CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS AND REFERENCES IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS USED AT SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THAILAND: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a culture-oriented quantitative analysis of three series of English textbooks approved for use at secondary school level (Mathayom 4-6) by the Thai Ministry of Education— *Snapshot 1-3*, *Speed Up to the World Outside 1-3*, and *Weaving It Together 1-3*—all three textbook series being international editions not specifically designed and adapted for Thai learners of English. The focus of the analysis is on cultural representations and references in those books: What is the cultural orientation of the textbooks? And to what extent do reading and listening texts focus on either presenting the life-style and activities of characters (i.e. cultural information at the micro-social level) or on presenting general facts (i.e. cultural information at the macro-social level). The discussion at the end of the paper finally addresses problems arising from using international editions of English textbooks in developing 'intercultural speakers.'

Introduction

In many English classes textbooks represent a major part of the teaching and learning material used.   Using textbooks in English classes does have considerable advantages for both teachers and learners such as providing ready-made texts and exercises with relative balance between the four skills, showing concrete samples of progress and allowing comparable instruction across classes (Garinger, 2001).   However, the rapidly growing market of EFL teaching and learning around the globe has led to an influx of the materials available.   The increasing number of textbooks makes selecting an appropriate textbook for the group of learners you have in mind more and more difficult and time-consuming.

An analytical approach towards textbooks provides insights into the composition and orientation of the material and, consequently, reveals trends and new developments as well as differences among them.   Eventually, textbook analysis can provide the basis for evaluating the suitability and adequacy of certain textbooks for specific learner groups[1].

Such an evaluation process would contribute to Nunan's (2003) recommendation to carry out "an audit of the human and material resources allocated to English language instruction and an assessment of the adequacy of these in relation to the needs of the learners..." (p. 111).

The analytical focus in this study is on the cultural orientation, more precisely on the cultural representations and cultural references in selected English textbook series used at secondary school level in Thailand.   But why focus on the role of culture in English textbooks?

It is commonly understood that language learning cannot be separated from learning about culture.   Thus, in foreign language teaching, "[i]t has been considered almost axiomatic that a foreign language should be taught in close association with the culture of the people who speak it as a native language" (Ito, 2002,

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[1] Cf. Garinger (2001) and Richards (2001) who both present ways to evaluate textbooks.

p. 36).   However, in the case of English, which has developed into a *lingua franca* in today's world and has so far remained unchallenged in its status as the most important language of cross-cultural communication, this thinking needs reconsideration.   Ito (2002) suggests that culture learning in English language education can no more simply be learning about English-speaking cultures, but has to go far beyond this in that both the learner's culture as well as other non-English-speaking cultures ought to be included.

If English teachers make use of a textbook in class, "(...) the textbook plays an important role in determining the nature of the cultural information presented" (Byram and Esarte-Sarries, 1991, p. 302). Investigating the cultural orientation of selected English textbooks in use in a Thai teaching and learning environment thus will show what cultures and cultural content learners are exposed to and whether or not cultural diversity is being achieved.

Quantitative analysis
Textbook selection

The first criterion for textbook selection in this study is to take only textbooks into consideration that are used at the so-called "expanding level" of language learning, i.e. *Mathayom* 4 to 6 or grades 10 to 12. This is based on the generally acknowledged assumption in foreign language teaching that higher level language teaching and learning includes more extensive cultural content (Ito, 2002, p. 37).[2]   The second criterion is that the textbooks had to be approved by the Thai Ministry of Education. The third decisive criterion is that the textbook series actually had to be in use at schools.

An interview with a representative of the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards and interviews with English teachers at twelve different schools in Bangkok made clear that the textbooks in use at *Mathayom* 4 to 6 consist basically of imported international editions of textbooks both for

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[2] The reliability of this assumption for this study is partly undermined by the - puzzling - fact that English classes at the "expanding level" commence once again with elementary or beginner's level textbooks.

main courses and elective courses.[3] The textbooks most frequently used in the schools I visited and, consequently, finally selected for analysis are the following:

Table 1: Textbooks selected for the analysis

Level	*Snapshot –* Student Book by Brian Abbs, Ingrid Freebairn, Chris Barker *> for "main course"*	*Speed Up to the World Outside –* Student Book by Susan Axbey *> for "main course"*	*Weaving It Together* by Milada Broukal *> for elective course "reading / writing"*
M 4:	*Starter*	*Elementary*	*Beginning level*
M 5:	*Elementary*	*Pre-Intermediate*	*High beginning level*
M 6:	*Pre-Intermediate*	*Intermediate*	*Intermediate level*

