THE PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS
AT NON-LANGUAGE MAJOR UNIVERSITIES TOWARDS
FOREIGN CULTURES IN ELT TEXTBOOKS

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a significant ambassador of another culture, ELT textbooks provide learners with linguistic knowledge which reflects a particular way of looking at the world and demonstrates both socio-cultural practices and an understanding of a society (Tahir Yaqoob & Zubair, 2012). However, "the culture-bound nature of ELT materials can present serious dilemmas in the language classroom" (Nault, 2006, p. 322). Designed for the purpose of international use, global ELT textbooks introduce learners to target cultural perspectives embedded in their language input. Textbooks written by native speakers of English tend to assume that Vietnamese learners can understand the cultural bias of the English language. Due to lack of cultural awareness, learners may misunderstand or misinterpret the meanings or the values of other cultures. In Vietnamese university language classrooms, non-major learners may be bewildered by culture-related representations in textbooks (Nguyen, 2003).

The present research focuses on exploring teachers' perception and response to these cultural representations. Through this research, textbook writers and curriculum designers will have insights into intercultural perspectives to enhance the design and the choice of textbooks (Dinh, 2014). Language teachers may increase their awareness to improve their strategies to help learners acquire both target language competence and intercultural competence.

2. METHODS

Interviews with ten language teachers at the ten participating universities were arranged. Half of the interviewed teachers had studied abroad, and the other half had never been to or lived in a foreign country. Although the interviews were semi-structured, teachers were free to talk about their concerns with cultural representations and ELT textbooks. It was my intention to encourage the participants to expose their views because the purpose of this phase was to uncover and describe teachers' perspectives on this issue, and these interviews were the sole means of gathering data in this case. This was a valuable method in that they provided useful and appropriate features in relation to understanding people's view.

3. RESULTS

3.1. General impressions of cultural representations in ELT textbooks

Regardless of having international experience or not, teachers communicated homogeneous impressions on cultural representations in ELT textbooks. Most teachers commented that foreign cultural representations dominated their textbooks, leaving little room for source cultural representations. They said all parts in their textbook were oriented towards foreign cultural values. The speaking and listening practices included conversations that were typically foreign. For example, in one conversation, when someone complimented another person, that person immediately

replied, "Thank you". This response may be typical in some foreign cultures, but maybe unfamiliar to Vietnamese people, who tended to turn down compliments to indicate modesty. These teachers emphasised the need to have foreign cultural and linguistic knowledge as a means to facilitate international communication in everyday life, professional experiences or travel.

While acknowledging the dominance of foreign cultures, teachers realised the prevalence of target cultural representations in their ELT textbooks. Teachers observed some mixtures of cultures in their textbook, but also asserted that the target culture was prioritised. For example, all the voices in the listening sections were British English, and the information and illustrations in the readings were mostly from Europe, and especially from England. Teachers reported the existence of international cultural representations, citing representations from Asian or African countries, such as Japan, Thailand or South Africa. However, the percentage of these representations was small, as English-speaking culture dominated their textbooks. Some teachers mentioned the underrepresentation of Vietnamese culture in these textbooks, but then stated that they usually asked their students to relate the text to Vietnamese culture. English language teachers seemed to be well informed of the characteristics of global textbooks, which could not include cultural representations of a single culture, but instead had to include a wide range of other cultures.

3.2. Challenging cultural representations

There were some differences in teachers' views on which cultural representations might be challenging for students. While most teachers without international experience (n=6) thought that academic topics - such as technology, science, invention, history, or language -were challenging for students, only one teacher with international experience referred to these as hard topics. Teachers without international experience mentioned several other topics - vacations, laws, tourism, future plans, and famous people – as either challenging for students or difficult for them to implement in their lessons. These teachers specified some possible reasons. The representations were unsuitable or unfamiliar to Vietnamese culture, but most importantly, it was because of students' poor prior knowledge and insufficient language knowledge to engage with these foreign cultural representations.

Teachers with international experience expressed reluctance in engaging with cultural representations; listing a range of challenging units for their students. They admitted not having sufficient information about some cultural representations in textbooks, although they had experienced life in an English-speaking country. For example, the concept, Metronap, presented in the textbook Straightforward is used in the context of modern society, in which urban citizens work very hard and are too busy to have time to relax. These citizens use convenient places for taking a short rest during a busy day. The concept of Metronap is not in the dictionary, nor does it exist in Vietnamese culture.

These teachers also criticised the way some of the textbook units were designed to examine students' prior knowledge, not to provide them with cultural information. For example, the Marco Polo reading (unit 4.1 Objective KET) was designed in a way that students, before reading the text, had to identify details about famous people such as Neil Armstrong or Marco Polo. Students might know these people by name, but not their life details. Her students were not able to complete the task without being provided necessary contextual information. Another reading was the music quizzes in the book New English File that required students' much prior cultural knowledge about the music of other countries. Teachers not only complained about the design of this representation, but also highlighted the load of language knowledge that students had to obtain in this unit. They explained that the cultural knowledge was based on grammar content, and that grammar was too complicated for their students to absorb.

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3.3. Engaging cultural representations

Teachers had quite diverse views on which cultural representations were engaging for their students in ELT textbooks. Six teachers observed that their students were interested in topics about love, friends, and family. These topics were age appropriate for young students. Four other teachers believed that their students enjoyed learning about everyday life culture or popular topics such as food, neighbours, or sports. The most common reason for their students' preferences, according to most teachers, was that students had some prior knowledge of these topics. Students could use this knowledge as a basis for learning more about other cultures, or for conversational communication. Teachers believed that students liked learning about the topics that they could personalise and relate to themselves. They wanted to know how foreigners behaved in a particular situation, and compared this with themselves. For example, Vietnamese people hardly ever hugged or kissed each other in greetings, while it was common for Western people to do so.

Teachers mentioned one particular example about sports as an engaging cultural representation for their students. In this example, a Vietnamese football fan named Duc wrote a review about a football match for a foreign sports magazine. This representation was interesting for their students because they thought this situation was like them sharing their feelings about the football club that they worshipped. On the basis of this example, it might be good to include Vietnamese cultural representations in these global textbooks. The more references to Vietnam that were integrated into the text, the more engaged the students would become.

In addition to topics about everyday life, some teachers believed that topics about modern technology, travelling, or architecture were also interesting for their students. They highlighted examples of topics such as Facebook, EBay, or Google as engaging topics for their students. These topics were not unfamiliar to them, but they were new. Examples of expat file and high - speed train are also the modern societal trends in international cultures.

Still other teachers remarked that their students were more engaged with topics about films, music, or fashion. Whatever topics these students preferred, their teachers stated that they had prior knowledge of these topics, or they were able to personalise and relate them to themselves. This means that they had encountered these cultural representations with the intention of using the information they learnt to communicate with others. From these observations, it is concluded that teachers and their life experience were important in teaching culture. If the teacher had more real-life experience, their teaching would be more effective and more persuasive.

4. SUMMARY

In short, most teachers agreed that some cultural representations were challenging for students, largely because they required students' much prior knowledge. In other cases, students' insufficient language knowledge and teachers' insufficient cultural knowledge were considered to be the main factors.

5. REFERENCES

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