Taiwanese Students' Place in the World: Lessons from Inventors and Left-Handers in EFL Textbooks

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Abstract

Despite of their considerable influence on multiple aspects of learning, language textbooks have most often been investigated for their cultural representation, frequently from the perspective of whose culture is represented, including target culture, source culture, and international cultures. Using examples from two lesson in two EFL textbooks, this article highlights the need for studies to also explore *how* a particular culture or topic is portrayed in textbooks. In particular, the article is interested in what these portrayals imply to learners about the world and their place in it. The findings suggest that what is implied in the two lessons examined is that English learners should be concerned with social justice issues, but only superficially. English learners in Taiwan should also recognize that even though Taiwanese people and Americans may be equals in their ability, they are very different socially. In addition, while a Taiwanese may be even more accomplished than an American, his success is inevitably measured against an American, the comparison of which determines the true worth of people in other parts of the world. Implications from these findings for both research and practice are discussed at the end of the article.

Keywords: English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) textbooks, critical discourse analysis (CDA)

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Introduction

Textbooks, as the main source and authority of learning, exert great influences on learners. As Ndura (2004) points out, "the content of instructional materials significantly affects students' attitudes and dispositions toward themselves, other people and society" (p. 143). Despite of their considerable influence on multiple aspects of learning, language textbooks are most often investigated from the perspective of whose culture is represented, including target culture, source culture, and international cultures (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). In such studies (e.g. Chao, 2011; Kim, 2012; Wu, 2010), analysis often focuses on representations of characters from different local and global backgrounds, representations of the local culture and other non-English/non-Western cultures, as well as intercultural elements such as "immigration, travel, cultural contacts, or intercultural comparisons" (Ke, 2012, p. 175).

Other examples of these types of textbook analysis include Song's (2013) examination of Korean EFL textbooks, which found a predominance of information related to the target-language culture, namely, American English and culture. Su's (2016) study of Taiwan senior high school EFL textbooks revealed American and British cultural content to be prevailing, even though aspects of a variety of other cultures were included. Shin, Eslami, and Chen (2011) analyzed internationally distributed English-language textbooks and found that content related to inner circle cultures (i.e. America and Britain) were the most prevalent. A common finding across these recent studies is that there has been increased attention toward intercultural understanding and interaction, even though these remain at the "traditional knowledge-oriented level of cultural presentation" (Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011, p. 263) and "superficial interactions" (Song, 2013, p. 386).

That there is a hidden curriculum, defined by Giroux (1988) as "those unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students" (p. 51), in English-language teaching (ELT) textbooks, including those for native speakers as well as English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners is a well-received notion. However, considerations of hidden curriculum in ELT textbooks have, unfailing, for decades, focused on "whose perspectives, life, experiences, and cultural values are being transmitted" (Su, 2016, p. 393) while almost no attention has been paid to the issue of *how* those "perspectives, life, experiences, and cultural values" are portrayed. The latter agenda, apparently, has been better hidden.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is therefore to uncover this heretofore well-hidden agenda by using examples from two lessons in two EFL textbooks in order to highlight the need for studies that explore *how* a particular culture or topic is portrayed in textbooks. In particular, the article is interested in what these portrayals imply to learners about the world and their place in it

Theoretical Framework

This article takes a critical perspective towards the understanding of language textbooks. Janks (2008) explains that "the use of the word 'critical' signals a view of language as central to the workings of ideology—as a key means of mobilizing meaning to sustain or contest relations of domination in society" (p. 183). As a result of such a theoretical lens, the goal of language education would be to systematically address how it is often through language (and by extension texts) that meanings are constructed in particular ways to sustain ideologies that privilege some while marginalizing others (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Such a perspective that highlights the ideological nature of language and discourses would consider textbooks to "carry culture and ideological messages" (Pennycook, 2000, pp. 98-99), and even as a more effective instantiation of ideology than language classes (Heinrich, 2005). Thus, the critical perspective drives this study that is concerned with the subject positions provided to students in language textbooks regarding their place in the world as English-language learners.

