

The Construction of New Political Identities through the Internationally Distributed English Learning Textbooks

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Abstract

Today, English education is very important but language learning has long been challenged since learning a second language is not only the mastery of its forms but also a process of identity construction and self-positioning in the second language. A review of recent studies shows that the cultural effects of learning English in the internationally distributed textbooks of English learning has been the main research interest while the construction of new political identities through these book series has not been sufficiently noticed. The present study aimed to investigate the construction of new political identities in learners through reading the internationally distributed English learning textbooks. Paying attention to the variety of subjects in these books have caused the researchers, and readers to ignore some political aspects embedded in these books which try to politically marginalize certain countries through their content and impose political hegemony as well as cultural hegemony on readers.

Keywords: language teaching, English learning textbooks, identity construction, language imperialism, hegemony

1. Introduction

Today, learning English is very important. Countries have recognized the importance of English as a global language, parents are enthusiastic about their children's English learning and students are adamant in studying English since it makes up approximately most of academic tests and a large number of companies recruit employees who are fluent in English in almost all parts of the world (Kim, 2012).

But it seems that teaching English is being used as a tool to establish and spread political dominance, political hegemonic power and mind control in the world. Language imperialism has been tied with cultural hegemony and exerts hegemonic control (Eakin, 2002) and, mentality, intentions and perceptions of American foreign policy and allegations of imperialism. This has opened up questions about US policy toward English learning textbooks. English learners around the world are considered as available human resources who can be trained to think and act in a preferred way.

A review of recent studies shows that the cultural effects of learning English has been the main research interest in recent years in different countries especially Asian and African countries which has mostly focused on cultural impacts of the internationally distributed textbooks of English such as Interchange and Topnotch Series while political aspects embedded in these book series have not been well-developed and noticed.

In the following part, some instances of cultural, social and linguistic concerns raised from the internationally distributed English learning textbooks appeared in the literature are presented. The present study aimed to investigate the formation of a new political identity in learners who read the internationally distributed English learning textbooks.

2. Literature Review

Language learning has long been challenged since learning a second language is not only the mastery of its forms but also a process of identity formation and self-positioning in the second language (Kim, 2012).

Heejin Song (2013) in his paper, "*Deconstruction of Cultural Dominance in Korean EFL Textbooks*"

investigated cultural representations in Korean EFL textbooks and how different cultures or cultural biases are embedded in these textbooks. In the revised Korean national English curriculum, English has been considered as a global language of cosmopolitan citizenship. English promotes cultural diversity and attempts to embrace cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences.

The results of Song's study showed that American English and culture are favored in Korean national English curriculum's textbooks. Superficial cultural/intercultural interactions in English textbooks have reproduced social, racial, national and gender inequalities by favoring American representations over others. Song, finally suggests that teachers should take a critical approach to intercultural education in order to instill more inclusive and critical worldviews in their students.

According to the research article by Hyorim Kim (2012) on social and cultural issues in selected EFL textbooks in Korea, gender bias, racial and ethnical discrimination, nationality, minority status and social class are the prevalent cultural and social biases in ELT textbooks. To avoid such biases, he offers some suggestions by Triyoga (2010), including detailed changes that should be made in ELT textbooks pertaining to: photographs, illustrations, names and personalities of the characters that should convey ethnic diversity of the country; materials that should portray a balance of men/boys and women/girls in active roles and different age groups; the representation of both sexes, which should be depicted equally as being engaged in independent activities, leadership roles and situations; the depiction of characters, which should reflect that some women are taller than men; the depiction of children at play, as well as the inclusion of characters of both sexes experiencing a wide range of emotions: anxiety, anger, fear, affection, sorrow, gentleness, boldness and tenderness". Hyorim Kim observes that when students learn a foreign language, their new identities are shaped in part by what they read in the textbooks at schools (Kim, 2012).

Mohseni and Karimi (2012) investigated Linguistic Imperialism and EFL Learning among highschool students. The study primary focused on investigating the impact of the hegemony of the English language on EFL learners' attitudes to learning English and whether imported English textbooks, *Interchange series*, affected the life style of EFL learners.

