage: India, England ■ Love, Prayer: England 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Capital punishment; England ■ Culture: USA, China, Afghanistan, India, France, Bulgaria, and Vietnam. ■ Oppression and Injustice: England ■ Greed, Materialism, Hypocrisy: India
<i>English 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ History, Origins, ancestry: Ireland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Travel: China, Mongolia, Egypt, Bangladesh, North Korea, USA, Cuba, Thailand, France, Vietnam, Paraguay, South Africa, England, Hong Kong, Brazil, Japan, India. ■ Identity, Oppression: Palestine ■ Identity, Greed, Hypocrisy: India ■ Dominance, submission: England
<i>English 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Struggle with physical disability: USA ■ Pets: USA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Racism, equality: USA ■ Globalisation: Asia, America, Europe, Africa

<p><i>English 4</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Politics, administration, bureaucracy: India ■ Memory: India ■ Creation of the Apple Company: USA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Covid-19 pandemic: China, USA, UK, Australia, Malaysia, France, Africa and Asia ■ Sorrow of separation: India ■ Search of new paths: India ■ Success: USA ■ Women in patriarchal domain: USA ■ Nature and Humanity ■ Identity formation: UK
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Reading Texts (N = 29)

Intercultural Interactions

Most of the cultural themes in textbooks were connected with critical reflection and superficial reflection. There are no instances of cultural hybridization in the textbooks. Although, the reading texts do not belong exclusively to critical reflections. The reading texts containing critical reflections also contain features of superficial reflections. For example, the short story “The Lottery” in textbook *English 1* gives us a description of the familial structure in India where living with parents and siblings is a norm (which can be grouped as a superficial interaction), at the time the story is an exploration of human nature by showing us that greed can break the same familial bonds which are valued in this society. Similarly, the text on Steve Jobs taken from the book *Steve Jobs* written by Walter Isaacson is an informative text on the creation of the Apple company, but at the same time the writer presents his views on how certain people responded to this technological revolution in the country. The following table represents the superficial interactions and critical reflections present in the four textbooks along with the referred nations.

DISCUSSION

ELT textbooks contents reflect an ideological practice of institutional power which is controlled by government power and through this discursive practice the English textbooks set the norms of ideal English speakers, communities, and English use (Song, 2013). The textbooks in this study represent dominance of white and male groups. The findings in this study reinforce prior textbook research finding such as Bhattacharya (2017) and Bose and Gao (2021).

The textbook characters represent many English-speaking nations but, English varieties are not limited to American or British English only. There are many reading texts from Indian and international literature. Many of these texts have been originally written in English and some are translated into English from other languages. The texts that have been translated into English were written in Kashmiri, Hindi, Spanish, and Russian. The dialogues and conversations in one of the textbooks contains abundant features of Indian English. Moreover, there are various examples of code-mixing in the same reading text. Tajeddin and Pakzadian (2020) state “the rise of world English’s and the international spread of English require learning tasks and activities in which learners are encouraged to preserve their own particular local linguistic features” (388). These examples are, however, very less in number when all the four textbooks are taken into consideration. In order to validate the local variety of English within the teaching materials a greater number of such reading texts need to be included in the ELT materials.

CONCLUSION

The present study analysed and discussed the cultural representation in ELT textbooks in India with focus on the textbooks used in the union territory of Kashmir. The study found that there is a dominance of British and American cultural content in the textbooks. This seems to indicate that these cultures are highly valued than the Asian or other international cultures. The textbooks are evidence of post-colonialism and globalization, as there is an over-representation of white racial group in the textbooks than the Asian and other racial groups. Although the

textbook developers have tried to balance this inequality by incorporating the reading texts from local culture, and other international cultures, but these texts are less in number as compared to the target culture texts. Similar findings are revealed in Shin et al (2011) suggesting that English language teaching textbooks should reflect multiple perspectives and engage learners in deep reflection, as current editions predominantly focus on inner circle cultural content. (Shin et al 2011)

The textbooks also suffer from a gender bias with only 19% of the female characters in the four textbooks. The finding that women are still an underrepresented class in ELT textbooks is in with Bhattacharya (2017), Islam and Asadullah (2018) and Bose and Gao (2022).

One of the significant findings of this study is that in terms of cultural interactions, the textbooks represent a significant percentage of critical and superficial interactions. Bose and Gao (2022) reveal lesser percentage of critical reflections in the textbooks belonging to the school level boards such as NCERT, West Bengal and Kerala Boards. Critical interactions are important in a language learning classroom as they help the learners develop a deeper understanding of cultural representations and an inclusive and a just worldview (Song, 2013).

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