

A Critical Look at the Representation of Algerian National Identity in the Third-Year Middle School EFL Textbook “My Book of English”

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Submitted

08/06/2025

Accepted

31/10/2025

Published

01/12/2025

Abstract: Among some vital components of effective language teaching, textbooks, as pedagogical materials, are deemed as nucleus of the teaching and learning process. It's widely acknowledged that several foreign language textbooks are clustered as ideological, representing the cultural and moral values of different nations. This study attempts to display critical look at the representation of Algerian national identity in the third-year middle school English textbook. Corpus and content analysis were employed to examine the themes that are used in perpetuating ideas about nationalism. A questionnaire that was administered to 15 middle school teachers of English constituted secondary data for this study. The results revealed that a plethora of national and local matters are taught in the textbook analyzed. Besides, the textbook seems to accentuate the importance of teaching some core national values, including commitment to maintain traditional values. Hence, nationalism is, to considerable extent, imparted in the EFL textbooks.

Keywords: *EFL teaching; Textbook; My Book; Algerian Identity*

1. Introduction

For several years, language research considers culture as an essential pillar for teaching a foreign language. Taking into consideration the significance of integrating the foreign and local culture in EFL education, proposals of EFL instruction are, recently, striving to broaden learners' literary and cultural horizons. More importantly, there is a general consensus among several researchers that English cannot be taught and learned without explicit reference to the local context (Kramsch, 1993; Abbasian and Biria, 2017). For instance, Abbasian and Biria (2017) claimed that when students have a personal connection to the content, they internalize and apply the knowledge more effectively.

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Researchers have focused on the cultural dimensions of many educational resources, particularly language school textbooks.

In the Algerian context, some studies (Merdassi, 2021; Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022) which explored the cultural representations in the textbooks of middle school revealed that the content was, to a large extent, skewed toward the local culture. Still, it remains essential to examine how effectively these textbooks teach students about Algeria's diverse cultural heritage, strike a balance between the local and foreign culture, and help students to shape their national identity. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the representation of Algerian national identity in the EFL text book used for third-year middle school pupils in Algeria.

This study endeavors to address the following question and sub-questions:

1. To what extent does the Algerian EFL textbook “My Book of English” for third-year students contribute to the development of national identity?
 - 1.1 What representations of Algerian national identity are portrayed in the textbook “My Book of English” for third-year students?
 - 1.2 What are EFL teachers’ perspectives on the influence of national identity education on students’ identity development ?

2. Literature Review

2.1 National Identity

The literature on national identity reveals that the latter is a multifaceted concept, encompassing various sub-elements. National identity is approached from both psychological (micro-level) and sociological (macro-level) perspectives (Ohad & Daniel, 2019). Psychologically; it signifies an individual's affiliation with a nation. It encompasses, for example, feelings of belonging and pride. Socially, national identity is influenced by a shared history, cultural symbols, and collective memory that unify societal members (Ohad & Daniel, 2019). According to Norton (2013), national identity expresses mirrors and represents the nation's culture. Since this study examines how national identity is transmitted through institutionalized educational content, it adopts a macro-level definition of national identity. From an educational perspective, particularly in the arena of foreign language teaching, it is often argued that acquiring new linguistic and socio cultural systems is a challenging endeavor for learners who may find themselves learning new linguistic forms. Thus, exposing learners to the local culture in the preliminary stage of learning can serve as a bridge, linking the old and newly acquired knowledge, thereby enhancing their intercultural understanding of the language. Regarding the Algerian educational system, national identity education

is, to a large extent, embodied in the curriculum system, as it is seen as one of the significant core values in the language teaching syllabus (Merdassi, 2021). Accordingly, the majority of the content in the English education program's lessons is related to cultural norms, traditions, and significant historical events. Based on the information provided, it can be said that promoting national identity through school education has become the norm rather than the exception in several educational systems.

