

**AN EVALUATION OF THE REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL CONTENT IN
THE PRESCRIBED ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK OF SECONDARY LEVEL
IN BANGLADESH**

Karishma Sobhan Priyanka

Lecturer

Department of English

Bangladesh University

Bangladesh

Abstract:

This paper investigates the representation of cultural elements in the prescribed English language textbook of secondary level (class VI) in Bangladesh through text analysis and portrays the comparison between the authentic aspects versus unauthentic aspects. Unfortunately, there are hardly any studies that have been conducted in Bangladesh regarding this issue. However, this investigation suggests that the textbook writers respectively values linguistic competence but neglected the culture where it comes from. However, Teaching language without teaching the culture of its native speakers is "a lifeless endeavor" (Sellami 2000). Therefore, in order to build a cultural bond and awareness, it is necessary to include target language culture in the prescribed textbook, because the way the textbook treats culture, may remain insufficient for the students and may not prepare students well in order to achieve an intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: Culture, Foreign Language, textbook, interpretation, intercultural communicative competence

Introduction:

English is the lingua franca of the twentieth century and it is treated as one of the most important means for acquiring access to the global world. It opens new opportunities and enables to build a global network. As a result, there is a huge need to learn English in Non-English-speaking countries and the same scenario also prevails in Bangladesh. Therefore, Bangladeshi students are striving to gain a good command of the English language.

However, learning a foreign language is not enough to communicate with the neighbour countries. In order to avoid the use of inappropriate language, misunderstandings, humorous incidents, and misinterpretations, students need a thorough understanding of cultural values and beliefs underlying the target language. Many eligible people fail to get a good job in foreign countries or even lose their job due to their lack of cultural knowledge (Zhang and Yan 2006).

Therefore, English as a subject has taken a significant place in every student's life. In Bangladesh, students rarely get a chance to meet people who speak English as their first language. So, the responsibility solely falls upon the teachers and textbooks, because they are the only source of English language in the schools. Yet, it is a very common practice in Bangladesh that English language teachers, as well as the textbooks frequently overlook the essential information about the target language culture.

This paper investigates the representation of cultural elements in the prescribed English language textbook of secondary level (class VI) in Bangladesh through text analysis. This study is structured and conducted to obtain an answer to a question—

Does the textbook portray cultural bias towards Bangladeshi or target culture in terms of texts, or is it inclusive of both cultures?

Literature Review:**Defining Culture and its association with Language:**

Defining the word 'Culture' is not an easy task. It is a complex phenomenon. Culture is a "humanly created environment for all our thoughts and actions" (Tepperman et al. 1994:1). Thanasoulas(2001) mentions that culture includes all the social practices which tie a group of people and make them different from others. Yazdi (2005) also states a similar view that Culture is the factor which differentiates the human being's behavior from the behavior of animals.

Spair(1956) claims that Culture is a system of behaviors and modes that depend on unconsciousness. Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century points out that Culture consists of the following three elements –

- Practices (patterns of behavior such as gestures, greetings and leave-takings, festivals, and entertainment);

- Products (books, dress, food, songs and household items);
- Perspectives (beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and values).

A similar view is presented in the Collins English dictionary(2003). It says, Culture encompasses the total range of inherited ideas, values, knowledge, expression, taste, and manners, which are practiced, conveyed and distributed by the members of the group. All these different viewpoints of Culture makes it clear that Culture is not natural or inborn; rather it is a social product, which includes the elements such as language, rituals, clothes, science, arts, beliefs and values that connect people together (Roohul-Amini, 1989).

In my own definition of Culture, I also support the view of Standards and Roohul-Amini. In my words, Culture combines a group of people together, who share the same values, and practices in a similar way of life and a common language.

Language and culture are inseparable and they are interlinked. Language is a code which is used to signify thoughts and needs; through which communication is practiced.

Language is like a mirror of culture and the primary medium of communication. Communication can be compared with swimming, where language is the swimming skill and culture is the water. Without having a good swimming skill crossing a river would be very difficult and slow, and without water (culture) there would be no communication. Therefore, to be an effective speaker, a learner must know about the target language culture. Valdes(1986) believes that language, thought and culture are three parts joint together and learning a language will not be fully complete without understanding the patterns and values of the culture.