Method

Locally produced senior high school (grades 10-12) EFL textbooks, regardless of the publisher, follow a similar format in each lesson. The central focus of each lesson is the reading selection, the title of which also serves as the title of the lesson. This is preceded by a pre-reading section which usually includes questions or activities that either elicit student interest or background knowledge in the reading selection. Following the reading passage, there are comprehension questions and discussion questions to help students understand the passage and share their thoughts on the topic. This is then followed by a vocabulary section which lists words from the passage to be learned. There is also a grammar pattern section that introduces one or two grammatical structures taken from important sentences in the reading passage. Finally, extension activities, such as writing practice, round up the lesson.

Six versions of EFL senior high school textbooks from four publishers (Far East, Lung Teng, Nan-I, and San Min) are currently in use in Taiwan. Although there are four publishers, there are six versions of EFL textbooks because both Far East and San Min publishes two versions. Each version contains six books, i.e. one book for each semester. Each senior high school selects their own textbook, and both Lung Teng and San Min Version B are widely used. In deciding on particular lessons to serve as the example for analysis and discussion in this article, I decided on Book 1 as it is the first EFL textbooks students come into contact with upon entering senior high school. In both the Lung Teng version and the San Min B version, there are 12 lessons in Book 1. From each, I chose the first lesson that discusses a socially relevant issue rather than one that is a work of fiction. (Please see Table 1 below for a list of titles and topics from the two textbooks.) This article discusses the reading selection and the pre-reading section in two lessons from the two textbooks. One of them is entitled "Inventing a Better World," which appears in Lesson 3 Book 1 in San Min Version B (Che, 2014). The other is entitled "Do You Treat Left-Handers Right?" which appears in Lesson 4 Book 1 in Lung-Teng (Chou, 2010).

Table 1. Book 1 of both textbooks and their reading selections.

Lesson	San Min--Title/Topic*	Lung Teng--Title/Topic*
1	Lost in the New School/The first day of a Taiwanese boy going to a high school in the U.S.A	Learn English, Go Global/The importance of the English language
2	A Lesson in Forgiveness/A boy learning a lesson in forgiveness	Freshman Zit Girl/Self-confidence
3	Inventing a Better World/The stories of two great inventions	The Hospital Window/Helping people**
4	A Colorful Life/Influences and symbolic meanings of colors	Do You Treat Left-Handers Right?/Respect for the minority
5	A Recipe for a Delicious Friendship/Discussing famous quotes about friends and friendship	Water in Lijiang: A Gift from God/The ancient wisdom of water use
6	When in Bulgaria, Do as the Bulgarians Do/Learning actual meanings of gestures	Rhyming Fun in Poetry/Rhyming in a poem
7	A Little Science Works a Lot of Magic/Using science and learning the secret behind the magic of science	Elevator Ups and Downs/Technology and innovation
8	The Long-Haired Spirits and the Thao/Thinking of a slogan to remind people to live in harmony with nature	A Wonderful Tour on the Menu/Exotic eating habits
9	A Rabbit's Foot and a Piece of Wood/Learning about the origins of some certain superstitions	Ride for Joy, Ride for Health/The story of a successful Taiwanese entrepreneur
10	Why Do We Lie?/Observing people's strange actions when they tell a lie	Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer/The origin of the legendary character
11	The Best Medicine/Finding out how easily one laughs	Saving Sight Worldwide/A charity organization
12	Working for Nothing Pays Off/Learning more about volunteering organizations and groups	Enjoy Idioms from Head to Toe/Language usages

*This is information from the table of contents in each of the textbooks. After specifying the title of each lesson, the textbooks also specify the "topic" of the lesson.
**While the title and topic of this lesson "the hospital window/helping people" reads like a socially relevant lesson, it is actually a story about two men named John and Robert who "were both seriously ill" and who "shared the same hospital room" (Chou, 2010, p. 35).

