

EXPLORING CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY IN EFL TEXTBOOKS: A
COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF THIRD YEAR MIDDLE
SCHOOL TEXTBOOK "MY BOOK OF ENGLISH"

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استكشاف الأصال الثقافية في كتب تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية :
تقييم شامل لكتابه السنة الثالثة من التعليم المتوسط "كتابه في اللغة
الإنجليزية"

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Abstract:

Foreign language teaching is a complex process in which the teacher must be qualified to select appropriate educational materials. Learning a foreign language certainly involves a comprehensive understanding of its associated culture. Thus, it is important that textbooks incorporate an authentic portrayal of diverse cultures in order to contribute a relevant learning environment. The current study attempts to evaluate "My Book of English" textbook in terms of cultural authenticity through a qualitative analysis. The findings indicate that the textbook presents a range of diverse cultures; however, it does not provide learners with an authentic picture about how the English

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language is used in different contexts. The absence of proverbs, songs and interactive activities that could prepare students to engage in a multicultural world. Therefore, some recommendations have been suggested to enhance the cultural authenticity embedded in the textbook.

key words: Culture, Cultural authenticity, Textbooks, FLT, Textbook Evaluation.

ملخص باللغة العربية:

يُعدّ تعليم اللغات الأجنبية عملية معقدة تتطلب من المعلم كفاءات بيداغوجية عالية تمكنه من اختيار المواد التعليمية الملائمة. لا يمكن فصل تعلّم اللغة عن فهم الثقافة المرتبطة بها، إذ تمثل الثقافة مكوناً جوهرياً في اكتساب اللغة واستيعاب معانيها في سياقاتها الاجتماعية والثقافية الأصيلة ومن هذا المنطلق، تبرز أهمية تضمين الكتب المدرسية عرضاً أصيلاً ومتنوعاً للثقافات بما يساهم في توفير بيئة تعلم واقعية وفعّالة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم كتاب *My Book of English* للسنة الثالثة من التعليم المتوسط من حيث الأصالة الثقافية، وذلك بالاعتماد على منهج تحليلي نوعي. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن الكتاب يعرض مجموعة من الثقافات المتنوعة، غير أنه لا يقدم للمتعلمين صورة أصيلة حول كيفية استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية في سياقات حقيقية. كما لوحظ غياب بعض العناصر الثقافية الأصيلة مثل الأمثال، والأناشيد، والأغاني، والأنشطة التفاعلية التي من شأنها إعداد المتعلمين للتواصل ضمن بيئة متعددة الثقافات. وبناءً على ذلك، تقترح الدراسة جملة من التوصيات الهادفة إلى تعزيز الأصالة الثقافية المتضمنة في الكتاب المدرسي وتحقيق توازن أكبر بين البعد اللغوي والبعد الثقافي في محتواه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة؛ الأصالة الثقافية؛ الكتب المدرسية؛ تعليم اللغات الأجنبية؛ تقييم الكتاب المدرسي.

I. Introduction

Foreign language teaching is a complex process which depends on the teacher's competence in selecting effective teaching materials. According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994), the textbook is an almost universal element

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in English Language Teaching (ELT). Textbooks seem to be an important component of any successful teaching/learning context. Language and culture are deeply intertwined, mastering a foreign language necessarily requires understanding its cultural background. Kramsh (1993) believes that beyond facilitating communication, language expresses the culture from which it emerges. That is, the process of teaching/learning a foreign language seems inadequate for effective communication unless it involves exposing learners to the culture of the language they are learning. Despite the development of technology and the recently involved teaching methods, textbooks remain one of the most relied on tools in EFL classes. In addition to teaching linguistic and grammatical input, they reflect cultural content like: traditions, beliefs, and values that help learners understand and respect other cultures. Gilmore (2007) highly advocates that the language learning process should be directed through natural or authentic learning environments and conditions to promote this process. In this sense, authentic content foster language learning and develop learners' culture skill. The more learners are exposed to culturally authentic materials, the more they develop their language proficiency in real-world contexts.