From my teaching and language learning experience, I believe that a foreign language is best understood in its cultural settings. But to create such a cultural setting in the classroom there should be a textbook that carries target culture elements.

Incorporating Culture In Language Teaching:

Positive Effects on Learners:

Learning a foreign language goes beyond its grammatical rules, pronunciation and vocabulary items. It also encompasses cultural connotation. Nida (1998) points out that, each language is different and each expression or word meaning is associated with that particular culture. For example, when someone utters the word 'Lunch', an Englishman will refer to pizza or steak, whereas a Bangladeshi man will refer it to steam rice and curry. The word 'Dog' refers to a pet, a good companion and man's best friend in English culture. But in Bangladesh, the world dog is associated with a road-side animal which is used as a night guard.

Even colors have different meanings in a different culture. For example, color 'Red' means danger in English culture and in Bangladesh this color is associated with bride and festivity. Traditions of one culture are also viewed in different angle by people from a different culture; like, Bullfighting is an art and sport of Spanish culture. A Pakistani audience will consider this sport a cruel activity. Even there are some words which are never used in another culture. For example, there are different names of Snow used by Eskimos and different names for Rain in Bangladesh.

As I already mentioned that, many qualified people fail to get a job and even lose their job for using inappropriate utterances and for having a cultural barrier. Therefore, by learning about the target language culture a learner can also know what he should ignore or treat as irrelevant (Armour-Thomas & Gopaul-McNicol, 1998) while talking to a foreigner.

Negative effects on Learners:

However, in some cases, foreign culture learning could be frustrating too. When the difference is beyond students understanding or expectation, an anomaly develops. It is difficult to adopt a new culture or to imitate it because each person has their unique perspectives based on their culture (Peirce 1992). For example, learners from the same level and same culture may have different interpretations about the role of woman in the society.

Even, the meaning of 'authenticity' varies from person to person. For example, a learner from a village school who works six hours in the field would consider a story authentic if it is related it with his experience and community. Researchers found out that schooling affects the learner's psychological development (Frazier and Morrison 1998). So, before choosing a book the authority must pay attention to how it may affect the learners (Howaed 1991).

Ogeyik (2011) focuses on socio-cultural awareness and claims that,

They will be demotivated if target culture is too much foreign. Some researchers support the presence of native culture in an EFL textbook because learners have the right to see themselves within a book. They feel excited to find their own lifestyles and experiences instead of a foreign culture which is completely different (Harris, 1996; Taxel, 1997).

The member of one culture believes that their way of thinking, understanding of the world, their tradition and way of looking into things are the correct ones. So culture teaching helps to build cultural respect and creates awareness. Shanahan (1997) points out that, a foreign language learner lacks exposure to the target language, however cultural content can provide this opportunity.

Bangladeshi students badly need this exposure in order to recover the misunderstanding of different cultural terms and to become an effective speaker. As I already mentioned that, our students rarely get a chance to meet target language users. So teachers solely depend on textbooks and materials to teach a foreign language.

Culture and Language Teaching through Textbooks:

Byram (1993) examined that, cultural content in the textbooks should include: Social identity and groups, social interaction, belief, behavior, social institutions, daily life, national history, and geography. The cultural settings should be authentic (Brooks, 1987) because, without it, a book becomes lifeless and meaningless. The term 'Authentic' is associated with the words, like – true, reliable, valid, genuine, an actual character not counterfeited and legitimate to mind. Authentic texts are the product of a real speaker to establish real communication with an audience (Nunan 1988; Benson & Voller 1997). It indicates the target culture and the ability to behave or think like a target language people, in order to get recognition and validation by them (Kramsch 1998a).

Furthermore, Gray (2002) mentions that topics should be appropriate according to students' culture and context, because inappropriate topics may offend and demotivate them. So, there should be a fair and balanced representation of people from different races, religion, genders, ethnicities, and classes.

