

## A Critical Look at Culture in EFL Textbooks in Japan

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As peoples of the world become more interconnected, English has become a tool of communication in a wide variety of situations. As a result, the teaching of EFL has increasingly incorporated culture into its methodologies, materials, and curricula to better prepare students for these intercultural situations. However, the way in which culture is conceptualized in EFL classrooms is not always appropriate and can even impede learners from developing their intercultural citizenship. This paper looks at how culture has been conceptualized in EFL education in various stages, the ways in which these conceptualizations of culture have influenced research on EFL materials in Japan, the need for a model of learner development regarding the development of intercultural citizenship, and the use of Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (MICC) as a guideline for the evaluation and creation of EFL materials.

人々の相互関連性が世界中で高まるにつれて、英語はさまざまな場面でコミュニケーションの道具となっている。その結果、教授法、教材、そしてカリキュラムに文化を取り入れたEFLの英語の授業が増加してきたが、そのことにより、学生たちは異文化交流に対してより良い準備ができるようになった。しかし、EFLの授業で文化を概念化して取り入れる方法は必ずしも適切ではなく、学習者が「グローバル市民」になることをより難しくすることさえある。本稿では、近年のEFL教育における文化の概念化と活用、日本で用いるEFL向け教材のための文化研究のあり方、そのような教材の中でどのように文化を利用すべきかを検討し考察する。

**D**ue to the political and economic hegemony of the Anglosphere, English has become the lingua franca of business, academia, culture, and other international areas (Fairclough, 2006). As the predominant neoliberal view of education emphasizes the development of practical skills for economic competitiveness, EFL education seeks to train

learners to be linguistically capable in English so they can compete in the global economy (Phillipson, 2008). More recently, culture has started to find a role in EFL education as teachers and learners accept the importance that culture plays in communication (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). However, culture is a notoriously hard term to define, and different interpretations of what culture entails and how it should be incorporated into EFL classrooms can lead to widely different representations in EFL materials. These representations of culture can in turn affect how learners come to perceive culture and how they interact with those from foreign cultures. In this paper I seek to explore the predominant stages in which culture has been conceptualized in EFL and the corresponding ways these stages have been utilized in Japanese EFL material research, as well as the need for a model of learner development regarding intercultural citizenship (IC). The paper will conclude with a discussion on the use of Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (MICC) to create and evaluate EFL materials for the development of learner IC.

### The Conceptualization of Culture in EFL

The role of culture in the EFL classroom has been the subject of much debate and is still undergoing refinement and further definition. This process can be separated into different stages in which the role of culture in the EFL classroom has shifted conceptually (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Weninger & Kiss, 2013).

In the first stage, culture is considered as a set of transferrable artifacts to be taught and learned about a *target* culture, usually from “native-speaking” countries. This stage is focused on learners using so-called native speakers as arbiters of cultural knowledge and as a linguistic model to aspire to in order to become accepted members of a target culture. However, this practice has come under criticism for its promotion of powerful classes as the representation of an entire nation's culture as well as criticism for its glorification of the most politically and economically elite groups as ideal (Phillipson, 2008).

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Researchers such as Pennycook (1998, 2007) and Canagarajah (1999) have looked at how the perceived necessity to acculturate into an Anglosphere culture demotes learners' native culture as undesirable, which is what led to the idea of linguistic imperialism.

In the subsequent stage of culture in EFL education, practitioners attempt to provide comprehensive language training as well as cultural training, whereby learners become members of two distinct cultural groups. In this conceptualization, culture is considered as a fixed character trait typically based on national boundaries, and intercultural communication is viewed as the exchange of information between two culturally distinct parties. However, criticism of this approach has arisen, as culture cannot be thought of as a system of traits that are fixed, hegemonic, and binary. Rather, culture is flexible and ever changing. Therefore, neither national, religious, racial, gender, nor any other classification of peoples is adequate to explain an individual's culture (Kramsch, 2009). Furthermore, this approach is problematic as a conceptualization of culture in EFL, as discourse is not limited to the exchange of information between parties. Communication is affected by the nuances and values of each interlocutor's corresponding multiple cultures, which in turn affect the relationship between language and the representation of ideas (Byram, 2006).

