

Investigating Local and Foreign Cultures in the Algerian Middle School Textbook MS1

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Abstract:

The last decades are marked by a renewed interest in the textbooks' cultural contents. While there is a wide consensus over the inseparability of language and culture and the necessity for textbooks to be culturally loaded, the appropriate choice of culture that could help learners communicate effectively remains a moot question. This research investigates the place of the local culture compared to target and transnational cultures in the Algerian middle school textbook My Book of English MS1 and ENSB students' attitudes towards the promotion of local culture and enculturation.

The findings reveal that the local culture dominate over foreign cultures and students' attitudes correlate with the textbook authors' choices. Both textbook authors and students hold that celebrating the local culture, promoting good citizenship and nationalism should be the major educational goals.

Keywords:

Culture; Textbook evaluation; Attitudes; Nationalism; Ideology;

1. INTRODUCTION:

Language and culture is receiving more and more scholarly attention. While the inseparability of language and culture is becoming common sense, no established agreement is to be found related to the choices of culture. Despite the controversy over the cultures to be depicted in a textbook, the textbook authors have to make some compromises. Indeed, the limited scope of textbooks, the authors and policy makers' ideologies as well as the educational goals impose specific choices of culture.

Textbooks are effective materials to teach language and culture. Despite digitalization, they remain a powerful source of cultural input that promote (inter-)cultural literacy and (inter-)cultural communication. If carefully designed, they can promote at once an understanding of the Self and the Other, which reduces ethnocentrism as well as prevents assimilation.

Effective language learning depends heavily on the cultural literacies that are depicted in textbooks. Therefore, each of the three types of culture (local, target and transnational) has its own effects on the learner. While the local culture enables an understanding of the “Self”, the foreign cultures reduce ethnocentrism and promote intercultural awareness and effective communication.

This research aims at answering the following questions;

- Is culture teaching in the Algerian context a form of enculturation?
- What is the place of the local culture compared foreign cultures?
- How is culture viewed in the Algerian school?

We set the following hypotheses;

- Culture is viewed under a national paradigm in the Algerian context.
- Acculturation is viewed as a threat to national culture, while enculturation is seen as a major aim for the promotion of good citizenship.
- Local culture is emphasized.
- Culture is mainly taught to get an insight into the Algerian community and reinforce the national identity.

Despite the importance of this issue, “only a little work in applied linguistics has explored issues concerning the choice of cultural content for textbooks” (Risager, 2013, 205). In the Algerian context, some research is undertaken to investigate the choices of culture (Hayet Messakher and Soryna Yassine), yet, without digging deeper in the ideologies that affect the choices. This research, thus, aims to fill this gap in the literature.

2. Culture and Textbooks:

Reading the literature, we find so many different definitions and types of culture. Most commonly culture is divided into local, target and transnational. We find also classifications related to Big C and Little c cultures which can go back to the old elitist favoritism of the canonical works (what Mathew Arnolds considers as the best that has ever been produced or thought about) and the exclusion of other cultures which are not from the Canons. Yet, thanks to Stuart Hall we no longer share this view and these two cultures are sometimes replaced by deep and surface culture.

And of course, all these types of culture are to be found in a textbook with varying emphasis following the educational aims and the teaching ideology. A textbook is a teaching material that is culturally loaded. Karen Risager advances three different approaches to culture in textbooks;

2.1 – the encyclopedic approach

The encyclopedic teaching was the most traditional form of teaching characterized by a focus on language. Culture was mainly presented in form of realia. With this approach, we are mainly referring to language pedagogy as culture pedagogy mainly arose with the national approach (Risager, 2007, 4).

2.2- The national approach

This is a very dominant way of language and culture teaching. As previously stated, the national approach to culture was the first step to what today scholars call culture pedagogy as learning is culturally contextualized. It became clear that language and culture are inseparable and most importantly, they are marked by a complex and a multidimensional relationship. The national approach highlights three different dimensions of language teaching;

- The content dimension: the teaching is thematically organized.
- The context dimension: language learning takes place in different social situations.
- The poetic dimension: this dimension reflects the poetic and aesthetic nature of language and culture.

Despite the fact that the national paradigm has brought major contributions to culture pedagogy, it is today criticized for its understanding of culture as merely territorially defined. Moreover, the national approach promotes banal nationalism, which according to Michael Billig, prevents intercultural awareness, tolerance and world citizenship (2002). The national approach thus, considers culture without reflecting its complex, heterogeneous and global nature. Target cultures and local cultures are, therefore, presented as homogeneous.

The territorial understanding of culture also suggests a native-speaker approach. The target culture is then, as argued by Adrian Haliday, presented as the language of British and Americans who constitute the Center and all the remaining English speaking people are excluded (periphery).