Method, focus, and scope

Generally speaking, the textbook analysis undertaken in this study may be seen in the tradition of content analysis in that it approaches texts by means of categories (Titscher et al., 2000). The categories for the culture-oriented analysis of textbooks are established according to the two-folded focus of the quantitative analysis:

(1) The **cultural orientation** of the textbook series:

Which target cultures, i.e. English-speaking cultures, and non-target cultures, i.e. other cultures including the learner's culture, are presented to what extent? How multi- or cross-cultural are the books?

Two indicators are used to determine the cultural orientation of the textbooks:

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[3] It needs to be emphasized, though, that English teachers create a lot of teaching and learning materials themselves in addition to using textbooks — or instead of using any textbooks at all.

(1a) Categorizing reading and listening texts according to their setting, the places mentioned, the nationality and cultural background of people in the text as:

- *target culture-oriented texts*—American; British; others (i.e. Australian, Canadian, Irish, New Zealand); combining different target cultures; non-specified English speaking cultures;
- *non-target culture-oriented texts*—African; Asian-Pacific (Thai); European; South American;
- *multi-/cross-culturally oriented texts*—combining Western cultures; combining Western + African / Asian / South American cultures; combining non-Western cultures;
- *global texts*—not culture specific coverage of issues.

(1b) Categorizing any references to "famous people" including mere name-dropping or photos of "famous people," brief contextualized references and full texts on "famous people." The categories established are:

- *people with target-cultural background*—American; British; others (i.e. Australian, Canadian, Irish, New Zealand);
- *people with non-target cultural background*—African; Asian-Pacific (Thai); European; South American.

(2) Cultural representations at the **micro-social** or personalized level and at the **macro-social** or impersonalized/factual level: To what extent are both levels represented? What types of language and texts dominate each level?

Here again the reading and listening texts are being focused on in the analysis. The distinction between the micro-social and macro-social levels of cultural representations is part of a model for a qualitative analysis and evaluation of the content of textbooks proposed by Risager (1991) and also used by Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1991). Texts at the micro-social level are texts on the lives and activities of characters, i.e. these texts are 'personalized' in that they focus on cultural aspects—explicitly or implicitly—presented through individuals. By contrast, texts at the macro-social level are texts dealing with social, historical, geographical, or economic issues, i.e. they provide factual

information and are 'impersonalized.' At both levels, the following types of language and texts can be distinguished:

> -spoken language: dialogues among characters, interview-style direct speech; or
> -written language: personal writing in semi-authentic format[4] (letters, notes, etc.), "public" writing in semi-authentic format (magazine or newspaper article-style, posters, brochures, etc.), writing in (non-authentic) textbook format.

Result

(1)   Cultural orientation of the three textbook series

The figures in Table 2 show that in both the *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside* series there is a strong emphasis on the target cultures (more than 70% in each series), more precisely on British culture (55.5% and 45.2%, respectively).   *Weaving It Together* is more balanced in including both target (27.5%) and non-target cultures (29.4%), as well as providing multi-culturally oriented texts (25.6%) and texts covering global issues (17.5%).

What all three textbook series have in common is that the target cultures represented are either British or American, largely ignoring other English-speaking cultures.

Table 2: Categorization of reading and listening texts according to cultural orientation

Cultural orientation ▼	*Snapshot* *1-3*	*Speed* *Up 1-3*	*Weaving* *1-3*
Target culture-oriented texts:	**70.3%**	**71.5%**	**27.5%**
a) American	9.7%	7.5%	27.5%
b) British	55.5%	45.2%	0%
c) others	5.1%	3.9%	0%
d) combining target cultures	0%	9.2%	0%
e) non-specified	0%	4.8%	0%

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[4] The term 'semi-authentic format' was chosen to refer to layout and structural elements of texts that are similar to what authentic texts would be like.