The most recent stage regarding the role of culture in EFL removes individual countries and artificially separated cultures to take a more critical approach to the development of cultural identity and membership. IC is a term, among others, that is used to describe the ability of learners to relativize their own identity and its formation with those from other cultures, accepting differences rather than considering foreign cultures as deficient (Byram, 1997; Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Through the development of IC, language learning goes beyond the neoliberal concept of the acquisition of skills and shifts towards critically investigating how language and culture form individual identities and beliefs. When developing IC, students are not asked to accept unfamiliar cultural values and norms in order to become accepted members of another culture nor are they encouraged to compare and contrast cultures that are portrayed as hegemonic national, ethnic, racial, or gender stereotypes (Byram, 1997). Through IC, learners take a critical approach to language and culture in context, including their native language and culture, in order to more thoroughly investigate the roles of language and culture in the development of identities and groups (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

### The Role of Culture in Japanese EFL Classroom Materials

In Japan the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is the government agency that creates the national curriculum for all certified public

schools. MEXT issues the Course of Study (CoS) curriculum guidelines that provide an outline for the teaching of subjects at all levels of education. However, the CoS guidelines do not provide any explicit direction in terms of second language acquisition pedagogy, teaching methodology, or EFL-specific teacher training (MEXT, 2011). EFL learning goals only specify how English is to be utilized in the future lives of learners in Japan as workers in the global economy (MEXT, 2011). As a result, Japan has not made any institutionalized attempts to incorporate IC into the CoS guidelines in any meaningful way (Parmenter, 2006).

The CoS guidelines do little to change actual EFL classroom practice, as there is little oversight of either the pedagogy and methodology of individual teachers or how municipal or prefectural boards of education implement these guidelines as they see appropriate. However, MEXT does exert direct influence over classroom content by approving the textbooks that are used in EFL classrooms in both public and private schools at the primary and secondary levels. Approved textbooks must be utilized in all public school classrooms; therefore, the most direct control that MEXT has over the individual learning process in the EFL classroom is reflected in the textbooks that are approved. Although teachers have the potential to utilize alternative teaching methodologies and to incorporate supplemental materials in their classes, it has been shown that textbooks generally provide the basis for lesson content and methodology (Browne & Wada, 1998). To investigate the ability of EFL education in Japan to develop learners' IC, an investigation into MEXT-approved textbooks can provide relevant and applicable data.

There have been several studies that have looked at the incorporation of culture into EFL textbooks in Japan (Ashikaga, Fujita, & Ikuta, 2001; Matsuda, 2002; Yamada, 2011; Yamana-ka, 2006). However, many of these studies conceptualize culture as a set of static artifacts in line with the earlier stages of the role of culture in EFL. As a result, researchers quantifiably measure different cultures as they are represented lexically in the text. By quantifying culture as a unit and dividing these units based on individual countries, these studies take a limited view of culture as a concept (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Although this quantitative research can be effective in looking at societal perceptions of the uses and users of English, it does not effectively allow for pedagogical recommendations, especially regarding the development of learner IC. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis assumes that the analyst will interpret the textbook in the same way as the learner or teacher. However, this ignores the multiple ways in which cultural meaning is formed (Kramsch, 2009).

Ashikaga et al. (2001) looked at the type of culture promoted in senior high school (SHS) textbooks by analyzing the frequency of lexical terms grouped by "concrete culture" (cultural symbols) and "abstract culture" (cultural values) as conceptualized by

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Allen and Valette (1972). Ashikaga et al. also grouped these cultures into “target” (Anglo-sphere), “source” (Japanese), or “international” (all others) categories. The results showed that concrete culture related to target sources was predominant in SHS textbooks. This information was followed by author recommendations to incorporate abstract culture, wherever appropriate, to increase students’ “sensitivity and openness to different cultural values and viewpoints” (p. 9). However, these recommendations were not based on any model of learner development outlined in the article and cannot be made based solely on the data gathered in the study.

Matsuda (2002) looked at the uses and users of English in 1st year junior high school (JHS) textbooks approved by MEXT. This study used Kachru’s (1985) concentric circle model to look at the main characters’ nationalities and identify the context of discourse as either international or “intranational” (Matsuda, 2002). The study demonstrated the prevalence of international uses of English between inner-circle native English speakers and Japanese nationals. As a result, Matsuda (2002) concluded that this could create or reinforce the student opinion that English is only intended for use with inner circle speakers in international contexts. Again, this conclusion was not centered on a model of learner development. Although it seemed to be common sense, it only had anecdotal evidence in the stated research.

