

Deconstruction of Cultural, Racial and Gender Dominance in Iranian Senior High School EFL Textbooks

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Abstract

Course books play a crucial role in educational process and are believed to be the pivotal ingredient of language teaching. Every new textbook needs to be analyzed in order to reach its best. Hence this study aims to analyze three Iranian English course books to reveal how various cultures are shown via the course books characters' race, nationality, gender, and intercultural communications. The inspection of the course books revealed unequal cultural representations with the dominance of white and male characters. Furthermore, regarding the intercultural interactions, most examples included conversations among Iranians in a superficial level of cultural engagement. It was also found that males' roles are more highlighted throughout the series. Hence, in some cases, the leading ideology floating in this series is prototyping the Iranian-Islamic culture and values by means of English. Overall, this series seemed to suffer from biased embedded ideologies in terms of presenting cultures, races and genders. The findings of this study are of great help for language teachers, language learners, textbook developers, and curriculum developers to adopt an international position toward education.

Keywords: Culture, English textbooks, gender, racial dominance

Introduction

Course books play a major role in teaching process and are alleged to be the pivotal ingredient of language teaching (See; McDonough et al., 2013; McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). In this process, course books are the primary source of information and teachers utilize them to achieve their teaching goals and promote learning process (McDonough et al., 2013; Richard, 2001). Similarly, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2017) believe that English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks are considered as the input providers which enhance learners' intake and meaning output.

On the other hand, Apple (2001) states that neoliberal reforms in education have brought up a growing acknowledgment of multiculturalism within educational programs and course books. Nevertheless, he states that whereas cultural knowledge is included in most curricula and course books, the manifestations of marginal cultures are depicted as biased power relations can be detected and challenged. He believes that this is how hegemony is maintained and discriminations in terms of cultural, racial and gender dominance are recurred. Apple (2001, p. vi) continues to mention that in a more liberal education "we see the world through the eyes of people of color, not just mention their contributions as an add-on". While Apple mainly emphasizes on multiculturalism in North American countries, his opinions can be generalized to other educational systems in other contexts including Iran.

In Iran, all course books employed in state schools, including EFL (English as a Foreign Language) course books are developed by the Ministry of Education. As a result of several

criticisms proposed against former high school EFL textbooks (Farhady, 2000; Rahimi, 1996; Rashidi, 1995; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006; Yarmohammadi, 2000), Vision 1, 2, and 3, as the second three parts of the six-volume series of English for high school students, have been authored in accordance with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles by the Ministry of Education (Alavi-Moghaddam et al., 2016, 2017, 2018) to be used as the English course books for senior high school students. This present curriculum which regards English as a language of international and pluralistic citizenship should assist cultural multiplicity and attempt to take into account the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences. Moreover, it pinpoints that in order to have a well-organized conversation in English, learners' skill to communicate in intercultural communications would be necessary.

As this series is being taught to all Iranian students, this prolific use of these textbooks influences learners' worldviews. Besides, textbooks having biased perspectives may guide students in a wrong way in which, instead of appreciating differences between cultures, races, and genders, they might, unconsciously, be led to gender discrimination and prefer some cultures and races over others. Therefore, this paper makes efforts to answer the following question

Q. How are cultural, racial and gender dominance reflected in Iranian senior high school English course books?

Review of Literature

Approximately, in all learning contexts, course books are believed to be the major source of world knowledge in language teaching and learning (Kilickaya, 2004). Accordingly, textbooks carry and deliver sets of values, which are referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 90). English textbooks can be characterized based on whether contents represent: (a) the source or learners' own culture and race with internal gender-based worldviews (b) the values of a country where English is spoken as a native language— such as the US and Britain; or (c) a variety of cultures and races from all over the world with no gender discrimination (Apple, 2001; Landis, et al., 2003; Kalia, 1980).

Literature has revealed biases in EFL (English as a foreign language) coursebooks and has demonstrated unequal distribution of cultures within the textbooks (e.g., I. Lee, 2009; K. Lee 2009; Sherman, 2010; Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011; Song, 2013; Taylor-Mendes 2009). Shin, Eslami, and Chen (2011) report that social values of inner circle countries (the countries in which English is spoken as the first language) are generally highlighted in EFL textbooks. That is, inner circle cultures are more widely practiced than the cultures of the countries where English is spoken as a second or foreign language. This overemphasis on inner circle cultures implies a vista in which these countries are the only idealistic sources of English use and users. In this way, Song (2013) examined Korean ELT textbooks and found that American English and culture are favored in them. Although attempts to display various cultural/intercultural conversations are made in these textbooks, the conversations are primarily narrowed to a superficial level, and non-Koreans, mostly American and male characters have dominant roles in the textbooks.