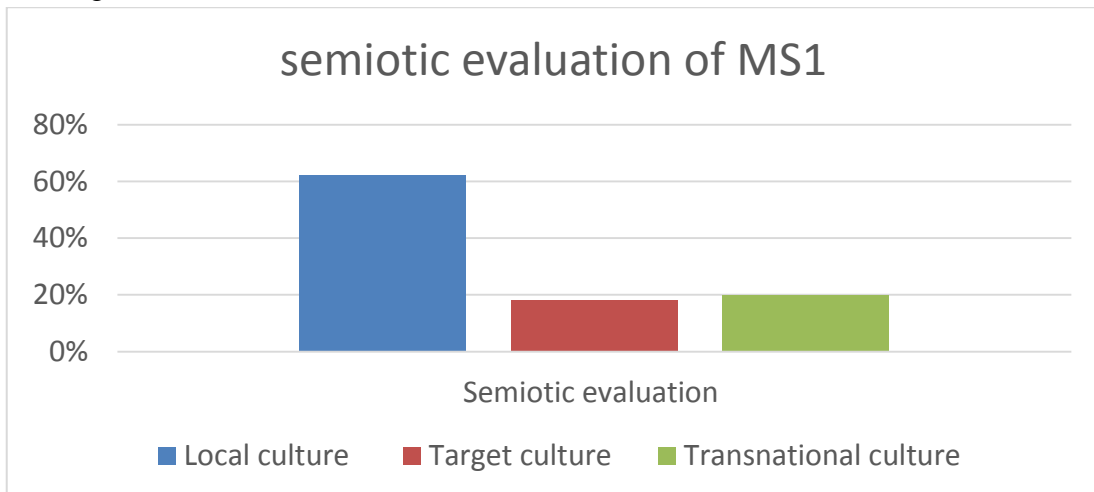
2.3. The transnational approach:

Today scholars (Risager and Kiss) are calling for transcending the national approach and adopting the transnational paradigm. Following Risager, language teaching should be undertaken from a transnational and global perspective. Focusing on the local or target culture would not serve the learners as they only develop their communicative competence and would undoubtedly fail in promoting Intercultural Communicative Competence and intercultural literacy (2007, 2).

Contrary to the national approach that aims at forging good citizens, the transnational approach strives for multilingual world citizens that could mediate between cultures. However, it should be noted that this approach does not mean an overlooking of national cultures, it rather distinguishes itself from the national approach in its view of culture as complex, heterogeneous and at once geographically and globally shaped. Thus, the geographical definition of culture that limit it to the "nation-state" cannot be the sole focus of a textbook. Indeed, a textbook that draws solely on the national paradigm may promote ethnocentrism and overshadow the complexity and global nature of the world today. A transnational textbook, therefore, reflects the geopolitical, linguistic, historical and professional ties that link people together and affect their identities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research relies on a semiotic textbook evaluation as well as attitudinal questionnaires that were distributed among 49 third year ENSB students. The questionnaire questions are of two types; open-ended questions and four-item Likert scale that help fully reach students' attitudes towards the investigated issue. The data was collected in February 2019. The textbook evaluation, as illustrated bellow, reveals that the local culture takes over the other cultures as 62% of the images depict local culture. We find images of institutions, martyrs, revolutionary figures, the national flag, local cities and monuments, which are clearly banal national elements (Morsli and Riche, 2019). The transnational culture comes second (20%), while the target culture receives 18% of attention.



My Book of English MS1 seem to disagree with the dominant view that preventing what Bennet refers to as “fluent fool” wouldn’t be possible without an emphasis on target culture. The latter is the least represented in the textbook and is mainly limited to national symbols such as maps, flags, currency and the royal family. The textbook does not provide any critical incidents that would sensitize learners to cross cultural differences. Doing this, however, there is no guarantee that learners develop a Communicative Competence as for Hymes a CC depends on feasibility, possibility, appropriateness and multidirectional interpretation. The first year learners are, thus, taught to produce grammatically accurate sentences, but not necessarily appropriately interpreted messages, which may increase critical incidents and misunderstanding.

The questionnaires, as shown in table 1, reveal that it is consented among the ENSB students that language and culture cannot be separated. They are equally aware of the necessity of textbooks to depict both local and foreign cultures

	Question	Strongly agree	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree
1	EFL students learn both language and culture	64%	36%	0	0
2	Culture and language should be taught in separate units	0	1%	27%	72%
3	culture comes secondary to language. Therefore, we should focus on language	0	1%	34%	65%
4	local culture should be depicted in textbooks	16%	46%	33%	5%
5	English and American cultures should be depicted	30%	46%	14%	10%
6	Transnational culture should be depicted	35%	25%	34%	6%

Table 1. students' attitudes to cultures.

