

Representation of Cultural Aspects in English Language Textbooks: Teachers' Reflections

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Abstract

Language and culture are inseparable in education. The linguistic activities we engage in through prescribed textbooks are inherently tied to cultural concepts. Therefore, language textbooks should be developed with a strong cultural foundation. The study aims to explore how culture is incorporated in grade 11 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks and how EFL teachers address those cultural contents in classroom teaching. Similarly, it particularly focuses on whether the EFL textbook interlinks global culture with indigenous culture or just the stereotype of it. Building on a qualitative approach with phenomenological research design, we chose two participants from Lalitpur District for in-depth interviews who have been teaching in two different community schools for more than a decade. The findings revealed that culture can be embedded in a language textbook in different ways: content, activities, and different pictures or images. The study suggests that the policymakers, language educators, and learners should be aware of the cultural aspects of the students who use the textbooks, considering it as one of the most inevitable parts of language teaching and learning.

Keywords: textbook, culture, symbolic competence, phenomenological inquiry, thematic analysis

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Introduction

The term 'culture' is defined as a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or organization. It is also described as the features of everyday life (such as diversions or ways of living) shared by people in a particular place or time. In essence, culture is embodied in many aspects and shared by a group of people (Zhu Hua, 2014). Moreover, Williams (1979) referred to culture as a "damned word" because of its multiplicity in the contexts where it occurs. It has many forms, such as national culture, regional culture, ethnic, diasporic, transnational, gay, lesbian, black, club, street, and drug culture. It means different things to different people. Therefore, the term "culture" cannot be defined through singular terms or conditions. Edward, Burnet, and Taylor (1871) define culture as "the complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 1). This suggests that the behavior, attitudes, and lifestyle people learn or accumulate from their society constitute culture. It is also referred to as the "deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people" (Samovar et al., 1998, p. 36). Thus, cultural theory is a branch of anthropology, semiotics, and other related social science disciplines such as political economy, sociology, and communication. It permeates every aspect of human life (Serrate, 2008).

Language and culture are interrelated entities. Human activities are the reflection of culture, and in this sense, language and culture are interconnected in shaping those activities. The knowledge that learners acquire from textbooks plays a crucial role in shaping and reshaping these human activities. Therefore,

the writing and selection of textbooks is a matter of serious discussion. When textbooks are designed with a focus on reflecting the learners' culture, they help foster learners' identity and raise awareness of their local heritage and assets.

The study focuses on the cultural representation in EFL textbooks within the context of Nepal. Textbooks are considered essential and authentic tools in the teaching-learning process, and help in shaping the knowledge, attitudes, and skills in the learners. These, in turn, are reflected in behavior, influencing the norms, values, and traditions of society and community. Nura (2004) emphasizes the importance of cultural aspects in textbooks, such as religion and national history. He further suggests that textbooks should embody, clarify, and raise awareness about the historical and cultural realities of the community. Moreover, a good textbook should promote intercultural awareness (Baker, 2011), helping learners understand and model intercultural communication. Intercultural awareness is understood as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective communication across cultures. In this regard, Baker (2011) mentions the term '*linguacultural*,' which fosters interaction in communication among learners. Therefore, EFL textbooks should develop learners' intercultural awareness so that they interact with each other without any hesitation.

From the critical postmodernist perspectives, culture is taken as a dynamic and fluid resource in intercultural communication. It is changeable based on the context and situation. According to the contextual variation of people, a new culture is formed, which is termed as a small culture (Zhu Huwa, 2014). The 'small culture' refers to 'a dynamic, ongoing group process to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances' (Holliday, 2009, p.205). It recognizes that the role of people is culture-making, and a new culture is formed in terms of common age, occupation, caste, etc. So, EFL textbooks should address such contextual sensitivity in linguistic structures in relation to socio – cultural context (Jiang, 2006). Similarly, Holliday (2009) states two types of thinking in culture: old thinking and new thinking. The old thinking asserts that national culture is a basic unit in which we need to work.

It defines culture as a static entity, and for its preservation, we need to work. It implies that EFL textbooks should focus on such content that makes learners aware of that static notion of culture. New thinking, on the other hand, cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred, and they are always negotiable. Such a notion is highly connected to globalization and the movement of people. It strongly asserts that culture is not a set of discrete entities but a shifting and indescribable phenomenon that is deeply interconnected with politics and economics. People should not romanticize it. So, EFL textbooks should focus on such a fluctuating nature of cultural dynamism. It denotes that textbooks should make learners contextually aware, and they should be able to apply them to any kind of situation. It is textbooks that relate the importance of cultural background to the power of learners' decision-making process (Lesikin, 2001). It empowers learners to unravel their reality and get the facts in real-life situations. But such a decision-making process should be incorporated with grammatical tasks and activities, and cultural background information.