2.2 EFL Textbooks

The teaching of foreign languages requires the use of a range of materials. Textbooks are among the most significant pedagogical materials, often regarded as the nucleus of the teaching and learning process. In the quest to define the concept of a textbook, Rahmawati et al. (2021) assert that a textbook is an essential educational resource which is intended to meet the objectives and knowledge standards specified in the curriculum. Textbooks guide educators through various pedagogical processes to achieve the intended learning objective. Beyond their pedagogical value, EFL textbooks can be a vehicle of cultural representations. They can include three types of cultural contexts: the learner's own culture (also known as the source culture), the foreign culture (the culture of the target language), or a mixture of diverse cultural phenomena from both local and indigenous sources (Kirkgöz & Agcam, 2011). Kiss and Weninger (2013) argued that language textbooks should be regarded as cultural and pedagogical artifacts, providing insights into the relationship between representations and their educational applications. This viewpoint highlights the fact that textbooks go beyond serving as neutral materials for language instruction; they are socially and culturally constructed instruments that communicate certain values, perspectives and cultural ideologies. From this perspective, the examination of textbooks includes more than just evaluating their linguistic content; it also entails the investigation of the cultural and ideological dimensions embedded in textbook content. Thus, the current study endeavors to extend this line of thought by investigating the representation of Algerian national identity in the EFL textbook used for third-year middle school pupils.

3. Method

This study is descriptive in nature. The research design is based on a mixed-methods research paradigm as this study seeks to collect both quantitative and qualitative data that answer the questions in this study. The researcher aims to

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collect reliable data by the means of the teachers’ questionnaire, the corpus analysis and content analysis respectively.

The population of this study consisted of EFL teachers who were in charge of third year classes in middle school during the academic year 2022/2023. Fifteen (15) English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators from various middle schools were chosen at random to participate in the research. A questionnaire was designed, piloted and administered to them. The aim behind using this instrument is to investigate teachers’ perspectives on the representation of national identity in the Algerian EFL textbook “My Book of English” for third-year students. The questionnaire includes a set of questions about the teachers’ teaching experience, their perspectives on the culture(s) represented in the third-year English-language textbook used in Algerian middle schools, as well as their perspectives on how national identity education influences students' identity development.

The corpus analysis and content analysis were used to examine the themes that are used in perpetuating ideas about nationalism. The data source for the corpus and the content analysis in this study was “My Book of English”. It was one of the latest textbook series designated by the curriculum development center of Algeria. This book was introduced and used for the first time during the 2019/2020 academic year. With the help of the Teacher’s guide and audio recordings as scaffolding materials, efforts have been made by textbooks designers to relate the majority of the activities to international regulations for the sake of preparing learners for the international examinations properly. The textbook contains four sequences:

- Sequence one: Me, my abilities, my interests and my personality
- Sequence two: Me and lifestyles
- Sequence three: Me and the scientific world
- Sequence04 : Me and my environment

Each sequence entails six essential lessons (I listen and do, my pronunciation tools/I pronounce, my grammar tools, I practice, I read and do, I learn to integrate, and I think and write). Hence, the textbook adopts a holistic approach based on teaching the four language skills to learners.

3.1. Analysis Procedure

The data gathered from the questionnaire was analyzed following a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative approach was selected to analyse the closed-ended items, whereas the qualitative approach was selected to treat the data gathered from the open-ended questions so that to explain and complete more the

quantitative data. The qualitative data was analyzed following thematic analysis. To answer the questions that led to the corpus and content analysis, each sequence of the book was examined. This study identified all the nouns pertaining to Algerian nationality and non-Algerian nationalities. Also, the researcher displayed the referring rates by contrasting the two sets of nouns. The researcher chose to begin by counting the frequency of references to the term "nationality" in a basic corpus concordance. Besides, the aspects of national identity in the textbooks were also analyzed using content analysis.