Reflecting the theoretical foundation based on which this study was conceptualized, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was the method through which the reading selections were analyzed. The goal of CDA is to illuminate how "language is implicated in the reproduction of and resistance to inequitable relations of power" (Norton, 1997, p. 207), and "the role of discourse in creating, maintaining, or potentially changing, unequal and hegemonic power relations" (Weninger & Kiss, 2015, p. 57). Importantly, therefore, a CDA approach analyzes not "how texts reflect reality," but how "the discourses operating in [texts] *produce* reality" (Ilieva, 2000, p.

54, emphasis in the original). Following Fairclough (1989, 1995), CDA involves three interrelated dimensions of analysis associated with three aspects of discourse. The linguistic features of a text should be analyzed and then considered within the context of the production and consumption of the text, which should in turn be understood in relation to the conditions surrounding the sociocultural practices relevant to the text.

In following the CDA approach to making sense of the two lessons in the two EFL textbooks, the meaning of the linguistic features and accompanying images in each lesson were first analyzed, the results of which were then examined within the context of the textbook's production and consumption as the source material for English learning in the EFL classroom. This was then explored in relation to the sociocultural context of English in a country belonging to the outer circle (Kachru, 1992) of English users in the wider global situation.

In the sections to follow, unless otherwise stated, all the excerpts are taken from the reading selection under discussion.

Findings and Discussion

"Inventing a Better World"

This reading selection consists of six paragraphs and is around 430 words in length. Two inventions are discussed in the reading selection to support the thesis stated in the first paragraph of the article, that "many times, people come up with ideas to meet their own needs. Later, the solutions to their problems may become great inventions that change our way of life." The two inventions, a faucet "controlled by a built-in sensing device" and the Post-it note, are respectively attributed to Teng Hung-chi (henceforth Teng), a Taiwanese, and Spencer Silver, an American. Thus, from a cultural representation perspective, a Taiwanese and an American are both included in this article about important inventions. However, what is more important is how these inventors are portrayed, both linguistically and visually.

The article discusses Teng first. In the two paragraphs that describe him, one explains how he came up with the idea of a faucet that could "run automatically without being touched" because "his hands were dirty from work, so he did not want to touch the faucet." The other paragraph then discussed his success of winning international prizes for his inventions. In other words, Teng's life and work was portrayed as a smooth-sailing process and a result of his own dedication and creativity without input from others. The latter point is reflected in the three images accompanying his portrayal which has a denotational relationship (Weninger & Kiss, 2013) to the two paragraphs about Teng. In the first image, we see a photo of Teng hard at work, underneath which is a caption that reads, "Taiwan's Edison in his laboratory." The second is an image of a pair of hands under a running faucet. The third image is of Teng with a big smile on his face, holding up a medal and a certificate, with the caption "winning first prize at the iENA exhibition."

While Teng's success seems to have involved no one else, Spencer Silver (henceforth Silver) and the process of how the Post-it note was invented is portrayed very differently both linguistically and visually. The Post-it note was "the result of a failed experiment" to "invent a strong glue." Despite of the failure, however, Silver "wasn't

disappointed," but "instead, he tried to convince his co-workers of the usefulness of the weak glue." Most of his colleagues were not convinced, except for Art Fry (henceforth Fry), who discovered the utility of the weak glue while singing "hymns during church services," which eventually lead to the creation of the Post-it note. In the two visuals that accompany the discussion of this invention, the first was a picture of Silver and Fry at a table full of Post-it notes. They are sitting side by side, shaking hands, with big smiles on their faces. This image shows a connotative relationship (Weninger & Kiss, 2013) to the passage, as the message is an implied one rather than one that is mentioned explicitly, i.e. that Silver and Fry appreciate having worked together to create the Post-it note, and also enjoy sharing their accomplishment. The other visual is an image of a group of people singing hymns at a church service, as people at standing at pews and looking down at the books they are holding. The shape and colors of the windows in the background also denote that this scene is that of a church service, which is mentioned in the paragraph above which this image is placed. It is not clear whether Fry is depicted in this image, but the medium to long shot distance of the image shows that the focus is not whether Fry is depicted, but that people are gathered at a church service. Finally, in the pre-reading section entitled Before You Read, there are nine images of "things you may need in your everyday life," and students are asked to rank them in the order of importance. These nine items are a lightbulb, an air conditioner, a notepad, a box of tissues, a smartphone, a refrigerator, a television set, a cup of instant noodles, and a mirror. As these are images of things rather than inventors, they are not relevant to the goals of this study concerned with *how* people and issues are represented.