Basing on the results of this study, it was concluded that (a) the hegemony of English has an amicable influence on the EFL learners' attitudes towards leaning English, and (b) the imported English textbooks have no considerable effect on the EFL learners' cultural change.

According to the findings of this study the desirability of learning English is high among high school students studying in schools where teaching English language is de-emphasized. It indicates their belief that the English language will bring untold blessings to those who succeed in learning it. It is also believed that learning English will lead to economic and educational empowerment. This attitude has influenced EFL learners' motivation to learn English, especially at high school level.

Students and their parents in this study believed that imperialism is not at the heart of ELT. They maintained that English is regarded as a practical tool not a way of cultural enrichment. Another important finding of this study was that learning English is not necessarily linked to American or British cultural values. The imported English textbooks are not platforms for English speakers to promulgate their own cultures because the main focus is on English as an international language.

In Soleimani's (2012) study titled *ELT: A Trojan Horse in Disguise?*, teaching languages cannot be devoid of the cultural values of the target language, and it aims at denigrating the cultural values of the learners, while many people consider language teaching as a neutral practice. AS cited in Soleimani (2012), the purpose of such cultural oppression, is to establish supremacy and maintain a hegemonic control over other cultures. This article tried to present arguments that scholars provide against the common belief that holds ELT as a neutral and unbiased profession. It also tried to provide practical guidelines for ELT practitioners to help them uncover hidden tenets governing the ELT profession in today's world.

Marginalization preserves the dominance of Western knowledge over local knowledge by promoting flawed practices. These practices include fallacies such as discouraging the use of first language in language programmes, emphasizing the superiority of native-speaking teachers over non-native ones, and detaching the processes of learning and teaching from sociolinguistic contexts, language use and usage.

Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) took a look at the current state of TEFL in Iran emphasizing the importance of including local specificities of the Iranian culture and religion. Iranian *TEFL* in this study was introduced as a "successful assertion of Iranian local culture against the cultural and ideological domination of the West", which could be a response to all marginalization that Iranians have suffered during the past. In this paper the authors

tried to show how the West has made attempts to ensure that other localities' cultural, ideological, and attitudinal views have not contaminated English language as much as possible.

While trying to discuss what it means to teach English as a foreign language in an Iranian context, the authors argued that ELT professionals are very much responsible for the marginalization of Iran by showing positive attitudes towards the American culture. It also seems that most of the Iranian learners still try to conform to Standard English and consider it superior to other varieties. The authors further argued that the more the learners tried to achieve a native-like mastery of English, the more they were alienated from their own culture. This de-culturation, in turn, was found to lead to learners' loss of identity. This problem is accentuated by the fact that the West is working side by side with the Iranians' self-marginalization, to further subjugate national, religious and historical identities of Iranian people. The authors pointed out that language learning should be nationally and culturally accomplished.

According to Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012), this research should lead to the construction of a national language curriculum designed to reflect the real localities of the Iranian culture by introducing language-related components as well as specific historical, socio-cultural, and religious identities of the learners.

Yaqoob (2011), in his study on Ideology, Worldview and Cultural Aspects of ELT in Textbooks in Pakistan investigated the implicit and explicit ideological messages related to culture, and how far they impact upon the learners' worldviews. The analysis showed that both the Punjab Textbook Board (PTB) and Oxford University Press (OUP) English textbooks were replete with cultural ideologies. Furthermore, they represent different cultural ideologies which influenced different worldviews of their readers. The results showed that government and non-elite schools students, hold almost identical worldviews, while their counterparts from elite school, hold more nationalistic, religious, anti-Hindu, anti-Israel, anti-Christians views which are closer to indigenous culture than those of the latter group. They also like male characters more than female ones in comparison with elite school students (Yaqoob, 2011).

Zarei and Khalessi (2011), in their study titled "*Cultural Load in English Language Textbooks: an Analysis of Interchange Series*" maintained that the depth of rampant cultural issues across the internationally distributed English learning textbooks could not be obviously ignored since the English language has been regarded to be perilous to the viability of other languages, as a carrier of arrogance, as a means of suppression, oppression, colonization of the mind as well as social and linguistic discrimination. In this study, a model of cultural patterns was used to analyze the contents of the *Interchange* series including *values, norms, institution* and sub-components of cultural *artifact*.

