# CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS – IS IT STILL THERE?

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## Abstract

In the paper the author examines the ways in which culture of the target country or countries is represented in foreign language textbooks. Elements of "culture" are analysed in the content of English and Russian foreign language textbooks, both as explicitly expressed descriptions of life and institutions in a foreign country and as subtle hints about lifestyle and value systems. The author attempts to make a distinction between what is typically seen as the "culture" and "ideology" in foreign language textbooks. Further, she considers various possible ways of "reading" culturally charged texts and implications for teaching.

## Key words

Textbook research, foreign language teaching, culture, ideology

1.  **Introduction**
    It is a well-known fact that foreign language learning is foreign culture learning and that foreign language teaching inevitably entails transmitting elements of the target culture, though it may take various forms, both intended and arbitrary. The role of cultural learning in the foreign language classroom has been the concern of both teachers and scholars and has provoked continuing controversy. Nevertheless, it is sometimes viewed only as another skill, an appendage to teaching the four established skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, as foreign language teachers we teach and our students learn about the foreign language culture whether or not we include it overtly in the curriculum and whether or not we believe it is present in our

teaching. It is often emphasised in curricular documents that teaching a foreign language should focus not only on grammar and vocabulary of the language, but should also promote the development of communication skills to prepare learners for successful interaction with people from other cultures. And as communication is never out of context, and every context has some elements of culture, communication itself is rarely culture-free. The term *culture,* however, can be used differently. In this paper we attempt to examine how culture (in some of its meanings) is integrated into foreign language textbooks, and also illustrate the degree of student involvement in making sense of what is presented to them.

## 2. Culture in/of the foreign language classroom

According to Kramsch (1993:24), there are two main perspectives which have influenced the teaching of culture in language classroom. The first one is based on the transmission of factual information about the culture of the target country, in particular facts about institutions, art and everyday life. This way of presenting cultural content, where the emphasis is on facts rather than meanings, arguably does not facilitate understanding of foreign attitudes and values. The other perspective draws upon cross-cultural psychology and anthropology and it differs from the first one in that it provides learners with tools to interpret the phenomena in the target culture, however, it is up to them to integrate that new knowledge with the assumptions, beliefs and attitudes already adopted in their society. These two models are consensual, that is, they do not prepare learners for situations where conflicts arise and where they encounter clashes due to cultural differences between the involved parties. Moreover, in neither of these two models the problem of diversity is addressed – the target culture is usually generalised and presented as a mainstream entity only with slight variations.

Kramsch (ibid.) calls for a third dimension which would provide space and opportunities for learners to negotiate their meanings and help them interpret them. This practice means not only speaking and listening to people from different cultures, but also exploring the intentions and frames of reference of other

participants in the conversation. This approach thus leads to one´s independent manipulation of meanings and recognition of how our cultural reality is constructed through language.

Such a method of teaching that would encourage students to use their own voices to develop understanding and insight into a different culture is, unfortunately, quite rare in language classrooms. There have been many studies on classroom interaction focusing on the "culture" of classroom communication and these studies revealed that foreign language classrooms are often dominated by one pattern of teacher-student interaction, the so-called IRE, sometimes referred to as the recitation script. In this pattern, the first action is the teacher´s question or directive (I), then follows student´s response (R) and the final stage is teacher evaluation. Hall (2012: 92) calls this model "the default interactional pattern in western schooling, from kindergarten to higher levels of education and across all curricular areas" and documents that frequent use of recitation script is negatively correlated with learning. There are studies showing that in foreign language teaching the IRE also prevails. Lin (1999b) in her analysis of the discourse of English language classrooms in Hong Kong found that the recitation script was the most common pattern. As in this model the teacher does most of the talking, she also related this pattern to limited student participation and views it as an obstacle to the development of English skills for communication as well as for sociocultural purposes.

The issue of autonomy and independence has clear implications for textbook usage. Textbooks are often viewed as an authority, as reliable and valid sources authorised by ministries of education etc. Especially in foreign language teaching it is more than understandable that as non-native speakers of e.g. English we do not question the content of the textbook as we do not feel entitled to do so. This uncritical acceptance of teaching material can result in non-creative presentation of the textbook material and little active engagement in an interactive learning process.

## 3. Culture or ideology

The word "culture" of course takes up various meanings, as demonstrated also in the context of foreign language learning and

teaching. Kramsch (1998: 10) defines culture as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings". She also stresses the heterogeneous and non-definitive, constantly changing nature of culture which is to a large extent shaped by its language. Understanding across cultures therefore depends on common conceptual systems, which arise from the larger context of our experience.