In another study, Sherman (2010) studied racial and cultural biases embedded in model conversations in international EFL textbooks. He revealed that positive and respected roles are given to native speakers. While they are also considered as experts, non-native speakers are characterized as non-experts. With regards to unequal power relations, racial stereotyping was also identified in students' and teachers' views about the EFL course books in a study in Brazil by Taylor-Mendes (2009). Taylor-Mendes unveiled that, while the white characters in the textbooks were shown as authoritative, influential, and dominant, the African-American counterparts were presented as impotent and subordinate. Such studies proved the biased

manifestation of culture and unequal inter-racial interactions and different English users. They also revealed inclinations to native English speakers' culture and white racial groups.

Moreover, dispositions toward genders are clearly reflected and presented in school textbooks and injected to the curriculum (Kereszty, 2009). Accordingly, Lee and Collins (2008, p. 128) claim that 'Learners, who generally attach great credibility and authority to educational materials, tend to absorb and assimilate the materials in minute detail without comment, and to be susceptible to their influence'. Therefore, textbooks have been recognized as important factors which form gender identities and gender discrimination, within a social (Carlson & Kanci, 2017; Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018). In Iran, there are a few studies available exploring cultural presentation of mainstream ELT textbooks (Baleghizadeh & Jamali Motahed 2010; Lee & Mahmoudi- Gahrouei, 2020). For instance, Baleghizadeh and Jamali Motahed (2010) examined and compared the hegemonic content of American and British textbooks. They found that more cultural content are embedded in American textbooks; however, both American and British course books incline toward target-culture information. Likewise, Lee and Mahmoudi- Gahrouei (2020) investigated whether any gender bias can be found in Iranian junior high school English textbooks or not. They revealed that, while there are some measures taken by the authors to alleviate any gendered dispositions such as the use of gender-neutral vocabulary and fair distribution of male and female dialogues, low female visibility can still be seen in the textbooks. They also found that the authors tend to embrace the Islamic culture of male predominance and confine women to family and school settings.

The above studies investigated how culture, racial, and gendered values are observed and treated in ELT materials, and concentrated on the confinements of some ELT textbooks in encouraging equality of genders and improving intercultural and interracial awareness. However, the descriptive approach they employed pull them back from any explicit efforts to unveil the hidden hegemonic agenda embedded in textbooks. Therefore, as language in a textbook is not merely a linguistic system, and covers and expresses ideologies, it is vital to explore its realization in ELT textbooks to enhance learner's intercultural and social awareness and reflections. Thus, due to lack of studies investigating the prevalence of cultural, racial and gender dominance in Iranian context and their prime importance, this study attempted to examine this issue in Iranian newly-published senior high school English textbooks (*Vision Series*) to reveal the cultural, racial and gender dominance embedded in this series.

Method

Materials

ELT textbooks were explored in this study on the grounds that English is a compulsory school subject in junior high schools in Iran, and students are supposed to attend about 2 hours a week in English classes (Zarrinabadi & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2017). This series known as the *Vision* series includes three newly-developed Iranian English textbooks which are multiple-skills communicative English textbooks developed by a group of Iranian authors during three years (2016-2018). The *Visions* are developed to help learners improve their communicative ability in English with a learner-centered approach. These textbooks are comprised of student's books, workbooks, and teacher's books along with CD which include 4, 3, and 3 units respectively.

Model of Analysis

The analysis procedure utilized in the present study was introduced by Fairclough (2001). At the first step in this model of analysis, characters' race and nationality, English varieties and Intercultural Interactions, and gender representation in the conversations of the textbooks are

extracted and compared to gain profound perceptions into the part played by ideology in the *Vision* series.

Data Analysis

This study was basically conducted to reveal latent cultural, racial and gender-based ideologies embedded in Iranian junior high school EFL textbooks. In so doing, race and nationality of the interactants, the English varieties and intercultural interactions included, and gender diversity within the conversations were carefully inspected to decide whether the textbooks adequately represent various cultures, races, and genders or any significant bias is embedded. Accordingly, this content analysis examined the issues of race, gender, nationality, and English variety or dialect in this series. This is achieved through an inspection of the visual and written forms as well as audio tracks of the textbooks. Likewise, intercultural communications between various cultural groups are investigated so as to reveal whether intercultural relationships are restricted to specific groups and practices.