The study results indicated that textbooks are artifacts strongly grounded in cultural biases, laden with cultural values unique to the Western world, which are believed to be disruptive to the culture or unconstructive in other societies, especially in Iran. Another general regularity discovered in the *Interchange* series by Zarei and Khalessi (2011) was that the frequency rate of cultural subcomponents dwindles down. This socio-cultural framework as well as cultural density in such books, according to Zarei and Khalessi, indicates "the tacit goal that foreign language learners need to get acculturated to the target language culture, feeling of alienation towards the books and the world", respectively (Zarei & Khalessi, 2011).

Abdollahzade and Banisad (2011) in their study titled "*Ideologies in the Imported English Textbooks: EFL learners and Teachers' Awareness and Attitude*" examined ideological prompts in the imported instructional English textbooks in Iran and the learners' attitudes towards English. The results of this study showed that imported textbooks represent particular ideologies and cultural values, including cultural stereotypes, the hegemony of English and sexism. Abdollahzade and Banisad (2011) maintained that:

- Although institute teachers were aware of the ideologies, they were not very much concerned with raising awareness about them;
- Given that most English textbooks are produced in countries other than Iran, cultural differences among different countries should be taken into account;
- Teachers need to be more cognizant of teaching cultural values, especially those that may cause culture shock for the learners. They should also increase their awareness about textbooks ideologies and convey this awareness to the learners. Further, awareness of the influence of the culture of a dominant language is necessary because the long-term influence may lead to a loss of confidence in the values of the less dominant language and culture.

Balaghizadeh and Jamali Motahed (2010) examined the ideological content of six American and British internationally distributed ELT textbooks through a critical discourse analysis. Results of this study suggested that in terms of content, American textbooks include more occupational and business-related issues while British

textbooks tend to entertain students. Regarding relations, characters in the conversations were placed in socially equal roles, and inequalities were rarely addressed in the interactions. According to Balaghizadeh and Jamali Motahed (2010), it is time to put aside a native-speaker model of curriculum development in order to develop an appropriate EIL curriculum in which local educators also have a sense of ownership of teaching English.

Neke (2003) carried out a study titled “*English in Tanzania, an Anatomy of Hegemony* in which he suggested that the use of English with its ideological loading has not been without economic and socio-cultural consequences. It has been emphasized that language policy is used as a tool that strengthens cultural dependency and leads to the formation of identities that are in alignment with Western culture. In some countries, English also limits the development of national and local languages (Neke, 2003).

English has created hierarchies of languages and led to the rating of culture as high and low. English has also led to the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, i.e. those who possess this linguistic cultural capital are better placed to occupy positions of power and influence.

English has greatly increased the crisis in which people seem to have lost confidence in the value of cultural systems and their knowledge base. People have been led to believe that, compared to English; their own national or local languages cannot be used to express science and its associated technologies efficiently (Neke, 2003).

In response to the assumptions of cultural homogeneity and linguistic imperialism, Aliakbari’s (2002) study raised ten contradictory arguments questioning the native speakers’ hegemony in international uses of English. Advocating cultural awareness and intercultural competence, his article called for the interlocutors’ mutual appreciation and cooperation of cultures to strengthen international relationships. Finally, as an alternative paradigm, the article proposed linguistic democracy and calls for the recognition of cultural diversity in ELT.

According to Aliakbari’s (ibid.) study, in using English as an international language, there is no need for the user to act like a native speaker of English. In such circumstances English can be taken as a means of expressing the speakers’ culture, not imitating the culture of Great Britain and the U.S. The interlocutors come from different cultures and no special culture can be imposed. Perhaps in using English internationally, the appreciation of cultural differences and cultural awareness on the one hand and developing intercultural competence on the other, can lead to more effective communication. That is exactly what is meant by linguistic democracy, as proposed by Aliakbari (2002).