There are two very big perspectives on the notion of culture: modernist and postmodernist perspectives (Kramsch, 2013). The modernist perspective views culture from big 'C' culture and small 'c' culture. The big culture has been an instrument in building the nation and state in the 19th century. It has been highly flourished and promoted by academic institutions such as schools and universities. It mostly focuses on teaching standard language, incorporating culture. The content of such a big culture in a textbook subsumes history, the literature, and the arts of the target country, assuring the continuity of national integrity and community. It further assumes that national cultures are a good and proper way of life and elicit pride and loyalty in people. So, the textbook should be prepared in terms of the integration of national culture in linguistic content and exercises. Small 'c' culture, in contrast, focuses on communication and interaction in a social context. It strongly claims that culture exists in everyday life. People's behaviors, such as eating, talking, dwelling, their customs, beliefs, and values, construct and reconstruct culture frequently. The terms cross – cultural pragmatics and

sociolinguistics appropriateness are key components of small culture. Therefore, an EFL textbook should bring awareness to those small linguistic events of learners.

The post – modernist perspectives have a shifting notion regarding culture due to the globalized geopolitical landscape and the spread of computer – mediated technology (as cited in Kramsch, 2013). It views culture as a discourse and a social semiotic construction in which native and non – native speakers negotiate each other to understand their discursive practices. They have a dynamic discursive process and follow the ‘catch their views in our vocabularies’ (as cited in Kramsch, 2013). It means both of them are in a changing mode of their position to understand each other. The struggle in their communication is simultaneously on multiple conflicting time scales. They are entirely engaged in understanding each other. Therefore, 21st-century textbooks should raise learners' awareness of such discursive exercises. Learners should grasp intercultural understandings from the textbooks, and they should feel comfortable adjusting to such a dynamic globalized world.

One of the most significant skills that a language textbook should develop in learners is the awareness of symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2011), in which different symbols are interpreted to draw the meaning in communication. An EFL textbook consists of different symbols, and they are used to convey different linguistic and cultural meanings. Symbolic dimensions of intercultural competence are discourse – based, historically grounded, and aesthetically sensitive (Kramsch, 2011), which explains the actual, the imagined, and the virtual world of human beings. In a very specific term, third place (as cited in Kramsch, 2013) is the reference of symbolic competence Kresch (2011), which creates a symbolic space for interlocutors to understand each other. Learners know how to navigate several systems and their cultural and historical boundaries. Zhu, Hua (2014) mentions that symbolic competence is not only to be approached to oneself and others, but it also tries to shape and reshape the very context of the language learned. It complements communicative competence with such a mindset so

that learners expand possibilities and opportunities to understand each other. Therefore, 21st-century EFL textbooks should address the dynamic and fluid nature of culture through language.

The mentioned literature subsumes culture as one of the most significant components of a language textbook. Teaching language without the awareness of culture is worthless in such a globalized village. Therefore, the study aims to investigate how EFL textbooks bring cultural awareness to the learners. What is the role of EFL teachers to impart linguistic knowledge, incorporating cultural flavor? Do EFL textbooks just provide cultural stereotypes or negotiation on them? There is no such interpretation of textbooks from a cultural point of view in Nepal, and many textbook interpretations have given no space for culture. Therefore, the study highlights the analysis of textbooks from a cultural point of view, drawing on the reflective ideas of the English language teachers. So, we noticed this issue as a new and informative one for conducting research. Thus, the paper attempted to answer the following research questions:

- How do EFL teachers perceive the grade 11 textbook from a cultural point of view?
- Do the EFL textbooks reflect the cultural stereotype of the target language or negotiation on it?
- What are the cultural contradictions caused by the EFL textbooks in the course of target language learning?
- What further suggestions can be made to incorporate cultural content into the prescribed textbook?

Methods and Procedures of the Study

This study adopted the qualitative research design, which believes that appearances are opposed to reality. Perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness are linked to the lived experiences of participants. It studies the structure of various types of experience and intentionality from a first-person point of view. “Phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the

perspectives of people involved” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 44). It focuses on lived human experiences with the issue that is researched. Similarly, the central concern of phenomenologists is to identify the understanding of life that can emerge from an individual’s experience (Whitehead, 2002). Considering the above standpoints, we also used a phenomenological design to get the lived experiences of the English language teachers who are teaching the grade 11 textbook.

Building on the phenomenological design, we purposively selected two EFL teachers from Lalitpur district. One is Amod (Pseudonym), who has been teaching in grades 11 and 12 for a decade in a community school of Lalitpur Metropolitan city, and the other is Binod (Pseudonym), who has been teaching in a private college for 15 years. Both of them have rich experience and a good command of English language teaching, and enjoy English language teaching as their main interest. Therefore, the study aims to collect rich lived experiences from the participants.