1. Statement of the problem

Textbooks are widely regarded as significant educational tools, they play a great role in developing learners' perception of the language and its culture. Byram (1997), Cortazzi & Jin (1999), and Risager (2006) assume that the presentation of culture in textbooks lacks authenticity. In other words, the textbooks' cultural content is limited to surface-level elements, while fundamental components such as: beliefs, values and real-life contexts are often overlooked. Integrating cultural components in EFL classes has been long emphasised but meeting cultural authenticity is still a confusing problem. Therefore, teaching a foreign language depending on textbooks that offer inauthentic representation of culture is considered to be incomplete. This gap presents a dilemma for EFL teachers, it raises a question about the relevance of cultural authenticity approved in the textbook.

To this concern, English language education, in Algeria, has seen a set of reconsiderations within the competency-based approaches which focus on the cultural content of the Third-Year middle school textbook. This study is conducted to evaluate the cultural authenticity represented in the English

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textbook *My Book of English* in Algerian middle schools for the purpose of checking the cultural authenticity of this material in meeting the objectives set by the ministry. Although English textbooks in Algeria represent the language used by native speakers which can validate authenticity, they have often been criticized.

2. Aims of the Study

The main objective of This article is to evaluate cultural authenticity in the Algerian third year middle school textbook of English. On that account, the main aims in this research are:

- To investigate the cultural components represented in *My Book of English* textbook.
- To evaluate the extent to which *My Book of English* textbook is culturally authentic.

3. Research Questions

- What are the cultural components introduced in *My Book of English* textbook and how are they represented?
- To what extent do *My Book of English* textbook provide authentic representation of culture?

4. Research Methodology

To meet the objectives of the research under investigating the evaluation of cultural authenticity in the textbook, a descriptive analytical approach based on a qualitative data is used. Concerning research tools, the researcher created an evaluation checklist which provide criteria for a detailed textbook analysis based on asking appropriate questions and interpreting their answers. These questions cover topics related to cultural authenticity and the way it is provided in the third-year middle school textbook. Cultural authenticity is examined throughout “My Book of English” sequence by sequence.

II. Literature Review

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In the context of foreign language teaching in Algeria, English is taught as a foreign language. That is, learners are initially introduced to the English language through textbooks, they lack the opportunity to use it in their daily life contexts. In the past, foreign language teaching focused on linguistic and grammar forms but recently, many educational studies have indicated that effective language teaching/learning is achieved when authentic content and cultural contexts are taken into consideration. Consequently, textbooks have seen significant changes in terms of content, format, and learning objectives.

1. Definition of Culture

Culture is a difficult concept that can be defined in different ways depending on the context in which the word “culture” is used. Taylor (1971) gave the first definition of culture as “That 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). To state it differently, culture is socially acquired and it teaches individuals think, behave, and engage in the world around them. In this context, Byram (1989) defines culture as “the whole way of life of the foreign country including but not limited to its production in the arts, philosophy and high culture in general” (p.15).

2. The Importance of Culture in Language Teaching

Language is bound up with culture in different ways, the close relationship between language and culture has been generally accepted and stressed in the language education field. Risager (2006) considers culture as a component and a part that cannot be separated from the language. She adds that linguistic production and practice is a way of cultural practice since language is always embedded in culture. In other words, knowing the conventions, customs, and lifestyles of the target country plays a great role in foreign language teaching/learning. Moreover, according to Byram (1989), cultural awareness is very important in language teaching because it contributes to language proficiency; consequently, any EFL textbook should include components of its culture whether implicitly or explicitly. Thus culture is obviously needed to develop students’ ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in different contexts.

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In this respect, Pullen and Lee (2009) argued that the target language culture has to be present in the language course especially if the target culture and the local culture are far from each other. They assert that the language learners need to develop not only their grammatical competence but also their communicative skills in order to allow an accurate language use to take place. This could only be achieved if the social and cultural issues of the L2 are present in the language course.

