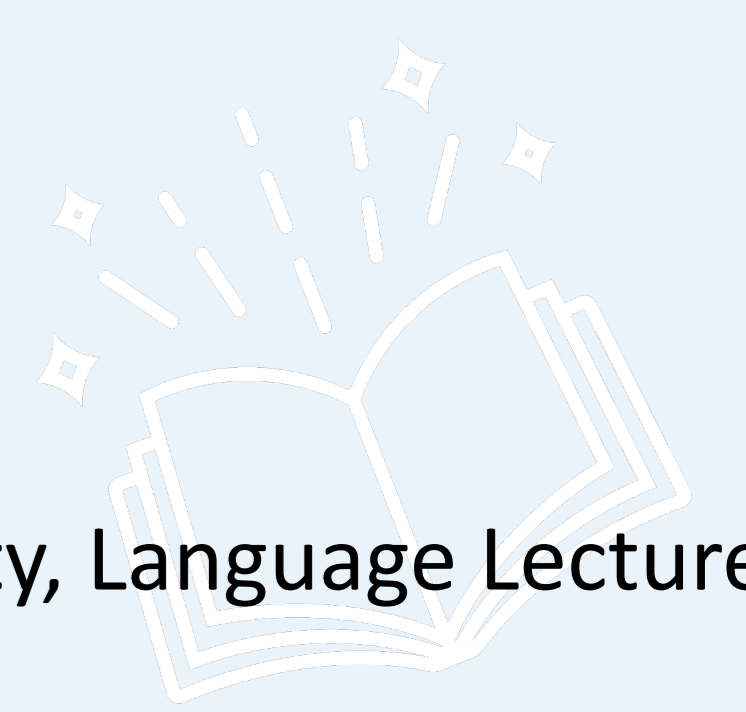


Textbook Content Analysis of the Cultural Representation for the Foreign Language Activities Curriculum in Japanese Elementary School



Yoshimi OCHIAI (Ritsumeikan University, Language Lecturer)

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) of Japan launched the “implementation plan for English education reform to cope with globalization (Implementation Plan)” in 2013, and the new Courses of Study was also initiated in elementary school in the 2020 academic year. From 2020, English is a required subject for Grades 5 and 6, and Foreign Language Activities has been taught at a lower grade in Grades 3 and 4.

MEXT (2017, p.6) intentions of introducing the Foreign Language Activities curriculum: With the rapid development of globalization, communication skills in foreign languages are expected to be required for people who engage not only in some industries and occupations, but also those in general in various situations throughout life. English should be taught in principle in the Foreign Language Activities curriculum because English is used as a tool of communication worldwide in reality (p.54). →English communication is essential for Japanese people to live in a globalized society.

A. Material selections for teaching culture

Kumaravadivelu (2008) argues that teaching culture in language classrooms develops learners’ global cultural consciousness in this era of globalization. He claims that teaching materials used in language classrooms should be able to deeply and critically engage learners’ minds about cultural complexities. → The selection of teaching materials for a language classroom plays an essential role in promoting students’ critical knowledge toward sufficient cultural understanding in the globalized society.

B. Questions toward Native speakerism in English language education

Regarding English education to cope with globalization, English education in Japan has been heavily influenced by Western culture, including white supremacy and native speakerism. Yamada (2010) found the coverage of the American representation surpassed that of Japan in the 1980s, and Japan was featured most frequently in the 1990s and 2000s’ editions while the US representations covered the second most frequently. Kubota (2018) found that, until the 2016 version of the junior high school textbooks, all textbooks featured a white female teacher as an assistant language teacher.

C. Biases Gained as a Knowledge through Education and Epistemic Injustice

Students may gain biased knowledge and prejudice through education. In the process of gaining knowledge through education, epistemic injustice may occur without us even realizing it. Kidd et al. (2017) argue that epistemic injustice refers to those forms of unfair treatment that link to issues of knowledge, understanding and participation in communicative practices. Fricker (2007) explains that “social power has an unfair impact on collective forms of social understandings is to think of our shared understandings as reflecting the perspectives of different social groups (p.148).” In other words, what is considered important in society will shape the one-sided perspectives as knowledge, and this knowledge will be passed down to individuals through education.

It is important to investigate what kind of knowledge is portrayed in the textbooks for Foreign Language Activities to avoid providing biased knowledge to students and avoid prompting epistemic injustice in the foreign language curriculum. This study aims to analyze the current Foreign Language Activities textbooks copyrighted by MEXT and examine how they aim to equip students with communication skills in response to globalizing society, with particular emphasis on foreign cultural representation.

Method

Material

the MEXT copyrighted textbook *Let's try!* series to all Grade 3 and 4 students
2 *Let's try!* textbooks volumes (only the printed versions)



<https://www.tokyoshoseki.co.jp/materials/e/13/1206/>

Procedure

The content was coded and recorded in Microsoft Excel, and the frequencies of appearance were compared to investigate which countries and aspects of culture emerged the most. Following Yuen’s (2011) and Davidson and Liu’s (2018) textbook analysis methods, the present study does not deal with the length of the content and the impact of the placement. The procedure of the data collection was repeated 2 weeks after the initial data collection by the author. When inconsistencies were found, the necessary amendments were made.