In order to collect data, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews for the lived experiences of participants in language teaching. We took two sets of interviews for each participant. The first interview was focused on rapport building and information sharing with them. Both of them were really cooperative in sharing their lived experiences of language learning. The second and content-based interview took around 25 minutes for each of them. It was, in reality, not like a formal interview. Instead, it was interactive and discussion-type in nature. We have also had an informal discussion on embedding cultural perspectives in grade 11 textbooks. They were really frank in sharing their experiences in relation to language teaching.

We employed a thematic analysis approach to analyze the interview data. As thematic analysis is defined as “a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), we transcribed the interview data minutely and did general initial coding line by line. Then, we categorized the coded data for searching themes. After a thorough comparison and revision of the categories, we generated three global themes and analyzed and interpreted,

building on the lived experiences of the participant teachers. The major themes derived from the coding and categorizing are displayed in the following table.

Themes	Data sources
Multicultural awareness through linguistic content	Examples from the text/lesson / units inside the textbook and telephonic discussion with the subject teacher.
Reflecting local culture through a global cultural message	Examples from the text/lesson/units inside the textbook and telephonic discussion with subject teachers
Symbolic manifestation of culture through images	The image from the textbook and related information from subject teachers

Results and Discussion

Multicultural Awareness through Linguistic Contents

Cultural awareness is a hot topic of discussion in the course of language education. The grade eleven EFL textbook has included multicultural content to create cultural awareness for learners. An example of multicultural content is the history of the Qin Dynasty, which mostly focuses on the cultural concept and awareness of the unification of China. The content of the lesson empowers learners to understand how Chinese history was and who the pioneers of that unification. The notion of such cultural awareness is highly discussed in Kramsch (2013) on the big ‘C’ culture discussion. The entire national culture of China has been briefly discussed there. The big ‘C’ culture also focuses on the knowledge of holistic national culture from the modernist point of view. Basically, the text has also mentioned some linguistic terms such as Qin Dynasty, Zhou Dynasty, and Han Dynasty, and some other names of Chinese culture. It is a fine reflection of Chinese culture in the text. In this regard, Binod mentioned:

The grade 11 textbook has talked about cultural contents from the global to the local level. At the global level, it has made them aware of the history of Chinese culture through the Qin Dynasty and how China became one of the

unified countries in the world. Similarly, he added that cultural awareness is one of the most significant parts of learning, based on which learners' critical and logical thinking are enhanced.

The remarks of participant 2 do not touch the notion of small 'c' culture, which is the main crux of the postmodern perspective (Kramsch, 2013). Globalized geopolitical landscapes and the spread of computer – mediated technology have narrowed down the space of people and they are involving each other in different walks of life. So, it can be argued that present-day EFL textbooks should make learners aware of this small culture (Zhu, Hua, 2014). Small culture is the construction and reconstruction of culture in terms of profession, religion, education, similar prior experience, and so on. It is known as a dynamic, ongoing group process to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances (Cited Holliday in Zhu, Hua, 2014). In this concern, Amod opines:

I think that this textbook should make learners aware of small professional activities, religious tasks, and local festivals of our own country. I further find that the existing content is really limited and such content inhibits learners from being aware of their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds in such a diversified and multicultural classroom.

Amod's views focus on the awareness of local culture while discussing the global culture. It suggests that the textbook has a strong discussion of global and international culture, but it has, to some extent, less emphasized the local ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation. Very few instances have been mentioned, but it is hardly possible to bring cultural awareness to the learners. We mention the discussion of cultural reflection in the lesson *of a few kind words of superstition*. The lesson reflects the notion of culture, knowingly and unknowingly, found in human behavior. The texts mention not walking under a ladder, a professor of anthropology who had spilled some salt, and throwing a pinch of it over his left shoulder are some normative cultures found in our society and community. Such superstitious beliefs are not only found in an illiterate community, but they are

also highly practiced in elite and educated families as well. It is called intercultural awareness (Baker, 2011), which makes learners expose their local culture in such a global market.

Reflecting Local Culture through Global Cultural Contents and Activities

Local culture reflection is the process of highlighting the indigenous behaviors through the knowledge of the national culture. The EFL textbook has mentioned such an exercise, which involves learners to expose their individual cultures based on the idea of national culture. For example, the activity of writing an essay on superstition that exists in your community (Unit 8, p. 75) is such an activity that brings learners' indigenous culture into the classroom. It has been given in the text '*a few kind words for superstition*'. The lesson has mentioned four different types of cultural dimensions in terms of superstition. When learners gain knowledge of a globalized culture, they tend to reflect on their personal culture. Such a notion of cultural knowledge is called small 'c' culture (Kramsch, 2013). The reflection of small culture is the notion of postmodernist notion in which culture is termed as a discourse. It asserts that culture is no longer bound to a particular territory and space. Instead, culture is the dynamic, fluid, and ongoing process of creation. In this context, Amod stated:

I find a huge discussion of global culture and less emphasis on local culture. I personally think that it is essential to preserve our indigenous property, which is our main identity. If learners get cultural competence at the local level, they adjust and negotiate different interlocutors easily.