Thus, the Taiwanese and the American(s) are portrayed to be on equal footing, as both have invented something that people all over the world use on a daily basis, and both are a part of the "world" discussed in the title "inventing a better world." It can be argued that the Taiwanese is depicted as even more impressive in his accomplishment as he "has created many other useful inventions" and have won many prizes. However, regardless of how successful Teng is, at best, he can only ever be as good as an American, i.e. "Taiwan's Edison." Edison, whose world-wide recognition as an inventor is such that he requires no introduction, as none is given in the passage, is implied in the passage as the inventor against whom all other inventors in the world need be compared, and the definitive success for anyone is to be recognized in relation to Edison rather than be a great inventor in their own right.

An important difference in the discussion of these inventors is their social relations, or in the case of Teng, the lack thereof. Both linguistically and visually, Teng is portrayed to be completely alone, either hard at work, or basking in glory. There is also an undertone of competitiveness associated with Teng, who has won many prizes partly as a result of entering into many competitions. In contrast, the Americans are portrayed as engaged in group activities (such as singing hymns together) and appreciative of team work. This is emphasized, as in the paragraphs that depict how the Post-it note was created, both Silver and Fry are portrayed as either trying to "convince his co-workers," in the case of Silver, and "shar[ing] his thought with others in the company," in the case of Fry. Therefore, even though the Taiwanese seems more successful, he works alone and revels in winning prizes while the Americans appreciate team work and relationships with others. It can be argued, however, that a cooperative mindset is often regarded as a more positive trait than a competitive one, as explained by Richard et al., (2002): "In much of the social-

psychological and educational literature, competition is viewed as something harmful…whereas cooperation is described as competent social behavior that entails many positive consequences" (p. 515).Hence, while just as capable as his American counterparts in his creative abilities, Teng might not be as wholesome his fellow American inventors.

"Do You Treat Left-Handers Right?"

This reading selection consists of four paragraphs and is around 300 words in length. The first paragraph includes a brief introduction of how "90% of the people in the world" prefer to use their right hand. The second paragraph explains the difficulties faced by "people who prefer to reach out to the world with their left hand," including writing from left to right and when they use scissors. How left-handedness was viewed historically was then described in the following one sentence, "That's why left-handedness was once thought of as being abnormal and sometimes even a disease." The paragraph then ends with information on some famous people who were and are left-handers, including da Vinci, Napoleon, and a popular Taiwanese-American singer Wang Leehom.

The third paragraph begins with the information that the main cause of left-handedness is "still unknown," and then gives a few examples of how people have become more understanding and considerate of left-handedness. The final example is that in England, "there is even a piano for the left-handed. The keyboard and pedals are reversed!" The concluding paragraph includes a hodge-podge of information, beginning with the suggestion that one can be thoughtful to left-handers by saying to them "Happy Left-Handers' Day" on August 13, which, the passage goes on to suggest, might even lead one to meet their Mr. or Ms. "Right." The paragraph ends with a caution for right-handers to be careful when attempting to hug a left-hander or kiss them on the cheek, as this might lead to "bump[ing] into each other!"