Findings

Even though the curriculum and course name were titled Foreign Language Activities, the MEXT copyrighted textbooks dealt mostly with English language. Only 8 foreign languages texts other than English (excluding Japanese) appeared in the textbooks. Although the Courses of Study (2017) clearly state that English should be taught in principle in the Foreign Language Activities curriculum, the curriculum and course were named Foreign Language Activities rather than English Language Activities. Hence, it seems natural to conclude and suggest that it is necessary to depict other foreign languages and non-English native speaker’s cultures.

Method

A content analysis based on Yuen’s (2011) textbook analysis model
All items in the textbooks, including language and illustrations, were counted.

A. 4 categories of culture(4Ps: Products, Practices, Perspectives, and Persons)

Products	things created by members of a foreign culture or products known to have a foreign culture appearance, both tangible and intangible
Practices	customs, daily life and society, such as social customs, holidays, national sports, and commonly played games
Perspectives	inspirations, myths, and world views, such as a concept of equality, fables, and superstitions
Persons	famous individuals or real persons In Yuen’s analysis, fictional characters were categorized as a Product since fictional characters in movies and stories can be considered a product of culture. The <i>Let's Try!</i> series has original fictional characters, and the characters are often drawn as if they are talking to the readers of the textbooks. Thus, in this study, the textbooks’ original characters will be categorized as Persons

B. Country representation

including 'No Specific Country' if the item cannot be specified by the countries
Grouped by the geographic region based on the United Nations Statistics Division

C. Image or Text

Country	No. of item	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons	Percentage of Total
Africa	8	6	0	0	2	1.9%
Northern Africa	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%
1 Egypt	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%
Sub-Saharan Africa	6	4	0	0	2	1.5%
2 Kenya	6	4	0	0	2	1.5%
Asia	97	46	39	1	11	23.5%
Eastern Asia	76	30	37	1	8	18.4%
3 Japan	59	19	37	1	2	14.3%
4 China	8	5	0	0	3	1.9%
5 Hong Kong	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
6 Korea	8	5	0	0	3	1.9%
South-eastern Asia	7	6	1	0	0	1.7%
7 Philippines	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%
8 Laos	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
9 Malaysia	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
10 Indonesia	3	2	1	0	0	0.7%
South Asia	9	6	0	0	3	2.2%
11 India	9	6	0	0	3	2.2%
West Asia	5	4	1	0	0	1.2%
12 Turkey	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
13 Saudi Arabia	4	3	1	0	0	1.0%
Americas	20	12	4	0	4	4.8%
Latin America and the Caribbean	6	6	0	0	0	1.5%
14 Brazil	3	3	0	0	0	0.7%
15 Argentina	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
16 Mexico	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
17 Jamaica	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
Northern America	14	6	4	0	4	3.4%
18 Canada	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
19 the U.S.	13	6	4	0	3	3.1%
Europe	21	16	2	0	3	5.1%
Northern Europe	6	5	1	0	0	1.5%
20 Finland	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%
21 Norway	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
22 Denmark	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
23 the U.K.	2	1	1	0	0	0.5%
Western Europe	7	5	0	0	2	1.7%
24 Germany	4	2	0	0	2	1.0%
25 Switzerland	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
26 France	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
27 Belgium	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
Southern Europe	3	2	0	0	1	0.7%
28 Spain	3	2	0	0	1	0.7%
Eastern Europe	5	4	1	0	0	1.2%
29 Bulgaria	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
30 Hungary	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
31 Russia	3	2	1	0	0	0.7%
Oceania	3	2	0	0	1	0.7%
Australia and New Zealand	3	2	0	0	0	0.7%
32 Australia	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
33 New Zealand	2	1	0	0	1	0.5%
No specific country	264	84	126	0	54	63.9%
Total	413	166	171	1	75	100.0%

Conclusion

It has demonstrated that imbalanced regional representations were found in them. Japanese English textbooks illustrated Western cultures more in the past; however, compared to the previous Foreign Language Activities textbooks, the Western cultural representation decreased, and Asian countries were presented more frequently in the current textbooks. Walker and Martinez-Vargas (2020) argue that an epidemic structure is grounded in a colonial system of evaluating knowledge that the most reliable and valid knowledge often comes from Western-centric ideas. Those underrepresented countries, such as African countries, are hermeneutically marginalized. Based on Fricker’s epidemic injustice notions (2007), showing an imbalanced image in the textbooks may subconsciously imprint biased upon students regarding who are the knowers of English. In the EIL context, the MEXT copyrighted textbooks must include worldwide cultural representations fairly not to offer students potential grounds for prejudice.

The study also found that the four cultural aspects based on Yuen’s (2011) model were presented disproportionately. To have Japanese students be proficient communicators in the world, it is necessary to equip them with multicultural perspectives and raise their cultural awareness through textbooks (Shin et al., 2011). The textbooks should include the world cultural representation fairly in order not to provide prospective prejudice to students, and the textbooks should take all cultural aspects into equal account and illustrate the cultural aspects to raise students’ global cultural consciousness. Through the critical reflections on their cultures and their values, students can form a better global cultural consciousness (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). As teaching materials may promote global cultural consciousness, the textbooks should be taken all cultural aspects into equal account to present them.

It is hoped that the findings will be of some use, as evidenced in the imbalanced regional representations and deficient cultural element representations.

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