Lessard-Clouston (1997) refers that, students need to know about the foreign language culture as well as their own culture. A book should not be biased towards one particular culture (Fenner 2001) and it should enable students to compare the perspectives of both cultures (Bateman and Mattos 2006).

Theoretical Framework And Research Methodology:

Theoretical framework:

From the literature review, it is evident that language is a social practice and it has become the core of language teaching (Kramsch 1993). This is a qualitative study which explores the representation of cultural content in the prescribed English textbook (Class- VI) through text analysis. For this study, two main standards of cultural content suggested by the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (1999) and Byram's (1993) is considered. The Standards (Appendix – 1) are almost universally accepted and Byram's (appendix – 2) checklist is also replicated in various studies. So, both of them are appropriate for the study because it covers almost all the areas of Culture.

I have adopted both, Benson and Voller (1997) and Harmer's (1991) concept of authenticity to analyze text authenticity. In this study, authentic texts refer to the language produced by a native speaker in order to establish a communication and it is not modified or changed to fit the curriculum requirements.

Evaluation criteria

Evaluation criteria

Cultural content	Covering areas	Adopted and adapted from	Year
Practices	<i>Patterns of behavior such as gestures, greetings and leave-takings, festivals, holiday</i>	Standards for Foreign	1999

	<i>and entertainment</i>	Language Learning in the 21 st Century	
Products	<i>Books, dress, food, songs, household items, and farming tools</i>		
Social and Cultural Perspectives	<i>Beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and values.</i>		
Social identity, profession, and group	<i>Names, job, social class, regional identity</i>	Byram	1993
Socialization and lifestyle	<i>Families, schools, religion, and daily life</i>		
Social and political institutions	<i>State institutions, law, healthcare</i>		
National and International geography	<i>Places, states, and countries</i>		
National history	<i>Historical events</i>		

Methodology:

The main data of this study is “English for Today” book for class-VI. This is a qualitative study and all the reading texts from the nine units will be analyzed using the theoretical framework given above. The findings will be listed in a table and will be analyzed in terms of cultural content.

Data Findings And Analysis:

Culturally oriented texts in the textbook:

Practices

Cultural content	Details	Unit	lesson	Page no.
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Practices	Greetings	<i>Greetings (good morning)</i>	1	2	2
		<i>Greetings</i>		6	6
	Entertainment	<i>Storytelling, basket making</i>	2	9	21
		<i>'Hat day' (bazar day)</i>		1	37
	Patterns of Behaviour	<i>Sleeping in the veranda</i>	4	7	4
		<i>Dancing and singing for rain</i>	8	6	96
Festival	<i>Eid day</i>	9	12	115	

Cultural practices care about 'how', 'when' and 'where' to do a certain behavior. Table – 1 represents the units that talk about cultural practices and they are categorized as –

- Greetings
- Entertainment
- patterns of behavior
- Festivals

Storytelling and 'hat day(bazar)' both are an old popular way of entertainment among the native Bangladeshi villages. Singing and dancing for the rain is also a common practice in Bangladeshi villages, but there is no explanation for 'who' or 'why' such behavior is practiced. The texts only represent native cultural practices in villages (see appendix - 4). City life is neglected in the textbook. There is only one unit that talks about, the Eid celebration in Muslim community, and rest of the cultural practices, e.g. 'Pooja', 'Christmas', 'Halloween' and 'New year' etc are also neglected.

It is important to include intercultural materials to familiarize the learners with different behavioral patterns of the target culture (Méndez García 2005). Foreign language learners are also culture learners (Friedman 1997), so there should be some reference to other cultural practices because it enables them to compare and appreciate the similarities and differences between cultures (EL-Hussari 2008).