4. Key Findings: Discussion and Interpretation

4.1 The Textbook Data

The findings from the textbook analysis are presented in the following tables:

Table 1

Algerian nationality			Non- Algerian nationality		
Words found	Frequency	Percentage	Words found	Frequency	Percentage
Algeria	40	37.3%	Foreign country	10	45.4%
Our country	10	9.3%	England	5	22.7%
Arab	22	20.5%	America USA	2	9.0%
Algerians	35	32.7%	England	5	22.7%

Frequency Analysis of Nationality-Related Words in the Textbook

Table 1 demonstrates a clear variation in the representation of the various cultures. Still, the dominant culture is the local one. As an illustration, most of the graphics (actual photos, cartoons, and maps) are related to the culture of Algeria. Besides, the cultural heritage of Algeria is more prominent in the textbook. For instance, the majority of the texts presented in sequence 2 ‘**Me and lifestyles**’ are related to the traditions of many Algerian regions. In fact, this finding resonates with the studies of Merdassi (2021) and Aoumeur& Ziani (2022) which concluded that the cultural elements presented in the newly introduced English textbook for middle school pupils are, mainly, in favor of the source culture. Viewed through an interpretive lens, the textbook’s focus on the local culture suggests a predilection for cultural familiarity rather than intercultural receptivity. Moreover, the incorporation of native cultural references reflects the textbook’s aim to safeguard national values, thereby promoting students’ connection to their national identity

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Table 02

Themes
National Pride
Commitment to maintain traditional values
The value of the homeland

Themes of National Identity Represented in the Textbook

The content-based analysis in this study revealed that ‘My Book of English’ has, to some extent, covered different aspects of national identity (see table 2 for further details).

1. National pride

The textbook seems to foster national pride by featuring prominent national scientists (e.g. Dr. Abderrahim Bourouis and Prof. Belgacem Haba) who epitomize the country’s intellectual heritage. These characters serve as symbolic representations of national values—perseverance, intelligence and innovation .

For instance, in sequence 3, the **writing task that is related to the section “ I learn to integrate”** seems to encourage learners to internalize the value of national achievements. The activity statement reads as follows: “It is "National Inventor's Day" in Algeria. To celebrate the event, I am going to write Dr Bourouis' biography and put it on display in the local public library where an official ceremony will be held”(p.103). In fact, these depictions can be seen as instructional aids that link personal achievement to national success, motivating pupils to see their own potential accomplishments as contributions to the improvement of their nation.

It is worth mentioning that the textbook appears to nurture national pride among students by providing narratives of personal success that depict individuals serving as models of how Algerians strive for and attain success. For example, in sequence 1, the reading passage about “ Mohamed Farah Djeloud” states: “With much encouragement from his modest family, the seven-year-old Algerian champion read some 50 books and even wrote a small one” (p. 30). In sequence 1 of the same textbook, there is a reading passage which presents a story of al-Hadja Fatima. It declares: “Blida - At 73 al-Hadja Fatma can be proud of being a perseverant woman. She went to school and defeated ignorance” (p45).

2. Commitment to maintain traditional values

In general, the textbook analyzed included texts on promoting some values, including appreciation of traditional cuisine and respect for ancestral customs. These values might be emphasized to preserve the cultural heritage and reinforce one's sense of belonging, thus keeping traditions alive. For instance, in sequence 2 "me and the lifestyles", many texts appeared to promote the traditional dishes that Algerians would serve in their special celebrations. One of them states that "Couscous is a typical Algerian dish..... . It is now my turn to preserve these dishes because they are part of my cultural heritage" (p.72). Moreover, the text of Dar Imzad explains that "The 'Save the Imzad' association aims at contributing to the preservation of the imzad as an expression of culture and identity" (p34). In fact, a notable parallel can be observed between the present finding and the one of Boukendakdji and Samat (2022), further supporting the argument that several texts seem to highlight the necessity of promoting traditional values.