Yamanaka (2006) also used Kachru’s (1985) concentric circle model as the basis of analysis of both JHS and SHS textbooks approved by MEXT. This study looked at the occurrence of lexical terms referring to specific countries and also confirmed the prevalence of discourse between inner circle native speakers and Japanese nationals in the textbooks. However, it also demonstrated the gradual inclusion of terminology related to the outer circle in SHS, which was held to reflect the growing importance of English as a global language. Although we can see progress being made in the inclusion of other lexical terms, the researcher did not apply learner development models to the findings. Thus, discussion of whether this would benefit learners was subjective.

Yamada (2011) conducted a longitudinal study of race and ethnicity in different editions of JHS EFL textbooks by coding textbook characters based on the shading of their skin in visual portrayals as well as their national identifications as indicated in the textbook. This study revealed the underrepresentation of African and South American characters and a bias towards Asian, North American, and European characters, which is largely consistent with the other studies discussed. Although in the conclusion, the author stated that this would negatively influence learners’ cultural outlook, this statement was not centered in a wider discussion of learner IC development.

These studies of culture in EFL textbooks are valuable for insights into how the content of EFL textbooks reflect the beliefs of English use and users in Japan. However, as they all conceptualize cultural identity as static and fixed to national identity, the results are limited in how they can be applied to learner development of IC. Weninger and Kiss (2013) saw quantitative approaches to evaluating the inclusion of culture in textbooks as largely unable to effectively estimate the impact that culture has on learning or on the development of student identity. An approach that looks at textbooks holistically needs to be conducted to make any comprehensive recommendations or generalizations regarding IC. To successfully evaluate how well MEXT-approved textbooks develop IC, a holistic approach based on a learner developmental model is needed to provide a nuanced and wide-ranging assessment.

### Utilizing a Learning Model for the Development of Intercultural Citizenship

Byram (1997) described five objectives that contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, which is synonymous with IC. These objectives provide a basis on which materials can be created to develop learners’ IC and, therefore, provide the outline against which we can evaluate textbook success in achieving these goals. Byram’s MICC offered five objectives in helping learners achieve IC: knowledge of culture, attitudes towards culture, skills of discovery, skills of interpretation, and political education. Other models of the development of IC or its partner terms have been put forth by Corbett (2003), Kumaravadivelu (2006), and Kramsch (2009), but I have chosen Byram’s model because it provides the most thorough operational definitions and assessment criteria that can be applied to EFL materials.

### Knowledge of Culture

The first objective of the MICC relates to knowledge of culture. Byram (1997) defined this objective in two broad categories: first, “knowledge about social groups and culture in one’s own country, and similar knowledge of an interlocutor’s country,” and second, “knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels” (p. 35). Young learners will have acquired knowledge about social groups and culture in their own country, although much of this knowledge is implicit and possibly believed to be universal. Therefore, increased knowledge of the boundaries, both internationally and domestically, of differing social groups—religious, ethnic, economic, and so on—could further learners’ understanding of the fluid nature of culture. Textbooks can achieve this by providing models of foreign interlocutors who express their own cultural beliefs and

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meanings, which can be learned from and then critically investigated by learners (Byram, 1997). Textbook writers should seek to include information beyond hegemonic national social groups and look at minority groups both within the home country and in other countries and regions.

The development of knowledge about the processes of identity formation is more difficult as it requires a high degree of self-awareness. Learners should be aware of the processes through which their own social identities have been created and how their social identities form a lens through which their perceptions of “inside” and “outside” cultural groups are created (Byram, 1997). Therefore, the development of knowledge of culture uses cultural information that is gained to allow learners to relativize their own identities with those of others. Materials that contrast characters’ cultural memberships, manifested as differing personal beliefs and behaviors, could help develop learners’ IC as they critically investigate their own cultural memberships through the examples.