In terms of the visual, there is only one image that accompanies the reading passage, and it is placed next to the information in the third paragraph about the "piano for the left-handed" in England. In the image, two pianos are positioned side by side, with the one on the left labeled "left-handed piano" and the one on the right labeled "right-handed piano." In the Warm-Up section that precedes the reading passage, five photographs are included. As the photos are placed under the title of the lesson, "Do You Treat Left-Handers Right?" it can be assumed that these are photos of well-know people who are left-handers. From left to right, the first is Maria Sharapova (a Russian tennis player who is a US resident), former US President Barack Obama, Natalie Imbruglia (an Australian performer, naturalized in the UK), Prince William (the Duke of Cambridge), and finally Angelina Jolie (an American actress). These images imply that left-handed is primarily a western issue (relevant most significantly to Americans and the British). They also indicate that, even though this is a locally-produced textbook by a Taiwanese publisher, only images of western people are deemed appropriate for inclusion in an English-language textbook, as not even the popular singer Wang Leehom mentioned in the reading passage is included.

Thus, the issue of left-handedness is presented in this lesson as mostly a western issue but also a global issue. First, the article states that left-handed people "have a hard time writing from left to right." This statement does not take into account of some

East Asian scripts, such as written Chinese, which traditionally go from top to bottom and from right to left. The article also mentions that "in England, there is even a piano for the left-handed" in which "the keyboard and pedals are reversed." While this is an important creation, it does not benefit left-handed people who do not reside in England or who do not have the financial means to acquire such a piano. Finally, left-handedness is also presented as a global issue with the mention of Left-Hander's Day, which the readers of this article (i.e. the EFL learners in Taiwan) are encouraged to participate in. This reflects Canale's (2016) observation that "in textbooks of languages of global status," such as English, what is often represented is "an emerging homogenous (global) meta-culture that unites all English users" (p. 237). In this article, the specificity of left-handedness in different cultures is never mentioned or acknowledged. By presenting left-handedness first as a western issue and then as a global issue, the article has positioned a western issue as essentially a global issue, i.e. as the global norm, and as such, could be made relevant to Taiwanese EFL learners if only they remember "to say 'Happy Left-Handers' Day!' every August 13."

In addition, while the reading highlights a social justice issue, i.e. the rights of a minority group, the issue is presented in a superficial manner. In other words, "treat[ing] left-handers right," according to the passage, means doing the following: knowing that left-handers have a difficult time writing from left to right and using scissors, that left-handedness was in the past considered "abnormal" and "a disease," and that "the main causes [of left-handedness] are still unknown." Treating left-handers right also means making designs of doors, computers, and piano, etc. that are left-hander friendly, celebrating Left-Hander's Day, and being careful when giving them hugs or kisses on the cheek. Of these, the description of left-handed people in the past, "as being abnormal and sometimes even a disease" is the most superficial. Rather than simply being considered as a disease or being abnormal, there was a long time in history when left-handed people were subject to severe vilification and left-handedness viewed as witchery, the consequences of which are often unimaginable today. Another issue glossed over is how even today, left-handers are still stigmatized in some cultures, such as in China (Kushner, 2013). Thus, by including a social justice issue related to a minority group but handling it in a lighthearted manner, the lesson does not engage in any politics "other than the politics of representation," (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 222), i.e. the assumption that having included the topic is enough, and that a more considerate discussion of the cultural-historical dynamics surrounding the issue is not necessary.

The politics of exclusion is also at work regarding how the issue is discussed. Canale (2016) explains the politics of exclusion as "the exclusion of certain groups…to achieve an idealized and homogeneous representation" (p. 234). In this passage, the representation of the situation for left-handed people is indeed "idealized" as a result of the exclusion of their vilification historically and current stigmatization in some parts of the world. It could be argued that such an exclusion is necessary as there is a strict limit to how long an article can be in an EFL textbook. However, as Canale (2016) cautions, "this is still problematic since this type of exclusion may mis- or underrepresent the foreign culture [or in this case the issue] and may also fail to favour students' critical awareness by not showing the complexities underlying any cultural group [or any issue]" (p. 232). When students repeatedly encounter such portrayals in different lessons about different people and issues, superficial and lighthearted understanding of complex social matters would eventually become their

normative way of thinking.