Some authors use the term *culture* to refer to the products of "high" culture (such as works of art), others use it when referring to miscellaneous facts about the target country. Cortazzi and Jin (1999:197) define the term as "the framework of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that are used to interpret other people´s actions, words, and patterns of thinking." Similarly to Kramsch, they state it is crucial that learners of foreign languages should become aware of different cultural frameworks, i.e. their own as well as the other one, because otherwise they would base their interpretations of a different culture on their own cultural assumptions and easily misinterpret various cultural messages. For them, culture is not only content, but also a series of dynamic processes involved in learning.

Ideology in education, on the other hand, is often perceived as a more or less explicit system of values, often stirring up controversy as it is one of the crucial questions both to parents and teachers what values will be transmitted through education. Johnsen (1992: 80) points out that it is important to review the relationships between the various parties involved in the process of reproduction and transformation of ideologies, including those related to the transmission of ideology through textbooks. These ideologically charged processes include not only the content of textbooks, but also the politics of textbook production, selection and distribution. This broad view on the role of textbooks is shared by Apple (1992:8), who notes that text production and use can be both retrogressive or progressive depending on the social context. However, he contends that the body of school knowledge is not a mirror reflection of the dominant values, it is rather a dynamic process of continual negotiation and remaking to integrate the perspectives of other than the dominant group. The control

over the preservation and production of knowledge is seen as crucial and is realised by selecting and thus giving legitimacy to particular types of cultural resources (Apple, 1990).

The central role in the process of value transmission is played by language itself. It is commonly viewed as a change-creating power, often abused by those possessing particular expertise and so related to the issue of ideology and power in education. As Lakoff (1990:16) observes, the development of modern psychology together with the development of new media have provided a large number of techniques, tactics and strategies that render language even more persuasive than it used to be.

Ideologies in texts as defined by Fairclough (2003:9) are "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation." Fairclough (ibid.) also emphasises that we can judge the ideological charge of a claim only by looking at the causal effects it has in certain areas of life and by asking whether the effects contribute to maintaining or changing of power relations. Analysing ideology in textbooks would therefore entail not only analysis of the texts but also an analysis of classroom usage and possible interpretations of the material.

Generally speaking, what are the implications for textbook analysis? It is important to point out that culture and ideology as defined above are closely intertwined in that both are shaped by and shape language and both convey the values of society, which are then reflected in textbooks. The culture of the given country influences the form and design of the presentation of material and is mirrored in the content of textbooks (both in the form of references to the life and institutions of the country and everyday life of people, communication styles, etc.). The detection of ideologically invested elements is a more challenging task as elements of ideology often become "common sense", and their ideological nature is disguised. Furthermore, analysing ideology does not imply that the analyst himself/herself is objective, and so investigating ideology means working on very thin ice of one´s own prejudice and bias as confronted with the analysed material. In our analysis it is attempted only to illustrate some of the elements

of culture/ideology (often overlapping) we find interesting and worth investigating to outline further possibilities of research.

## 4. Textbook analysis
### 4.1 Textbooks of English as a foreign language

It is a common complaint that the design and content of textbooks are clearly influenced by commercial intentions of authors. At the same time, however, it seems that the selling points at the moment are also the environment, race awareness and gender issues (Cortazzi, Jin, 1999). The two textbooks we examined, however, not always followed this trend. They are both aimed at international cultures, that is, the cultures of countries where English is a foreign language. Although the textbooks are apparently designed to appeal to an international audience, there is still a very clear focus on American/ British culture.

For instance, the textbook widely used today in the Czech Republic called *The New English File* (2007) is centred round the culture of the USA and Britain, presenting facts about physical geography, history or daily life of people in these countries. Foreign speakers or learners of English get a chance to relate their experience to the one described in the textbook by tasks such as filling in a questionnaire about the food in their country. International communication and inter-cultural experience are promoted e.g. in an article on the exchange programme Erasmus, here described as a very positive, even life-changing experience. The textbook strikingly often deals with mass culture, specifically celebrities or fashion, sometimes teetering on the brink of bad taste, e.g. when publishing photos of famous actors/actresses and their less known relatives with the task to match people who resemble each other. The textbook authors resort to tabloid-like manner of visual presentation of material also in a task where very expensive cars are to be matched with nationalities (countries of origin). Another task associated with the cars was to identify questions about a car that a woman/man would ask (the heading being *What car? Men and women are different*). The captions below the pictures of cars suggest that cars with high top speed are preferred by men, while what matters for women is mainly the colour and size of a car (to be easy to park). In a follow-up task students are

to describe their ´dream´ car. These activities all suggest that it is not only normal but maybe even desirable to know who the up-to-date celebrities are as well as that it is quite natural to "dream" about a car. The gender stereotypes are very obvious and the aim of the activity is to reinforce them, as no space for discussion is provided for those would who disagree with the underlying assumption that men and women form uniform groups with the same features.