Results

In order to examine the textbooks, the conversations of this ELT series were analyzed based on a CDA model developed by Fairclough's (2001) to reveal any significant gender representation in these series. Table 1 shows the number of units and conversations of the *Vision* series. The conversations of this series were positioned in Conversation, Listening, and speaking sections.

Table 1. *Number of units and conversations*

Text book	No. of Units	No. of Conversations
<i>Vision 1</i>	4	16
<i>Vision 2</i>	3	12
<i>Vision 3</i>	3	12
Total	10	38

To ensure the inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa) of the obtained data, the textbooks were analyzed by both researchers and the results were fed into SPSS separately for each textbook. The reliability statistics of the ratings (21 situations and relations) showed high associations of 0.731, 0.812, and 0.721, for *Vision 1*, *2*, and *3*, respectively (Table 2).

Table 2. *Inter-rater Reliability (Kappa) of the Visions*

	Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error	Approximate Tb	Approximate Significance
Kappa <i>Vision 1</i>	.731	.079	12.460	.000
No. of items	38			
Kappa <i>Vision 2</i>	.812	.056	15.767	.000
No. of items	38			
Kappa <i>Vision 3</i>	.721	.047	19.280	.000
No. of items	38			

Race and Culture

Firstly, textbooks characters were analyzed in terms of race and nationality, and their frequency were reported (Table 3). They were identified through pictures and written information such as names and their nationality. Some characters' nationality and/or racial features were not clearly diagnosable as not all characters' images, names, and national origins were described.

Table 3. *Characters' race and nationality*

Course Book	Race	Nationality
<i>Vision 1</i>	White: 14	Iranian:12
	Others:10	Others:12
<i>Vision 2</i>	White:15	Iranian:15
	Others:3	Others:2
<i>Vision 3</i>	White:18	Iranian:18
	Others: 0	Others: 0
Total	White:47 Others:13	Iranian:45 Others:14

According to Table 1, with regards to racial aspects, the white group is highlighted in three course books. Taking a close look at characters' nationalities in this table, it can be clearly observed that the Iranian nationality is absolutely dominant in all three volumes and just in some cases, the nationality of other English speakers from inner, outer, and expanding circles (Kachru, 1992) are seen.

Besides, the frequency of English varieties in Table 4 shows that the author of these textbooks have an undeniable tendency toward American English more than other varieties. Besides, the frequency of English varieties in Table 4 shows that the author of these textbooks have an undeniable tendency toward American English more than other varieties.

Table 4. *English Varieties and Intercultural Interactions*

	<i>Vision 1</i>	<i>Vision 2</i>	<i>Vision 3</i>	Total
American	20	14	12	46
British	2	3	2	7
Others	2	1	2	5
Intercultural Interactions	0	0	0	0

As Table 4 shows, there exist only a few examples of non-standard varieties in this series and many speakers of other English varieties or EFL context are overlooked. Although the authors attempted to embrace characters from different ethnics other than inner circle English-speaking nations, these course books show a propensity toward the American English variety over others.

A very interesting point about these text books is that nowhere in their contents, one can find an intercultural communications (Table 4), and the only culture bolded and talked about is Iranian. It reveals that the authors did not attempt to include other cultures within the textbooks.

Gender Representation

Generally speaking, examining these domestic *Vision* Series revealed a roughly systematic and consistent inclination toward portraying the roles played by females and males. Table 5 shows the number of attendance of the genders in conversations all over the textbook. It is clear that relatively males have more active role in communications than their females' counterparts in this series.

Table 5. Gender Representation in Vision series

	<i>Vision 1</i>	<i>Vision 2</i>	<i>Vision 3</i>	Total
Female	14	5	7	26
Male	10	13	9	32

In summary, the series presented both genders in a sexist way originated from the Persian culture, in which females were discriminated or excluded systematically in order to remain separated from the society. In effect, the series has been developed based on a blending of Islamic and cultural ideology fitted for Iranian society.

Discussion

Teaching and learning materials such as course books need to comprise what is mentioned and proposed in the curriculum, which is basically an ideological imposition from centers of power. This institutional discursive practice which is controlled by officials' power can be displayed through the presence of biased dispositions and knowledge in the course books. Within the boundaries of such discursive practices, English coursebooks establish the impression of ideal English speakers, societies, and use. In this study, manifestation of white male groups was roughly dominant. Furthermore, Iranian culture is also the dominant culture in the text books.