3. Discussion

A brief review of literature, as shown above, indicates that the cultural effects of learning English have been a research interest in recent years in different countries, especially Asian and African, where studies mostly focused on the cultural impacts of the internationally-distributed textbooks of English such as the *Interchange* and *Top Notch* Series, while the power of these books to shape new political identities in readers have not been sufficiently noticed. Paying attention and being attracted to the variety of subjects in the internationally distributed learning English textbooks have caused the researchers and readers to ignore the political aspects of these books which try to politically marginalize certain countries and impose the political hegemony as well as cultural hegemony of countries which produce international learning English.

A summary of concerns about the internationally distributed English textbooks proposed in the above-mentioned studies is presented below; it seems that a political aspect should be added to each item:

- Superficial cultural and intercultural interactions
- Social inequalities regarding race, nationality and gender
- EFL learners’ cultural change
- The desirability of learning English among EFL learners
- Teaching cultural values of the target language
- Denigrating cultural values of the community of the learners
- Establishing their supremacy and maintain a hegemonic control over other cultures
- Changing our attitude toward the native speakers’ advantage and superiority
- Putting emphasis on the importance of including the local specificities of culture and religion
- Showing positive attitudes towards the American culture by ELT professionals
- De-culturation and learners’ loss of identity
- Self-marginalization

- Cultural values, norms, institutions and artifacts
- Socio-cultural framework as well as the cultural density in such books
- Considering cultural differences among different countries
- Characters in the conversations placing in socially equal roles
- Socio-cultural and economic consequences
- Formation of identities in alignment with Western culture
- Limiting the development of local and national languages in some countries
- Rating culture into high and low
- Cultural awareness, and intercultural competence
- Mutual appreciation and cooperation of cultures to strengthen international relationships
- Linguistic democracy
- Recognition of cultural diversity in ELT
- Cultural awareness and appreciation of cultural differences
- Discouraging the use of first language in language programs,
- Historical, and religious identities, implicit as well as explicit ideological messages related to culture,
- Representing particular ideologies and cultural values including hegemony of English, sexism, and cultural stereotypes
- Promulgating their own cultures
- The superiority of native-speaking teachers over non-native ones
- Considering learners' specific socio-cultural
- Cultural conflict and culture shock
- Losing confidence in the value and effectiveness of cultural systems and knowledge base
- Expressing the speakers' culture, not one for imitating the culture of Great Britain, the US
- Detaching the processes of learning and teaching from the sociolinguistic contexts and realities of language use and usage
- How far cultural ideologies impact upon the learners' worldviews

On the other hand, in these studies, following issues have been neglected which should be regarded as other effective factors that the readers are confronted with, during the process of reading the internationally distributed English learning textbooks, including: the process of new political identity formation, learners' political change, alienating readers from their own political attitudes and identities, a loss of confidence in their own political values, political content of these books, global political inequalities, using language learning as a tool which strengthens political dependency and limiting national and local politics, training readers with certain political views besides their linguistic and cultural views, those who possess the linguistic cultural capital of knowing English and are better placed to occupy positions of power and influence in communities may possess certain political views.

The motto "*English for today's world: connecting people from cultures and language backgrounds*" appeared in the internationally distributed *Top Notch* series seems equitable, ethical and educational albeit self-contradictory; when the reader simply skims this book series, he/she may find it inequitable, prejudicial and political. To illustrate the point, table 1 represents some data about the content of the book *Top Notch 2A*.

Table 1. Countries and cultures present in *Top Notch 2A*

	A Mention of the Country/City/Region	Customs	Foods	Historical Tourist attractions	places/ Movie/ Celebrities	Map
1	Argentina/Buenos Aires			*		
2	Australia			*		
3	Austria/Vienna			*		*
4	Brazil/ Rio de Janeiro/ Porto Alegre	*	*	*		
5	Canada/ Montreal				*	
6	Caracas					
7	Chile				*	
8	China/Beijing			*		
9	Dublin					
10	Eastern Europe countries	*				
11	Ecuador	*				
12	Egypt			*		
13	England/London			*		*
14	France/Paris	*		*		*
15	Geneva, Switzerland					
16	Greece/Athens					
17	Hawaii					
18	Hong Kong					
19	Hungary		*			
20	India	*	*			
21	Italy/Venice/ Rome			*		*
22	Japan	*	*	*		
23	Kenya	*				
24	Korea/Seoul	*	*			
25	Malaysia					
26	Mexico/Mexico City	*		*		
27	Mongolia	*				
28	Peru		*			
29	Russia					
30	Spain/Madrid	*		*		*
31	Sweden					
32	Thailand		*			
33	The US/Washington/Chicago New York/North & South America	*		*	*	*
34	Ukraine	*				