Here, Amod's remarks indicate the lack of local culture while talking about global culture. But what we assert is that this textbook has addressed local culture, providing knowledge of global culture. For example, Unit 9 Democracy and Human Rights has discussed racial injustice in South Africa, and the voice of Mandela has been one of the emancipating and liberating voices for underprivileged people who have been discriminated against for many years. The racial/caste-related discrimination is highly prevalent in our society and

community, even the government has launched different rules and policies. The activity " writing a five-minute speech on the issue of racial / caste-related discrimination in our community" is the hot topic at the local level in Nepal. Such a text provides energizing insight to the learners, and they can raise their voice at the very local level. So, it is found that the grade 11 textbook has given a global context-based culture in the text and that the global concept of culture has been incorporated at the local level through different types of activities and exercises. In this context, Binod has stated:

Even though textbooks have mentioned globalized culture, I have associated it with our context and made learners aware of it. I have used the example of the unification of Nepal by Prithivinaryan Shah while teaching the lesson on the Qin dynasty. Similarly, different instances of my local area have been mentioned in the course of my teaching journey. For example, I tell them the example of crossing the cat while going out of the home. It is conceived as the sign of bad luck.

Binod's reflection shows the professional skill of experienced teachers. The fact is that it is the experienced teacher who generalizes and localizes the designated content according to the level of learners and the context of the topic. So, we also agree to the participant that our culture can be explained and associated to learners in terms of the content we teach in the classroom. It is the cultural sensitivity of teachers for making learners aware of teaching language with culture.

Symbolic Manifestation of Culture through Different Images

Culture is found in every walk of life. The way we speak, the way we dress, the way we enjoy, each and every activity shows our culture. So, the grade 11 textbook also reflects culture through different representations of pictures and images. Some cultural images of the textbooks are:

The displayed images are the symbolic representation of the culture of a particular society or community in a specific sense, or they are the representation of national culture as well. The first image displays the Muslim culture in terms



of the dress she wears, which is the reflection of big ‘C’ culture in the world (Kramsch, 2011). It basically shows the dress that Muslim women wear in their society and community. Similarly, if we interpret the same image in relation to the text that has been mentioned, it specifies the courageous nature of a young lady for the liberation and emancipation of females from the basic rights of education. Therefore, culture is found in each and every walk of our lives.

The second image is the history of the world and the mega property of China. The one and only matter seen from the moon is the Great Wall of China, which is the symbolic representation of the world and entire mankind as well. So, it indicates the global culture. However, if we relate the image with the text, it manifests the specific Chinese culture and still the manifestation of Qi Shi Huangdi and his policy to involve people at work who are not employed at that time. Therefore, images and symbols convey a huge cultural message to the learners. Such kind of intercultural competence, as cited in Byram (Zhu, Hua, 2014) is the competence of culture for learners. So, if we observe the grade 11 EFL textbook from this perspective, we see lots of cultural properties.

The third image has been taken from unit 8, the title is a few kind words of superstition. It illustrates the human construct and their behaviors, whether literate or illiterate. It is, in the context of Nepal, believed that a black cat is the sign of bad luck, and when people see it going out from their home, they feel bad luck and stop their outing. They also wait and stop, and when the next person crosses the way, then they go from there. This is a kind of stereotype notion of culture that persists in the human mind and behaviors. Such a stereotype of culture is termed as national culture (Holliday, 2009), which defines culture from a modernist

and postmodernist perspective. In Holliday's views, when culture is defined as common values, beliefs, and entire norms, it gives the identity of a whole area, called national culture.

Conclusions and Implications

The study highlights that culture is an integral and inseparable part of language. Teaching a language inherently involves teaching its culture. The research calls on language policymakers to consider how culture is embedded in language teaching and learning. It also encourages educators to explore ways to integrate globalized culture with indigenous culture in classroom activities. Additionally, this study is claimed to serve as a foundational step towards developing future language textbooks that emphasize culture as a core element of language instruction. In summary, it urges novice researchers and teachers to incorporate cultural aspects when teaching language. The study further keeps the space for upcoming researchers to analyze the textbook from a critical postmodernist point of view, in which bookish exercises are associated with culture in very small and micro classroom activities. So, in-depth investigations of the textbook form of the critical paradigm are an open space for future researchers.

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