### **Attitudes Towards Culture**

The next area in the MICC has to do with attitudes towards culture. Byram (1997) defined this as “attitudes towards people who are perceived as different in respect of the cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviors they exhibit” (p. 34). These attitudes can include stereotypes and prejudices, both positive and negative, which can influence expectations in communication between people of differing cultures. A learner that displays a high level of IC should have attitudes of “openness” and “curiosity” and “a willingness to suspend belief in [his or her] own meanings and behaviors” (Byram, 1997, p. 34). In developing their attitudes towards culture, learners take the knowledge of culture from the previous objective and attempt to shape their perceptions of these foreign cultures. It is a common practice for those who look at a foreign culture to apply their own sets of values in evaluating the unknown (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Learners with healthy attitudes towards culture do not attempt to apply cultural relativism to all practices but are encouraged to accept differences instead of judging cultures as deficient. Learners who have developed IC in their attitudes towards culture are willing to participate and try new things, both culturally and linguistically, rather than relying on what is familiar. In order to develop these kinds of attitudes, textbook writers could try to relativize a learner’s own cultural meanings, beliefs, and behaviors by taking an outsider’s perspective on the learner’s own culture. Additionally, attempts in the textbook to combat commonly held stereotypes would help develop learners’ attitudes towards culture (Byram, 1997). Japanese materials often are quite self referential by including a lot of Japanese cultural symbols, but are rarely reflective of the origin of these symbols or what underlying cul-

tural values they represent. A more critical look at the culture that is natural to learners would allow them to apply the same thought process to culture that is foreign to them.

### **Skills of Discovery and Interpretation**

The third and fourth areas of Byram’s (1997) MICC both deal with skills, divided into skills of discovery and skills of interpretation. Through the skill of discovery a learner can gain “specific knowledge as well as an understanding of the beliefs, meanings and behaviors that are inherent in particular (cultural) phenomena” (p. 38). This approach entails learners gaining the ability to recognize foreign cultural phenomena and extract meanings and connotations. However, when considering the textbook as a source of authentic cultural material, this can be a daunting prospect (Pinner, 2016). Cultural phenomena are difficult to convey in EFL materials through textbook dialogues that mainly focus on introducing linguistic knowledge. However, skills of discovery could be developed through the use of materials that are adapted from the foreign culture, either by the textbook publisher or the teacher. It is possible to use adapted materials as a lens through which cultural beliefs, meanings, and values of a particular culture are discovered if the right guidance is given by a textbook (Byram, 1997). Japanese textbooks often mention or include a brief foreign cultural material such as sheet music or song lyrics; these should also be explored for their underlying cultural values.

Following the skills of discovery, the skills of interpretation become relevant. Learners should be able to deal with cultural materials and recognize the explicit or implicit biases that occur both in the documents and within themselves. Through this recognition, learners can mediate the meanings of the materials through balancing different perspectives and gain a better understanding of the cultural systems that are present (Byram, 1997). Much like skills of discovery, development of the skills of interpretation would mean that textbooks would include adapted material from a foreign culture, as well as an investigation of the cultural values inherent in this material. However, these skills of interpretation would go further to encourage learners to contemplate how these cultural values reflect on the biases inherent within the material, the author, and the learner.

### **Political Education**

The final area of the MICC deals with political education, in which learners participate in intercultural situations in accordance with the abilities that they have gained from the four earlier objectives. Learners should be able to “interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges in accordance with explicit criteria, negotiating where necessary a degree of

acceptance of them by drawing upon [their] knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Byram, 1997, p. 53). This area is probably the most difficult to incorporate into the classroom, much less into a textbook, as it requires the active involvement of learners in an intercultural situation utilizing their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make an evaluative judgment of an intercultural situation. This goes beyond language learning "for purposes of clarifying communication and interaction" but has language learners "clarifying [their] own ideological perspective and engaging with others consciously on the basis of that perspective" (Byram, 1997, p. 101). The textbook can help instill political education by providing examples of characters engaging with global issues that they have an ideological viewpoint on and working towards social justice regarding that issue. Textbooks could also be explicit about encouraging learners to become involved in local or global issues in which they use their viewpoint to take an active role and participate with other people.

## Conclusion

Using a developmental model of IC, which conceptualizes culture as a flexible, multi-faceted group membership, we can better investigate the cultural content in EFL materials in our classrooms. Traditional ways of introducing culture as food, fashion, festivals, and folklore, although interesting and exciting for students, are not enough for the development of learners' IC (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Additionally, the conceptualization of individuals exclusively as members of a national group does not further their intercultural understanding (Kramersch, 2009). A critical approach in teaching and learning that is reflected through classroom materials is necessary for progressive learner development and intercultural awareness. Byram's (1997) model for intercultural communicative competence gives us a lens through which we can develop a better understanding of how to create EFL materials for our learners and how these materials can help our learners develop as global citizens.

## Bio Data

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