Non-target culture-oriented texts:	8.6%	7.4%	29.4%
a) African	1.1%	1.7%	1.9%
b) Asian-Pacific	1.1%	2.3%	11.8%
(Thai)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)
c) European	3.5%	1.7%	5.9%
d) South-American	2.9%	1.7%	9.8%
Multi-/cross-culture-oriented texts:	21.1%	15.4%	25.6%
a) combining different Western cultures	17.1%	5.3%	5.9%
b) combining Western cultures	0%	3.1%	5.9%
+ Asian cultures	1.7%	4.8%	5.9%
+ South American cultures	1.7%	2.2%	7.9%
+ African cultures	0.6%	0%	0%
c) combining different non-Western cultures			
'Global' texts:	0%	5.7%	17.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(N = 174)	(N = 228)	(N = 51)

Comparing the overall representation of Western and non-Western cultures or rather the extent to which non-Western cultures are included, it is found that only 9.1% of all texts in *Snapshot*, 15.8% in *Speed Up to the World Outside,* and 43.2% of the reading texts in *Weaving It Together* include aspects of non-Western cultures.

Weaving It Together emphasizes the multi-cultural approach most strongly, even though representations of Western cultures pre-dominate (59% of all texts are either exclusively or partly Western-oriented).

Looking at the inclusion of Asian cultures and specifically Thai culture, it can be seen that the *Snapshot* series ignores Asian cultures almost entirely in its reading and listening texts and only one text includes a brief reference to Thailand in the context of other Asian cultures. *Speed Up to the World Outside* includes more references to Asian cultures (5.4%), but no explicit inclusion

of Thai culture takes place. *Weaving It Together* has the highest amount of representations of aspects of Asian cultures (17.7%), and it is in a multicultural context that two references to Thai customs and traditions are made.

Among the references to "famous people" being the second indicator to determine the cultural orientation of English textbooks, three main types can be distinguished:

Table 3: Types of references to "famous people"

Type of references ▼	*Snapshot 1-3*	*Speed Up 1-3*	*Weaving 1-3*
● 'name-dropping' and/or photo only	56.8%	47.4%	31.1%
● brief contextualized references	9.9%	31.6%	57.8%
● more extensive information (full text)	33.3%	21.0%	11.1%
Total	100% (N = 81)	100% (N = 76)	100% (N= 45)

Table 3 shows that the *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside* series often refer to "famous people" by only giving those people's names or showing their pictures without providing any further information on them, more frequently in language exercises rather than texts. On top of that, the "famous people" mostly (70% and 50%, respectively) referred to are so-called "pop and movie stars." Making extensive use of this type of reference implies that there is a globally shared understanding of who is a "star" and who teenage learners around the world, irrespective of their cultural background, ought to be familiar with or might be "fans" of.[5]

The categorization of "famous people" according to their cultural background in Table 4 shows that the overwhelming majority of references are target culture-oriented (on average

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[5] Whereas one can argue that global pop culture does indeed exist, the problem with all the references in the topic area of pop culture is that they are particularly prone to quick out-dating.

about 76% in all three textbook series), the references to famous Americans being pre-dominant (about 51% in the three textbook series). *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside* include only very few references to famous Asians (3.7% and 5.4%)[6], whereas *Weaving It Together* includes a higher proportion of famous people from Asian cultures (13.5%). Overall, the references to famous Westerners add up to about 90% in the three textbook series.

Table 4: Categorization of references to "famous people" according to cultural background

People's cultural background ▼	Snapshot 1-3	Speed Up 1-3	Weaving 1-3
target culture	79%	77%	71%
a) American	56.6%	40.5%	55.5%
b) British	17.4%	33.9%	15.5%
c) others	5.0%	2.6%	0%
non-target culture	21%	23%	29%
a) African	2.5%	0%	0%
b) Asian-Pacific	3.7%	5.4%	13.5%
(Thai)	(1.2%)	(0%)	(0%)
c) European	12.3%	15.0%	15.5%
d) South American	2.5%	2.6%	0%
Total	100% (N = 81)	100% (N = 76)	100% (N = 45)

The results of the analysis of the cultural orientation of the textbooks show that the *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside* series include elements from various cultures to a certain extent. Their focus, however, is clearly set on the two main target cultures, American and British cultures, the latter being pre-dominant in the listening and reading texts. The partly followed multi-cultural approach has a strong Western orientation, whereas Asian and other non-Western cultures remain largely excluded. *Weaving It Together,* by contrast, follows the multi-

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[6] The only Thai-related reference is the reference to famous violinist Vanessa Mae, whose father is Thai, in *Snapshot*.

cultural approach more steadfastly. Even though the culture of Thai learners is barely explicitly referred to, this textbook series includes Asian cultures to a greater extent than the other two textbooks in this study.