3. Definition of Cultural Authenticity

There is a considerable range of meanings associated with authenticity. Freda Michan (2005) claims that authenticity refers to materials that are produced by and for native speakers of the language for actual communication purposes. That is, authenticity in language teaching/learning involves using materials that reflect real life communicative contexts such as: newspapers, magazines, movies...etc. Byram (1997) refers to cultural authenticity as the degree to which cultural content in language teaching materials accurately reflects the values, practices, and perspectives of the target culture. Integrating authentic materials in foreign language teaching fosters learners' cultural understanding, and therefore, it enhances their intercultural competence.

4. Textbook Evaluation

According to Tomlinson (2003), textbook evaluation is “a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials” (p. 15). That is, textbooks evaluation is a systematic process of assessing the effectiveness or pedagogical value of textbooks in order to determine the extent to which they meet the needs of teachers and learners in the teaching learning process. It serves as a means of ensuring that the instructional materials employed in classrooms provide both educational efficiency and meaningful learning opportunities.

5. Integrating Cultural Authenticity in Textbooks

Since then, a range of studies have been conducted to investigate the extent to which cultural authenticity is integrated in English textbooks, they were carried out on various aspects related to authenticity (social culture, authentic materials, and soon). For instance, Aliakbari (2004) examined

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Iranian EFL textbooks and concluded that cultural components were selectively represented, they lack deep aspects of real-life cultural practices.

Moreover, Yuen (2011) analysed the content of Asian EFL textbooks, he noted that the cultural content was limited in authenticity and variety. Rashidi and Meihami (2016) emphasized the importance of integrating authentic cultural content in textbooks, they believe that culturally authentic culture certainly enhances learners' intercultural communicative competence. As a result, they effectively interact in real-life situations.

Another study that dealt with authenticity is Hamidi and Benaissa (2018), who analysed “New Prospects”, in Algeria, to investigate the authenticity of the tasks in the targeted textbook and examine whether the textbook helps the learners build their communicative competence. The results revealed that tasks in the textbook do not encourage communicative practice, and there is a remarkable lack of authenticity.

Despite growing awareness of the importance of cultural authenticity in language education and after reviewing the findings of the previous researchers, many textbooks still fail to portray cultures in an accurate way. This study seeks to fill this gap by evaluating the cultural authenticity of textbooks used in Algerian EFL classes.

III. Textbook Description

“My Book of English” is designed for Third-Year Middle school pupils, it includes four main units. The textbook consists of 160 pages, it aims to develop learners' linguistic and communicative competence in order to meet the objectives set by the ministry.

IV. Data Analysis

In order to explore the issue of cultural authenticity in “My Book of English” textbook, a comprehensive evaluation would show how cultural content is introduced for EFL learners. In addition, it will explore the four sequences in order to investigate the extent to which cultural authenticity is represented in this curriculum. This textbook is chosen because pupils at this level have already dealt with English for two years at middle school, they acquired vocabulary, grammar...etc. So, it is highly important to expose

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them to authentic cultural knowledge so that they foster their communication in real-world contexts.

a. Sequence one:

This sequence is entitled “Me, My Abilities, My Interests and My Personality”. It primarily reflects aspects of surface culture, portraying concrete cultural elements such as traditional clothing, local food, sports, and family activities. While these features play an essential role in introducing learners to cultural diversity, they represent only the observable dimension of culture, often described as the “tip of the iceberg” (Moran, 2001). Such an approach overlooks the deeper aspects of culture such as beliefs, attitudes, and values which are fundamental to fostering intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

The project of the sequence requires pupils to write about a traditional musical instrument, it is pedagogically valuable as it enhances learners’ awareness of cultural heritage and encourages the appreciation of local traditions. Nevertheless, its focus remains largely localized, offering limited opportunities for intercultural comparison and reflection.

The inclusion of authentic materials such as the BBC radio interview and personal profiles reflects an attempt to simulate real-life communication and expose learners to natural discourse patterns, though these tasks appear to be pedagogically adapted rather than genuinely authentic.