From a CDA perspective, word limit, or as Canale more eloquently describes as "information load," is a poor excuse for excluding certain information if one considers "why and how is a topic being written about, and what other ways of writing about the topic are there? (Ilieva, 2000, p. 54). Indeed, the article about left-handed people could have been written with a focus on their historical treatment or current stigmatization. In other words, how a topic is discussed very clearly demonstrates the ideological leaning of an author or publisher, but more importantly, it shows "the imbrication of linguistic-discursive practices with the wider sociopolitical structures of power and domination" (Kress, 1990, p. 85). In the case of this reading selection, the "wider sociopolitical structures of power and domination" is a view towards minority groups and their discrimination as characterized by a post-ideology, i.e. that equality has been achieved, and therefore, activism to fight against discrimination is no longer necessary. Gill (2016) has discussed this in terms of gender relations and Kornfield (2016) has identified such an ideology in relation to racism. This passage suggests a post- ideology towards physical discrimination, as it glosses over any substantial discussion of how left-handedness was viewed historically and also ignores stigmatization of left-handedness that still survives in some cultures (Eveleth, 2013).

General Discussion

The preceding sections have addressed how particular topics (in "Do You Treat Left-Handers Right?") and people belonging to particular cultures (in "Inventing a Better World") have been portrayed in EFL textbooks. But what do these portrayals that appear in an EFL textbook demonstrate to English learners about the world and their place in it? This will be discussed in the following.

According to these lessons, English learners should be concerned with social justice issues, but only superficially. That is, in learning about minority groups around the world, simply knowing that they exit is enough, as most discrimination occurred in the past, and the world today has achieved equality for all, for the most part. These minority groups should be celebrated in ways that improve the convenience of life for them and for others.

As English learners, they should also know that Taiwan and America are both a part of the world, and have an equal place in it, at least in terms of people's ability as inventors. However, success as a Taiwanese, despite of receiving multiple awards, nevertheless has to be measured against an American, such as Edison, the comparison of which determines the true worth of people in other parts of the world.

In addition, English learners should also recognize that even though Taiwanese people and Americans may be equals in their ability, they are very different socially. Americans appreciate cooperation and are happy to share acclaim. They also enjoy harmonious social relations. Taiwanese people, on the other hand, toil alone and succeed alone, perhaps valuing rivalry more than anything else, the reason for entering competitions and receiving awards.

Conclusion

In their discussion of a critical perspective towards language education, Hawkins & Norton (2009) emphasized "the importance of relating micro relations of applied linguistics to macro relations of society" (p. 2). This has been the goal of the present article, achieved through a critical discourse analysis of two lessons in two EFL textbooks from Taiwan.

The findings have shown that just as important as whose cultures and what topics are included in English-language textbooks is *how* these cultures and topics are portrayed and the consequences of the portrayals. As this has been demonstrated through an analysis of two lessons rather than a whole series or sets of textbooks, the logical conclusion might be to suggest a more comprehensive analysis of textbooks from this lens. Another logical line of investigation might be to explore how teachers and students using these textbooks respond to the ideologies discussed in this article, an avenue of inquiry suggested by Canale (2016) and Guerrettatz and Johnston (2013). However, what seems to be even more urgent is the consideration of per-service teachers, whose relations to textbooks is much less often highlighted, but who may be in the best position to make the most difference in the long run. An issue that should be deliberated, for both research and practice, is how to work with future teachers so that they not only have a better understanding of dominant ideologies in English-language textbooks but also how to overcome these hegemonic discourses in their everyday use of these authoritative texts with their students so as to enhance critical awareness of language as social and ideological practices for the next generation of learners.

Acknowledgement

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