Cultural Products

Cultural content	Details	Unit	lesson	Page no.
Dress	<i>Vest, shirt, sari</i>	3	4	30
	<i>Lungi (Dress)</i>		5	31
Food	<i>Eating rice and dal</i>	4	4	41
	<i>Rui fish, mutton</i>		5	42
	<i>Tubewell water, jar</i>		6	44

Products	Household items	<i>Mats</i>	5	7	45
		<i>Mud walls, straw roof, and Veranda</i>		1	51
		<i>Chula (stove)</i>		10	59
		<i>Pot, Bamboo</i>		11	61
	Dress	<i>Sari</i>	6	6	56
	Food	<i>Soya luchi (chapati)</i>		10	59
	Daily use item	<i>Mola fish, Chapati</i>	6	5	66
		<i>Ponds</i>		6	69
	Food	<i>Rui, Katla, and Mola fish</i>	8	8	70
	Transport	<i>Rickshaw</i>		7	1
	Tools	<i>Farming tools</i>	8	4	94
	Currency	<i>Taka</i>	9	11	113

Table -2 clearly shows that the main cultural products addressed in the textbook are common Bangladeshi foods, dresses, household, and farming items. Rice, dal, fishes, and vegetables are the daily food of Bangladeshi people and there is a lot of reference to these items. There is no information on the food habits of other cultures where English is spoken as the first language. There is no authentic menu or reference to restaurants, transportation, and electronic items. Only two lessons (11-12) talks about Bangladeshi currency but lacks any reference to other currencies e.g. Dollar, Pound, Yen etc. There are a lot of vocabularies associated with farming and frequently used throughout all the units.

Perspectives

Table – 3

Cultural content		Details	Unit	lesson	Page no.
Products	Dress	<i>Vest, shirt, sari</i>	3	4	30
		<i>Lungi (Dress)</i>		5	31
	Food	<i>Eating rice and dal</i>	4	4	41
		<i>Rui fish, mutton</i>		5	42
	Household items	<i>Tubewell water, jar</i>	5	6	44
		<i>Mats</i>		7	45
		<i>Mud walls, straw roof, and Veranda</i>		1	51
		<i>Chula (stove)</i>		10	59
	Dress	<i>Pot, Bamboo</i>	6	11	61
		<i>Sari</i>		6	56

	Food	<i>Soya luchi (chapati)</i>	6	10	59
		<i>Mola fish, Chapati</i>		5	66
	Daily use item	<i>Ponds</i>		6	69
	Food	<i>Rui, Katla, and Mola fish</i>		8	70
	Transport	<i>Rickshaw</i>	7	1	76
	Tools	<i>Farming tools</i>	8	4	94
	Currency	<i>Taka</i>	9	11	113

The texts and dialogues convey typical native perspectives of Bangladeshi villagers. The concept of staying and working together portrays the village family values. The tradition of singing and dancing for the rain is a superstition which is commonly practiced by the farmers. There is no link or text that talks about target language cultural values, ideas or beliefs.

Without any foreign cultural setting, learners will fail to establish an understanding of the relationship between the practices, products, and perspectives of other cultures (Standard 2.1). Learning English as a foreign language is not only about linguistic skills, it also incorporates cultural knowledge and awareness (Chlopek, 2008). So, there should be a gradual exposure to foreign cultures from junior to middle and secondary level students.

Social, national identity and groups

Cultural content Details Unit Lesson Page no.

Cultural content	Details	Unit	lesson	Page no.			
Products	Dress		<i>Vest, shirt, sari</i>	3	4	30	
			<i>Lungi (Dress)</i>		5	31	
	Food		<i>Eating rice and dal</i>	4	4	41	
			<i>Rui fish, mutton</i>		5	42	
	Household items		<i>Tubewell water, jar</i>	4	6	44	
			<i>Mats</i>		7	45	
			<i>Mud walls, straw roof, and Veranda</i>		5	1	51
			<i>Chula (stove)</i>			10	59
	<i>Pot, Bamboo</i>	11	61				
	Dress				6	56	
	Food		<i>Soya luchi (chapati)</i>	6	10	59	
			<i>Mola fish, Chapati</i>		5	66	
	Daily use item				6	69	
	Food				8	70	

		<i>fish</i>			
	Transport	<i>Rickshaw</i>	7	1	76
	Tools	<i>Farming tools</i>	8	4	94
	Currency	<i>Taka</i>	9	11	113