Additionally, the representation of Algerian names, maps, and traditional clothing illustrates an effort to promote local identity and cultural awareness. However, the predominance of local culture with insufficient representation of international cultures may restrict learners’ broader intercultural understanding.

b. Sequence two:

It is entitled “Me and Lifestyles” exposes learners to a variety of cultural elements such as clothing, fashionable hairstyles, games, music, and food originating from different countries. This focus on everyday practices serves as a comparative understanding of lifestyles across cultures.

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The project and associated tasks of this sequence aim to familiarize pupils with both the target and native cultures, thereby fostering cross-cultural awareness. The inclusion of English audio interviews, particularly those depicting daily routines, constitutes an authentic resource that encourages learners to engage in meaningful interaction through role-play. This activity promotes practical learning and enables pupils to distinguish similarities and differences between their own lifestyle and that of English-speaking communities.

Moreover, the use of visual materials such as board games (Chess, Monopoly, Draughts, and Scrabble) alongside traditional Algerian games like Jaalaila, Kroud, Al-kourkba, and Arayass illustrates an attempt to balance global and local cultural representation. Such comparison enhances learners' understanding of cultural diversity and supports the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Similarly, the presentation of traditional uniforms from various cultures, as well as Algerian dishes from different regions, demonstrates the textbook's intention to validate local identity while simultaneously introducing foreign cultural norms. However, the activities tend to emphasize observable aspects of culture customs, clothing, and food rather than exploring deeper cultural meanings or sociocultural values which limits the potential for critical intercultural reflection.

c. Sequence three :

The third sequence, entitled “Me and the Scientific World” focuses primarily on themes related to science and technology, encompassing inventions such as the telephone, camera, PlayStation, and X-rays. The inclusion of both Algerian and foreign inventors reflects an effort to present a balanced cultural representation within scientific advancement.

By integrating tasks that situate learners in various communicative contexts such as scenarios set in London, the textbook encourages pupils to project themselves into intercultural environments, thereby promoting cultural curiosity and communicative engagement. Such activities can help students envision the practical use of English in real-life contexts, particularly in academic and technological domains.

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However, despite these pedagogical intentions, the sequence remains limited in its portrayal of cultural diversity and depth. The content tends to emphasize technological knowledge rather than sociocultural dimensions of science. As a result, the connection between scientific themes and authentic cultural contexts seems weak.

Compared to the previous sequences, this unit offers few opportunities for learners to explore values, beliefs, or attitudes underlying scientific innovation in different societies, which constrains its contribution to developing cultural authenticity and intercultural competence.

d. Sequence four:

“Me and My Environment” focuses on ecological themes, including nature, wildlife, and environmental protection. It integrates visual materials such as photographs of natural landscapes and endangered species, which effectively engage learners’ attention and contextualize environmental issues. These elements help develop environmental awareness. However, the sequence demonstrates several limitations. While the listening activity featuring a UNESCO representative on BBC Radio and an interview with Dr. Waters from Durham University introduces learners to elements of the target culture, the emphasis is placed more on factual information and scientific discourse than on cultural practices, beliefs, or values surrounding environmental issues in either local or foreign societies.

Moreover, the cultural dimension is treated at a surface level (UNESCO, BBC, University of Durham), learners are not exposed to how environmental awareness is expressed in different cultural contexts. For instance, how communities in the UK or Algeria participate in conservation activities. Consequently, while the sequence succeeds in promoting global environmental themes, it falls short of delivering authentic cultural content that connects language learning with cultural experiences.

V. Data Interpretation

The textbook analysis highlights both strengths and significant gaps in the cultural authenticity of EFL teaching textbooks used in Algerian middle

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schools. *My Book of English* was evaluated across criteria related to cultural authenticity, the findings revealed that authentic cultural content exists to some extent but it is not covered adequately and equally throughout the four sequences. On the one hand, the first two sequences are rich of cultural content related to both local and target culture. On the other hand, the two last sequences (sequence 3 & 4) lacks cultural information.