In the textbook *Cutting Edge* (2007) the perspective is changed as more international issues are dealt with, with speakers from all around the world getting a chance to express their opinions. Also, students´ daily routines or eating habits are not to be contrasted with those of people in the USA or Great Britain, but only consulted with peers in speaking tasks. Ethnic minorities are portrayed in the textbook in contexts which do not explicitly deal with minority issues, they are smoothly integrated into general topics. Similarly to the previous textbook discussed, grammar and vocabulary is presented against the backdrop of the mass culture. An outstanding example of this is a task with language focus on expressing likes/dislikes, in which students have to match a question Do you like … with four phenomena: Brad Pitt, Madonna, cooking and cartoons (let us only observe that the correct answers for Brad Pitt are *Yes, I really like him* and *He´s OK.*)

## 4.2   Textbooks of Russian as a foreign language

For the sake of contrast we selected textbooks of Russian which are advertised as up-to-date material for international learners, *Rossia segodnja* (2002) and *Rossia 2000* (2000). In general, the textbooks are based on the target culture - the emphasis is laid on life in Russia, which is compared with other countries. The textbooks present a lot of controversial material with a declared objective to stimulate discussion and achieve objectivity. It is true that students are encouraged to present and develop their arguments concerning various issues, ranging from serious political and social problems (e.g. social gaps) to trivialities (how to celebrate special occasions in Russia). However, despite the fact that many open exercises (inviting a range of possible interpretations and responses) are included, in other types of

exercises such as translation tasks, the statements are no longer to be doubted and the "official" argument is thus conveyed in disguise. The statements such as: *"International terrorism has become a real threat to all mankind"* or *Chechnya is often accused of living off Russia: it gets free electricity as well as direct money transfers."* (Rossia segodnja) are hardly bias-free (although there is the hedge of *is often accused*) but it is not to be noticed or discussed any more in a translation exercise where students probably focus on the grammar and vocabulary needed to get the translation correct. Also, many national and gender stereotypes are perpetuated, e.g. in the text *How much is love?* where it is discussed how much flowers cost and whether gentlemen in particular countries need to give flowers to women in order to win love. Another interesting topic is a text on various subcultures, such as hippies, rappers, etc., where most associated tasks focus on the matching the attributes with individual groups (e.g. clothing or music) and do not deal with the wider context or social problems that these communities arise from. Such presentation of problems cannot promote understanding of the culture, it can be even argued that it is the contrary: many misunderstandings can arise and misconceptions are reinforced due to the lack of sufficient and comprehensive exposition of problems.

One of the features of the Russian textbooks is that they present different cultures in marked contrast to each other and promote the rivalry between them. E.g. Rossia 2000 contemplates in a long article whether one can survive on social welfare, how much food, clothing etc. they can buy and so it makes readers step into other people´s shoes and consider life priorities. However, a following exercise is based on a comparison of how Russian and English people view poverty. For an average English person, it states, poverty is expressed by not having separate bedrooms for each child or not having financial means for hobbies. For a Russian, the threshold of poverty is allegedly very different: it is the lack of means for important medicine or when a person is forced to eat meat only once a week or less. The textbook also enjoys comparing e.g. the nutritional value of Russia vs. American/British fast food etc. It is striking that although the intention of authors was probably to attract attention by light-

hearted topics, the hidden message is that one of the cultures is superior, because they stand in contrast to each other.

## 5. Reading

Rather than examining the elements of ideology in textbooks, research currently focuses on the perspective of influence, that is, whether and how a text affects a reader (Johnsen, 1992: 82). Byram, Risager (1999: 58) suggest that we need to pay special attention to the way in which teachers (who are themselves constant learners of culture) act as mediators between learners and foreign language and cultures. As Apple (1992:11) stresses, students also are not mere value-receiving subjects, but rather value- creating persons in much of their school experience. Their reading of the text can be dominated, i.e. they accept the messages at face value; negotiated, i.e. they may dispute a claim; and oppositional, i.e. they reject the dominant tendencies. More research is needed to be done on the multiple meanings of texts, their interpretations by students and different uses of them in a classroom.

## 6. Conclusion

The textbook´s selection of topics, genres and illustrations all reflect the educational cultures of the authors. Language teaching is therefore actually a kind of cultural practice through which the target culture and the native culture (that of learners of a foreign language) is made visible and related. The pathways through which this is realised are many, in this paper we illustrated only a few. However, the whole process of foreign language teaching and learning is so complex that teaching materials themselves cannot secure or determine the achievement of specific goals or the way the material will be dealt with in a lesson. Thus, we can only call for the employment of methods that will stimulate a reflective use of the best available materials for teaching language and culture in the foreign language classroom and methods which will make visible the elements normally "taken for granted", be it the desirable or the undesirable ones.

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