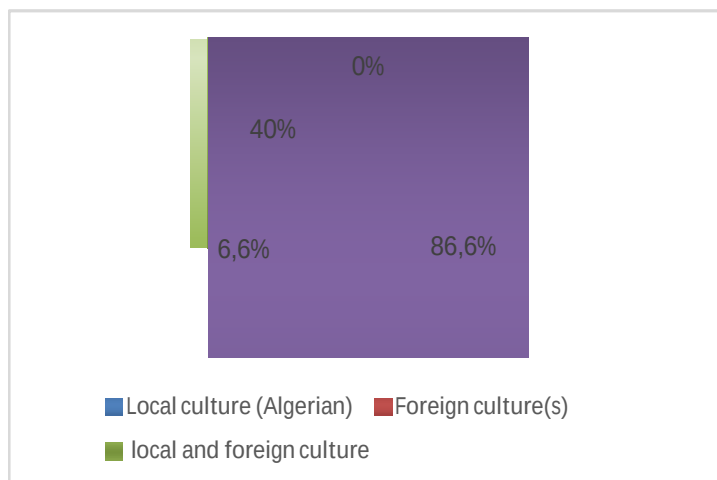
3. The value of the homeland

Another aspect of national identity was related to the value of the homeland. This finding echoes the one of Gheitasi et al., (2022), who noted that the textbook constructed an image of Iran as an aesthetically appealing and resource-rich nation, characterized by its biodiversity, picturesque environments, and extensive natural landscapes. In the textbook of 'My Book of English', Algeria is also portrayed as encompassing a broad range of wild species and scenic landscapes. For instance, sequence four begins with gap-filling tasks that require students to **name various examples of Algeria's protected fauna and flora. In addition to the above-mentioned idea**, some of the texts within the book highlighted the necessity of being proud of the beautiful home land. The following excerpt was taken from the textbook to demonstrate the cases where Algeria is depicted as a vast land, conveying an idealized national image. It states that "Djemila (60 km northeast of Setif) was the first of the great Roman cities on my itinerary" (p.66). Moreover, *another excerpt from the textbook states that* "I am travelling through the magnificent red mountains and sandy plains in the Hoggar National Park in south central Algeria" (p.140). It can be said that such depictions encourage learners to view their country as a symbol of shared history. This, in turn, can foster respect for one's own heritage and environment. Moreover, a strong sense of national belonging may be developed by textbooks that portray students' hometowns as lovely and admirable and that emphasize the value of homeland.

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4.2 The Teacher Questionnaire

Pie Chart 1



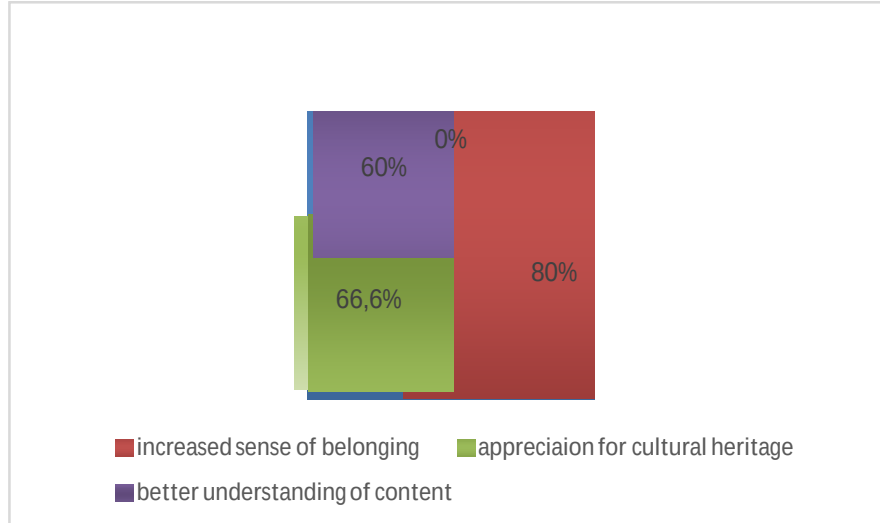
The Teachers' Perspectives on the Nature of the Cultural Content of "My Book of English"

The majority of the teachers (86.6%) agree that the content of the book "My Book of English" is related to the local culture. Indeed, the characters included in the textbooks (e.g., classmates, e-pals, outstanding figures) and the topics may contribute to the promotion of learners' sense of belonging as they portray the social reality of the Algerian context mainly. In fact, These findings correlate with other studies (Boukendakdji and Samat, 2022) which showed the dominant portrayal of the national culture in the Algerian EFL textbooks. This could be explained by the fact that Algeria, decades after independence from the french colonial rule, has always worked to uphold its national ideals and the policy of Arabization. However, when compared to the results of the study of Xiao (2010), the present study's findings contradicts them . For instance, a cultural analysis of an English textbook in China was conducted by Xiao (2010). With 79% of the total, his findings indicated that "target culture" was the most common category in the book.