Students' attitudes sometimes diverge concerning the choices of culture. Yet, broadly speaking, most learners support the emphasis on local culture at the same time argue that target culture is equally important and should be prioritized over the transnational culture. Students also seem to agree concerning the cultural elements that are appropriate for a language classroom, while supporting the depiction of Algerian life style, norms, values, art, food etc., most of the learners question the necessity of discussing foreign norms and values. They argue that first year middle school learners are not ready to discuss foreign norms and values are risk being shocked or assimilated.

4. CONCLUSION

My Book of English MS1 has a national approach to culture. Culture is seen as territorially shaped, homogeneous, and a major trait that distinguishes “us” from “them”. EFL learners are thus, taught a foreign language to be able to communicate locally and understand better who they are and what binds them together. This helps create and reinforce what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities” as the imagined Algerian community is mainly kept alive through textbooks. Yet, an understanding of the self undoubtedly involves an understanding of the Other and juxtaposing different worlds. This explains the textbook tendency to depict some foreign cultures (target and transnational).

This research reveals a strong correlation between the textbook authors and the students’ choice of culture, as both believe that celebrating local culture is a way to reinforce enculturation and national pride. Indeed, both textbook authors and the ENSB pre-service teachers agree on the importance of the local culture. The latter is perceived as homogeneous and territorially shaped. Therefore, the local culture is believed to be characterized by the Arabic language and Islamic culture. Indeed, the textbook itself refers to Arabic transcript, and keeps flagging symbols of Algerian nationalism as revolutionary figures such as Zohra Drif and Ben Badis. As illustrated in the appendices, institutions “flag” the Algerian flag and are named after the martyrs. The textbook thus, clearly aims at reinforcing national citizenship and promote feelings of belongings and pride in the Algerian history and heritage. A global citizen is thus, not taken as a goal.

My Book of English MS1 aims at a rich cultural literacy and promotes cultural awareness overlooking the importance of intercultural literacies and intercultural awareness. Learners are consequently, prepared for local performance of language and culture. Thus, the teaching cannot be said to be intercultural as the focus is mainly on local culture and learners are not encouraged to undertake intercultural contacts, discover new perspectives and no critical incidents were provided.

The textbook and the ENSB learners all agree on the necessity of celebrating local culture. This would promote enculturation and reinforce nationalism. However, We should be careful that this celebration of culture does not turn into an **exotica of difference**.

5. Figures and tables:

	Question	Strongly agree	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree
7	Learning about foreign cultures, norms, values and way of life is necessary	12%	5%	34%	49%
8	Dealing with foreign artistic productions is necessary	31%	24%	14%	31%
9	Dealing with Algerian culture, way of life, norms and values is necessary	42%	51%	6%	1%

Table 1: attitudes towards norms and values.

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Appendice 1

Ecole Normale Supérieur Bouzareah

English Department

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The present questionnaire is part of a research dealing with culture in the second generation textbooks. Its aim is not to evaluate students. The information you provide is a very useful contribution to the study. We would like you to answer by putting an X in the box that best indicates your answer and by giving the full answer when necessary. Thank you for your cooperation.

	Question	Strongly agree	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree
1	EFL students learn both language and culture				
2	Culture and language should be taught in separate units				
3	Culture comes secondary to language. Therefore, we must focus on language more than culture				
4	Local culture should be depicted in textbooks				
5	English and American cultures should be depicted in textbooks				
6	World cultures as French, Brazilian and Chinese should be depicted in textbooks				
7	learning about foreign cultures, norms, values and way of life is necessary				
8	Dealing with foreign artistic production, food and music is necessary				
9	Dealing with Algerian culture, norms, values and way of life is necessary				
10	Dealing with Algerian artistic production, food and music is necessary				

Would you please answer the following questions

What is culture for you ?

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Why is it necessary to teach culture?

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What are the cultural elements that should be taught? Why?

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Which culture do you think should be emphasized in textbooks, locale or foreign? Why

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Do you think My Book of English Fully depicts culture? Why

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How would you teach culture when you become teacher?

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Thank you!

Appendice 2.

القانون الداخلي للقسم



3. احترام أساتذتي وزملائي



2. عندما يتكلم زميلي، أستمع وأنتبه لكلامه



نتمتع و أنتبه إلى السبورة عندما يشرح الأستاذ الدرس



7. لا أتكلم مع زميلي داخل القسم



6. أعتد على نفسي في إنجاز التمارين ولا أغش



4. ألتزم بإكمال واجباتي المنزلية



10. أحافظ على أدواتي و دفاتي



9. لا أأكل ولا أشرب في القسم



8. أحافظ على نظافة القسم