Additionally, although pictorial and written contents characterize various English-speaking nations, English varieties are confined to American English in both written and spoken forms. Put differently, however these textbooks are interesting in depicting Iranian culture, names, and stereotypes, American English is the dominant variety heard. One of the reasons of this issue might be embedded in what Sadeghi and Richards (2015) reported, [In Iran] American English was the most-preferred variety of English for university students majoring in English as well as for language learners in institutes, with British English the next preferred variety. None of the students favored an Iranian localized version of English as their preferred variety of English. (p. 10)

Nonetheless, the cultural, racial and gender manifestation in these textbooks suggests that they cannot be included as good examples of active international interactions, since it is limited to Iranian context. This may reflect the Iranian government's great tendency toward Islamic-Iranian atmosphere which is also emphasized in the introduction of all three volumes; "[in our method] English and other languages are utilized to communicate with the world in an active way, based on the rich culture of Islamic-Iranian culture" (Alavimoghadam et al., 2016, 2017, 2018, p. 6). Due to globalization, Iranian culture should not be disregarded in ELT text books, but it should be considered as an international cultural asset (Block & Cameron 2002; Gray 2002). However, the way Iranian culture is embedded in the textbooks has besmirched the

international perspective of English toward other-representation (culture). In some measure, authors may not be to blame in this regard, as stipulated in Fundamental Evolution Document of Education and Pedagogy (Iran's Ministry of Education, 2018), teaching and learning foreign languages should be aimed at bolstering and spreading "Iranian-Islamic identity" (p. 30); hence this emphasis on depicting ideological domestic stereotypes by the authors can be rather justifiable (Baleghizadeh & Jamali Motahed 2010; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020).

Furthermore, examining this series revealed that the issue of gender unequal representation is prolonged and is upheld among Iranian ELT publishers as well and in contrast to international ethics of developing ELT course books which avoid gender-bias; this issue was apparently considered as an aim all over the textbooks. According to the National Curriculum (Iran's Ministry of Education, 2011), "...along with emphasizing on common features, curricular and educational plans should consider all differences rooted in geographical and contextual circumstances" (p. 10); an issue which has observably been besmirched in developing the *Visions*.

By and large, the results of the present study correlates well with other studies in terms of overemphasis of this series on Iranian social and cultural values (Amerian & Esmaili, 2015; Bahman & Rahimi, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Jamali Motahed 2010; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020), which is an important point that course book developers should be aware of. It is noteworthy, in spite of the fact that the authors seem to be aware of the importance of this issue, due to some cultural and religious beliefs prevalent in Iran's context, they deterred to show an entirely equal representation of other culture and social values of other nationalities.

Moreover, considering the fact that textbooks are some means of representing the social, cultural, political or religious ideologies of common culture mixed with the authors in general and centers of power in particular; it can be concluded that worldwide values were depicted in lower visibility to persuade these sides.

Conclusions

Before teaching these series, instructors must try to utilize more intercultural content. Owing to the absence of intercultural communications, teachers are suggested to use intelligible samples of audios from speakers of various English varieties to allow students to be exposed to accented English and recognize them as valid and identical varieties. Therefore, English learners, mostly from EFL contexts, can be more confident to speak their accented English.

Furthermore, English from different cultures embedded in the textbooks incline to underrepresent issues such as critical reflections that question unequal power distribution existing among/between sociocultural characters and groups. However, teachers' added discussions can compensate for this lack of critical intercultural communications which invite learners to investigate the texts beyond their superficial level (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018).

Moreover, it is vital for language teachers to access to plenty of materials from which they can choose miscellaneous examples and data for their classroom practices. As this study revealed, textbooks can include various examples of conversations between cultures. Different samples obtained from a range of textbooks can compensate for the confinements of only one teaching material. Also, teachers' critical perspectives toward overrepresentation and underrepresentation of groups can encourage discussions of inequality and bias in biased textbooks. In this way, teachers are required to take a critical cultural and linguistic side to raise consciousness among students. The last, but not the least, teachers should be able to carry out their own text analyses and participate in academic dialogues to share views and take sociocultural issues into account.

By and large, the leading ideology floating in this series might be an indicator of what Skelton (1997, p.188) calls “hidden curriculum”. It is clear that the ideologies embedded in course books are normally extracted from the majorities or the leading power in a society. In this regard, while establishing egalitarian norms in Iranian textbooks and schools can be achieved in the long run, teachers’ role in promoting students’ awareness of embedded cultural, racial and gendered dispositions in textbooks is undeniable. Both textbook authors and teachers all over the world could have a role in making a change, and help students to gain mutual respect for all cultures, races and genders. Furthermore, the findings of this study are helpful for language teachers, language learners, textbook developers, and curriculum developers and help them adopt egalitarian positions in language teaching and be aware of ideologically-imposed issues prevailing in course books and language learning contexts.

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