It is worth mentioning that only few teachers claim that the cultural content taught in these textbooks aims at enhancing learners' ability to analyze, and compare the foreign and local culture. This contradicts the findings presented in the textbook. In fact, the macro-level dimension of British culture is not prominently manifested in comparison to Algerian culture. Even the texts, the pictures and the activities

included do not seem to aim at comparing between the two cultures as each one is presented in isolation.

Pie Chart2



Teachers' Perspectives on the Effect of National Identity Education on Students' Identity Development

The pie chart demonstrates the perceived advantages of integrating the national identity into educational textbooks, derived from qualitative responses. The participants' answers were classified into three principal themes:

1.Increased sense of belonging: this was the most commonly cited advantage. The majority of teachers (80%) reported that integrating the national identity into EFL textbooks strengthens learners' sense of belonging, noting that learning about national traditions help them feel more connected to their nation.

2.Appreciation of cultural heritage: a significant portion of teachers (66,6%) highlighted that presenting lessons that reflect students' own culture can urge them to value their heritage and roots

3.Better understanding of content: Several teachers (60%) indicated that culturally relevant examples facilitate their understanding of topics, as the content appeared more pertinent and accessible.

Globally, the vast majority of teachers are convinced of the benefits of national education on learners' identity development. This aligns with findings from Riche and Morsli (2019), which showed that several EFL teachers believed it was

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essential to primarily reflect the Algerian culture in the classroom. In this regard, they concluded that the inclusion of some banal nationalism elements in a textbook “reinforces students’ self-image and nationalism”(p.16). Nevertheless, not all studies support this view. For instance, Boukendakdji & Samat (2022) claimed that the over-emphasis on native culture may, to a large extent, fail to aid learners in fostering their global cultural knowledge or engaging in intercultural communication scenarios. It is worth mentioning that although the participating teachers acknowledged the advantages of incorporating the local culture in the English textbooks, they stressed on the importance of linking between the source and the target culture when teaching English as a foreign language for the sake of averting radical nationalism.

5. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to display a critical look at the representation of Algerian national identity in the third-year middle school English textbook. Based on the findings and discussions, the research revealed that EFL teachers in Algeria acknowledged the positive effects of integrating national identity into EFL textbooks. The presence of the Algerian national identity has been touched throughout the textbook. The majority of characters included in the textbooks (e.g. e-pals, outstanding figures) and the topics included in the reading and listening lessons portrayed the social reality of the Algerian context. Besides, those topics encompassed different aspects of national identity, including the maintenance of traditions and the value of homeland. Nevertheless, based on the findings of the present study, the dominance of the local culture suggests that there is an imbalance in the representation of the local and foreign culture in the textbook of ‘My Book of English’. The lack of cultural literacy can produce intercultural incompetent learners who may fail in developing their awareness of cultural differences and similarities. Moreover, placing a heavy emphasis on national culture may expose learners to cultural shock when faced with different cultural environments, which can result in communication breakdowns in cross-cultural contexts. Though education ought to promote learners’ national identity, learners are required to be prepared for a global identity to help them keep pace with the modern era of globalization. Therefore, it is suggested that there is a need for redesigning the Algerian EFL textbooks to include more activities that foster learners’ national identity, but at the same time they urge learners to make similarities and differences between the source culture and the target one.

Incorporating project-based intercultural learning can also represent a valuable strategy to foster both intercultural competence and pride in students' own heritage. For example, as part of their ongoing assessment, students can work on a project where they compare cultural celebrations, highlighting both distinctions and shared values. In the same vein, EFL teachers can act as cultural mediators by incorporating paired reading passages that address comparable themes (e.g., traditions, family) from the perspectives of the Algerian and target cultures.

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