An explanation for the differences in the cultural orientation of the three textbook series is provided if we look at the different purposes and uses of each textbook series, as the second stage of this textbook analysis will show.

(2)   Representations at the micro- and macro-social level

Snapshot and *Speed Up to the World Outside* are designed to train students in all four skills of language learning, and thus attempt to include a balance of listening and speaking, reading and writing tasks. *Weaving It Together,* however, specifically aims at developing reading and writing skills. This difference in purpose results in different structures and content and eventually affects the cultural representations in the texts, as will be shown below.

According to whether any kind of cultural information in texts is either presented by or referring to individuals and their lives or as general, factual information, we distinguish between "personalized" texts or representations at the micro-social level and "impersonalized" texts or representations at the macro-social level. Table 5 shows to what extent both levels are presented in each textbook series, and, in addition, what text type is predominately chosen for micro- and macro-social representations:

Table 5: Representations at the micro- and macro-social level

Types of text ▼	Snapshot 1-3	Speed Up 1-3	Weaving 1-3
Micro-social level ("personalized")	**71.8%**	**66.6%**	-
spoken language	**50.5%**	**48.2%**	-
● conversation / dialogues	43.1%	4.3%	-
● interview-style direct speech	7.4%	43.9%	-
written language	**21.3%**	**18.4%**	-
● personal writing (letters, notes etc.)	6.9%	6.0%	-
● "public texts" in semi-authentic format (magazine or newspaper articles etc.)	14.4%	8.7%	-
● purely textbook-style texts	-	1.7%	-
Macro-social level ("impersonalized / factual")	**27.7%**	**33.4%**	**100%**
spoken language	**2.9%**	**0.9%**	-
● interviews	2.9%	0.9%	-
written language	**24.8%**	**32.5%**	**100%**
● "public texts" in semi-authentic format (magazine or newspaper article-style, posters, brochures etc.)	10.4%	17.0%	-
● purely textbook-style texts	14.4%	15.5%	100%
Total	100% (N = 174)	100% (N = 228)	100% (N = 51)

Both *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside* present culture pre-dominantly at the micro-social level (71.8% and 66.6%). The focus is on the lives of characters and their activities presented through spoken language. *Snapshot* "wraps" cultural information mostly in dialogues among characters, thus aiming at "(close-to-)real-life conversations." *Speed Up to the World Outside*, by contrast, clearly favors interview-style, direct speech of individuals over dialogues, generating the impression of less close-to-life situations. In either form, cultural information is often only

implicitly provided and always from certain individuals' point of view. The learners of English gain bits of cultural information through (fictional) individuals chosen to represent "typical" (or in some cases "exceptional") life-styles of a certain culture and society.

Weaving It Together, focusing on reading and writing, presents written language only, and all the reading texts present culture at the macro-social level in the form of impersonalized texts, i.e. factual information on various cultures and topics is given. The author herself describes the texts as "high-interest, non-fiction" in the introduction to the textbook series.

Table 6 shows what different cultures—target cultures, non-target cultures, or various cultures—the texts at the micro- and macro-social level represent or refer to. The two textbook series for general English courses, *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside*, concentrate on representing target cultures, in both cases mostly British culture, at the micro-social level (44.3% and 46.1%). To some extent they also include various other cultures at this level (21.2% and 16.6%). This, however, is mainly restricted to introducing characters from a different cultural background in a target cultural setting.

Table 6: Representations of different cultures

Types of text ▼	Snapshot 1-3			Speed Up 1-3			Weaving 1-3		
	target c.	*non-target*	*multi-cult.*	*target c.*	*non-target*	*multi-cult.*	*target c.*	*non-target*	*multi-cult.*
Micro-social level	44.3%	6.3%	21.2%	46.1%	3.9%	16.6%	-	-	-
spoken language	33.3%	1.1%	16.1%	34.3%	1.7%	12.2%	-	-	-
written language	11%	5.2%	5.1%	11.8%	2.2%	4.4%	-	-	-