As shown in the above table, there is no mention of countries such as IR Iran and North Korea in *Top Notch 2A*. In the world of politics, these two countries are under severe political and economic attacks and pressures by the US and are accused of violating international regulations and human rights. The US is advocating that Iran and North Korea should not develop nuclear weapons, while the US is the only country to have used nuclear weapons

in warfare; one may wonder how it would be if these two countries were following US, as others. One possibility could be that one could then easily find a mention of these two countries, their cities, customs, foods, historical places or tourist attractions, celebrities, maps and culture in this book series.

According to the motto of the *Top Notch* book, one may wonder whether IR Iran and North Korea are not “people” or “cultures” or have no “language backgrounds”. This obvious policy should be explained by the policy makers, publishers and writers of internationally distributed English textbooks; their scientific, cultural and educational commitment seems to be affected by US policy. IR Iran, with a history of thousands of years, has been forgotten in the internationally distributed book series while less famous countries and cultures are present there.

What about Russia (which reminds us of Soviet Union- United States relations)? Take a look at this part of the book *Top Notch 2A*:

‘The Hunt for Red October ... the movie is about a Soviet nuclear submarine that comes very close to American waters. The crew of An American submarine must decide: is the submarine trying to escape the Soviet Union-or start a nuclear war?’

Policy makers, publishers and writers should consider what the readers—Learners around the world, Russian learners, Persian learners, North Korean learners—really conclude from this part. This policy aims to create a feeling of alienation in learners not only towards the book but also towards the world. Maybe, this feeling can influence the learners’ attitudes towards their governments’ foreign policy or helps them change their way of thinking about US policies. The question is simply that why this part has been chosen? The story could be vice versa if no political policy ruled these book series.

Arab countries are also forgotten in this book series although the Arabs, their language and their religion cannot be easily excluded from the content of the book. It is also surprising that some Arab countries that have been regarded to be united with US or England are also ignored.

4. Conclusion

The present study can be useful in a number of ways: developing new curricula and teaching materials including textbooks with less nationalistic, religious and political biases. In this regard, policy makers in all parts of the world should be aware of the policies in the internationally distributed English textbooks and manage the educational materials for their own learners so that they are prevented from being influenced by the cultural and political hegemonies of English. A good example is the Pakistani textbook *Primary Stage English* which includes lessons such as “*Pakistan, My Country*,” “*Our Flag*,” and “*Our Great Leader*,” which can establish a connection between EFL, patriotism, religious and political faith (Spichtinger, 2013).

On the other hand, as cited in Bartlett (2006), policy makers, publishers and writers of the internationally distributed English textbooks should remember that the “internationalization” of English may create new possibilities for English native-speakers, as McCabe elaborates:

‘...whereas for two centuries we exported our language and our customs in hot pursuit of... fresh markets, we now find that our language and our customs are returned to us but altered so that they can be used by others... so that our own language and culture discover new possibilities, fresh contradictions’.

The English language has long become a means of suppression and oppression (Pennycook, 1994), as a carrier of arrogance (Searle, 1983, quoted in Pennycook, 1994), as colonization of the mind (Chatterjee, 1993) and as social and linguistic discrimination and new political identities are shaped in non-native learners around the world especially in certain countries and cultures through the internationally distributed English learning textbooks.

Therefore, the author suggests that further studies should be conducted to address political aspects, besides cultural, social and linguistic issues, in analyzing the internationally distributed English textbooks in different countries, especially in IR Iran, North Korea, Russia and Arab countries.

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