Table 4

My findings (table 4) show that the names used in the textbook are mostly native names (e.g. Mohammad Ali, Arif, Kamal, Salma etc). Only lesson-1 talks about some foreigners e.g. Navin Thapa from Nepal, Musa Hitam from Malaysia. There is only one reference about an Englishman 'Captain Cook' (p.65) but there is no explanation about his country or his daily life. However, the textbook remarkably neglects native city life and frequently talks about 'Farmers and farming'. A student from a city school may not consider these stories of working all day in fields as authentic because it is not related to their experience and community. Bangladesh is an agricultural country but still, there are other professions and social groups which are overlooked in the texts.

Socialisation and life style

Table – 5

Cultural content		Details	Unit	lesson	Page no.	
Products	Dress	<i>Vest, shirt, sari</i>	3	4	30	
		<i>Lungi (Dress)</i>		5	31	
	Food	<i>Eating rice and dal</i>	4	4	41	
		<i>Rui fish, mutton</i>		5	42	
	Household items	<i>Tubewell water, jar</i>		4	6	44
		<i>Mats</i>			7	45
		<i>Mud walls, straw roof, and Veranda</i>	5	1	51	
		<i>Chula (stove)</i>		10	59	
		<i>Pot, Bamboo</i>		11	61	
	Dress	<i>Sari</i>	5	6	56	
	Food	<i>Soya luchi (chapati)</i>		10	59	
		<i>Mola fish, Chapati</i>	6	5	66	
	Daily use item	<i>Ponds</i>		6	69	
	Food	<i>Rui, Katla, and Mola fish</i>	6	8	70	
	Transport	<i>Rickshaw</i>		7	1	76
Tools	<i>Farming tools</i>	8	4	94		
Currency	<i>Taka</i>	9	11	113		

Most of the lessons are about the daily activities of native villagers. There is no reference to other countries except Navin Thapa's family in unit – 1 (p.11). There is a huge lacking in the

variation of topics in the textbook. Using authentic target cultural setting “allow students to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language” (stated by Peck 1998 cited in Fleet 2006). Students feel motivated when their learning experience becomes a real experience.

Social and political institutions, National and international geography and national history

Table: 6

Cultural content		Details	Unit	lesson	Page no.
Products	Dress	<i>Vest, shirt, sari</i>	3	4	30
		<i>Lungi (Dress)</i>		5	31
	Food	<i>Eating rice and dal</i>	4	4	41
		<i>Rui fish, mutton</i>		5	42
	Household items	<i>Tubewell water, jar</i>	4	6	44
		<i>Mats</i>		7	45
		<i>Mud walls, straw roof, and Veranda</i>	5	1	51
		<i>Chula (stove)</i>		10	59
		<i>Pot, Bamboo</i>		11	61
		Dress	<i>Sari</i>	5	6
	Food	<i>Soya luchi (chapati)</i>	10		59
	Daily use item	<i>Mola fish, Chapati</i>	6	5	66
		<i>Ponds</i>		6	69
	Food	<i>Rui, Katla, and Mola fish</i>	6	8	70
	Transport	<i>Rickshaw</i>		7	1
	Tools	<i>Farming tools</i>	8	4	94
Currency	<i>Taka</i>	9	11	113	

From the above data findings, it is clear that there are very limited references to social and political institutions; and National history. There is only one lesson that covers the history of Liberation of Bangladesh. The whole textbook covers only two villages e.g. Sherpur and Nurganj. There is no example of other places, the capital city or districts. Unit – 9 (lesson – 8, Flying to Dhaka) mentions the name of neighbor countries but there are no descriptions. There are two lessons that talks about Thai floating market (p.101) and problems of Thai farmers (p.95). The description of the floating market is properly given. The vocabulary "klongs" is properly described. Integrating international region plays a great role to facilitate the learners' motivation and possible future visits to foreign countries or contacts with foreign people (Adaskou's et.al 1990).