Macro-social level	23.6%	2.9%	1.2%	25.4%	3.5%	4.5%	27.5%	29.4%	43.1%
spoken language	2.9%	–	–	0.9%	–	–	–	–	–
written language	20.7%	2.9%	1.2%	24.5%	3.5%	4.5%	27.5%	29.4%	43.1%
Total	**67.9%**	**9.2%**	**22.4%**	**71.5%**	**7.4%**	**21.1%**	**27.5%**	**29.4%**	**43.1%**

Weaving It Together follows the multi-cultural approach most extensively (43.1% compared to 22.4% in *Snapshot* and 21.1% in *Speed Up to the World Outside*) and includes a large proportion of non-target cultural representations (29.4%). Unlike *Snapshot* and *Speed Up to the World Outside*, which focus on target cultural representations at both the micro-social level (44.3% and 46.1%) and the macro-social level (23.6% and 25.4%), *Weaving It Together* in total puts much less emphasis on target cultures (27.5%) in presenting cultural information. Cultural diversity is obviously being aimed at when covering topic areas such as customs & traditions or food & drink. Still the representations of and explicit references to the learners' culture, i.e. Thai culture, are hardly worth mentioning in any of the three textbook series.

Discussion

All three textbook series certainly promote the idea of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. They also try to establish a "sphere of interculturality" (Kramsch, 1993) both by creating multicultural settings and introducing characters from different cultures at the micro-social level and by providing selected information on various cultures at the macro-social level. Apparently, all these bits and pieces of implicit and explicit cultural information contribute to forming the learners' images of various cultures and building their cultural knowledge. A quantitative analysis does not allow for any conclusions regarding the "quality" of the images and the knowledge, its results however suggest that both the cultural images and the cultural knowledge transmitted remain fragmented.

Looked at from an economic point of view, international editions of English textbooks are often made for learners from a large number of countries. This requires concessions and the authors must try to cover the needs of learner groups of a variety of cultural backgrounds (Richards, 2001; Risager, 1991). This commercial aspect in textbook production has a considerable impact on the design, structure, and contents of the textbooks: which topics are chosen to be in the textbooks, how language and grammar are presented, and finally which cultures are presented and how.

One evident consequence related to the textbooks' cultural orientation is that "it is impossible to elaborate a socio-cultural content that is based on a contrastive analysis" (Risager, 1991, p. 187) of target cultures and the learners' specific culture. Textbook authors generally solve this dilemma by following two escape routes to establish links to the learners' culture. First, they use target culture-related input to serve as a model for learners to produce spoken and/or written language related to their own lives and culture; e.g. *Now talk about your favorite food and the way you like it cooked. Then say which food you don't like.* Or *Write notes about a film which you like.* Secondly, they ask learners in various contexts to put themselves into a specific situation, often making use of the magic keyword "imagine," e.g. *Imagine you are going to spend the evening with a famous person...* Or *Imagine you are in London or your capital city. Write a postcard to an English-speaking friend.* Both strategies are meant to elicit cultural information from the learners in English to make up for the lack of explicit references to and representations of the learners' culture.

Here the question arises whether these textbook strategies to establish links to the learners' culture are indeed sufficient to enable learners "to transmit cultural information about one's own society to the outside world through English [which] is of itself a skill that will be indispensable in the 21st century" (Ito, 2002, p. 52). More generally, the question is: Are these strategies which are obviously considered a part of the multicultural approach adequate to raise cultural awareness and develop "intercultural communicative competence" (Byram, 1997) in the learners?

In today's globalized world, English is more often than not used in intercultural contexts, non-native speakers of English communicating with other non-native speakers across cultures, non-native speakers communicating with native speakers, and native speakers communicating with other native speakers from a different culture. Thus, truly "intercultural speakers" need to be able "to see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own [culture], expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language ... which may be the interlocutors" native language, or not" (Byram, 1997, p. 12). Should learners of English, in our case Thai learners of English, develop into speakers of English with intercultural communicative competence, it is indispensable to provide them with culturally well-balanced materials specifically designed for Thai learners' needs. These materials need to be inclusive of representations of the learners' own culture from different perspectives and explicitly relate their culture to other cultures in various ways—regardless of the level of English that is being taught. Only then can learners develop an awareness for a variety of aspects of their own culture and see their own culture in an intercultural perspective. Cultural input that includes target cultures, other non-target cultures as well as the learners' culture in a balanced way stimulates learners to reflect critically on their own and other cultures. Based on this, learners will eventually be able to express these ideas in English and learn to communicate effectively in intercultural situations.

The Author

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