Overall, the four sequences in *My Book of English* integrate both local and global cultural elements, but the textbook's content remains limited in terms of depth and authenticity. The cultural representations tend to focus on visible aspects of culture (the big C culture) neglecting the invisible dimensions such as beliefs, attitudes, and values (the small c culture). The materials are often adapted rather than drawn from authentic sources like real interviews, songs, media texts, or personal narratives.

Besides, most activities do not help in developing pupils' cultural understanding and communication because the cultural content covered in the textbook provides neutral passages, so culture is introduced implicitly. In addition, it can be easily noticed that the textbook lacks of proverbs, songs, extracts from books, and games which are considered to be authentic materials and would be benifitial in teaching/learning culture. Moreover, the study shows that the activities of the textbook are rarely done with the use audio-visual materials which help pupils to handle real language contexts. As a result, learners may not build intercultural awareness and a more effective understanding of language use in real-world contexts.

To this concern, some recommendations are necessary to improve authentic culture teaching in Algerian middle schools:

- Teachers should use audio-visual materials which present different cultures to support cultural authenticity in textbooks.
- The use of authentic resources including shows, proverbs, idioms, and songs is recommended because it helps pupils to engage in authentic cultural contexts and at the same time motivate them to learn the language.
- The discussion of common proverbs, folktales and idioms is a useful technique to explore the values and beliefs of target cultures.

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- The textbook of English needs to be re-evaluated for each year in terms of cultural content.
- Culture should be taught explicitly. That is, it is recommended to design a range of courses which address the concept of culture explicitly and teachers should discuss cultural elements in the classroom depending on authentic materials.

VI. Conclusion

According to the results obtained from the textbook evaluation, the hypothesis stated in the introduction which claims that an effective foreign language teaching/learning process certainly involves integrating culturally authentic content in the textbook seems to be true. In other words, it can be stated that culturally authentic textbooks help students to develop their communication skills and intercultural competence. The findings show that the cultural authenticity is limited in this material. In other words, the lack of cultural authenticity in many units is clearly noticed. In addition, the textbook activities do not provide pupils with an artificial picture about how the English language is used in different contexts by its native speakers. Therefore, further studies are needed to take place in order to emphasize the need for the inclusion of culturally authentic content in EFL materials. More importantly, the content of English textbooks needs to be examined to find solutions and recommendations to make this English textbook more successful concerning culture teaching in the Algerian middle schools.

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Appendix

A checklist to evaluate cultural authenticity in textbooks:

1. Representation of Cultures

2. Which cultures are represented in the textbook? the local culture, the target culture or international cultures?
3. Are all represented cultures treated equally and respectfully, without bias or stereotyping?
4. Does the textbook show a balance between local and foreign cultures?
5. Are cultural topics varied (e.g., traditions, values, history, social life, art, science)?
6. Do visuals (photos, drawings, maps) accurately reflect the cultures presented?

2. Depth of Cultural Content

6. Does the textbook go beyond surface culture (food, clothes, celebrations) to include deep culture (values, beliefs, communication styles, worldview)?
7. Does the textbook include daily interactions and behaviours from different cultures?
8. Do the lessons provide contextual explanations for cultural practices or beliefs?
9. Are students encouraged to explore why people act or think differently across cultures?

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10. Is there evidence of cultural diversity within the same culture (regional, social, or ethnic differences)?
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3. Authenticity of Materials

11. Does the textbook include authentic materials (e.g., newspaper articles, websites, interviews, songs, advertisements)?
12. Are the texts or dialogues taken from real-life contexts rather than being simplified or artificial?
13. Are the settings and situations realistic and culturally appropriate?
14. Are names, places, and expressions typical of real English-speaking contexts?
15. Do the listening and reading materials reflect natural language use and genuine communicative purposes?
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4. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

16. Are learners encouraged to compare and contrast their own culture with others?
17. Do activities promote critical reflection on cultural similarities and differences?
18. Are learners given opportunities to discuss cultural misunderstandings or intercultural challenges?
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