The data analysis clearly shows that the texts and concepts portray a stereotype native rural culture, and neglected both urban and target language culture. In support to this, Hamid and Baldauf(2008) argue that the present English curriculum is not appropriate in the Bangladeshi context as rural education is partially neglected, while urban students and traditions are given special priority.

Text Authenticity:

According to Benson and Voller (1997) and Harmer's (1991) concept, authentic texts are the language produced by native (target) people for daily communication and they are genuine texts, e.g. newspaper or magazine articles. Few chapters talk about Bangladeshi native foods. There is only one newspaper article (p.70) in the book, and it is fabricated according to students' native rural context. In terms of, target culture authenticity, there is no text which talks or represents target language culture or people. It is important to bring a variety of authentic materials that represents both of the cultures in order to enhance a learner's knowledge about the outside world and to promote respect (Méndez García 2005).

Discussion:

According to findings and data analysis, it is somewhat clear that the texts are biased toward Bangladeshi culture. In terms of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning, most of the cultural information presented in the textbooks deal with native cultural products and practices. None of the units emphasize cultural perspectives or creates a meaningful cross-cultural situation. The texts portray a stereotype image of native culture, in terms of products and practices. Valdes (1986) points out that, the focus of a lesson may be on grammatical features but the content must signify target culture.

Bangladesh is a developing country, where more than half of the population live on agriculture and poverty. So for them (rural students) target culture is an alien culture and if such a topic is given they may have nothing to contribute. So, this could be one of the possible reasons behind this unsatisfactory and traditional concept of English teaching in Bangladesh. However, the globalization of the language will not be possible, if we neglect the culture of the native speakers.

Our world has changed, but in many ways, our teaching and textbooks have not. In order to make our students communicatively competent and aware of cultural differences, it has become important to include target language culture in the national curriculum.

Conclusion:

This study suggests that the textbook writers respectively values linguistic competence but neglected the culture where it comes from. The results of the analysis have shown that the cultural content of foreign language textbook "English for Today (class – VI)" of Bangladeshi high school is basically based on the culture of the village people.

Teaching language without teaching the culture of its native speakers is "a lifeless endeavor" (Sellami 2000) and on the other hand, it is also undoubtedly crucial to know about own culture before stepping into unknown territory (Grove, 1982). Thus, there should be a balance of both cultures. Learning a foreign language does not only dictate who talks to whom but also help to encode the meaning and builds a bridge to remove the cultural gap.

Therefore, in order to build a cultural bonding and awareness, it has become necessary to include target language culture in the prescribed textbook, because the way the textbook treats culture, may remain insufficient for the students and may not prepare students well in order to achieve an intercultural communicative competence.

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Appendix – 1: Criteria for Evaluating the Cultural Content of Foreign Language Textbook
(Retrieved from - <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3392>)

STANDARDS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING:

A. COMMUNICATION: Communicate in Languages Other Than English

- **Standard 1.1:** Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions
- **Standard 1.2:** Students understand and interpret written and spoken the language on a variety of topics
- **Standard 1.3:** Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

B. CULTURES: Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

- **Standard 2.1:** Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied
- **Standard 2.2:** Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied

C. CONNECTIONS: Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

- **Standard 3.1:** Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language
- **Standard 3.2:** Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures

D. COMPARISONS: Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

- **Standard 4.1:** Students demonstrate an understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own
- **Standard 4.2:** Students demonstrate an understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

E. COMMUNITIES: Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home & Around the World

- **Standard 5.1:** Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting
- **Standard 5.2:** Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Appendix – 2

Byram's (1993, p.34-35) Criteria for textbook evaluation (focusing on cultural content):

- A. Social identity and social group (social class, regional identity, ethnic minorities)
- B. Social interaction (differing levels of formality; an outsider and insider)
- C. Belief and behavior (moral, religious beliefs; daily routines)
- D. Social and political institutions (state institutions, health care, law and order, social security, local government)
- E. Socialization and the life cycle (families, schools, employment, rites of passage)
- F. National history (historical and contemporary events seen as markers of national identity)
- G. National geography (geographical factors seen as being significant by members)
- H. Stereotypes and national identity (what is “typical” symbol of national stereotypes)