

**Analysis and Comparison of Culture Presentation in China and Vietnam English
Textbooks**

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Abstract

Over time English has developed into an international language and evolved into many varieties. These can be categorized into three concentric circles including inner, outer, and expanding circle (Kachru, 1988). Culture, as an essential composition of language learning, can be demonstrated and delivered alongside language content by textbooks. This study investigates and compares the cultural content presented in English textbooks of China and Vietnam, aiming to explore effective strategies of advancing ELT textbooks in terms of intercultural communication competency.

Keywords: textbooks, culture

Introduction

English has gradually spread and functioned as a lingua franca around the world with globalization, which granted the significant status of English learning in most non-English-speaking countries. Kachru's (1988) model, "three circles of English", classifies countries using English into three concentric circles: inner, outer and expanding. In the Inner Circle countries English is the native language, like the USA, Britain, Australia and Canada, etc. Here the traditional linguistic and cultural bases are of English. The Outer Circle countries include those to which English has spread and are thus, in non-native contexts. In this context English has been institutionalized as an official language to communicate with others within the circle, such as Singapore, Malaysia, some African countries, etc. Countries in the Expanding Circle, experience a steady increase in the number of speakers and functional domains, and include nations where English is used primarily as a foreign language rather than a lingua franca or a second language, for example, Japan, Korea, China and Vietnam.

According to Crystal (2008), the percentage of non-native English speakers who are in outer and expanding circles is around three times more than native speakers in inner circle settings. This indicates that English learning is not limited to communication with native speakers; it is also expanding to interactions between outer and expanding circles. In this case, the focus of ELT extended from linguistic knowledge to cultural awareness.

Language and culture are mutually related and inseparable. Culture is defined as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and action" (Kramsch, 1993, p.127), encompassing the shared behaviors which are easy to observe and invisible attitudes. It is embodied in the social interactions that pass on through generations, which is manifested by language. Likewise,

language functions as the medium of daily communication, presenting and being shaped by the values of one culture through verbal expressions. Therefore, language learning intertwines with culture acquisition, enhancing language progress in a mutual way.

As language learning material, a textbook “significantly affects students’ attitudes and dispositions toward themselves, other people and society” (Ndura, 2004, p.143). Therefore, the ELT textbook is considered an instrument which transmits different cultural values and promotes students’ understanding of various cultures. For this reason, and in order to support the interactions between English learners and native and non-native English speakers, research on the cultural content presented in learning materials suggested that the target culture, source culture and international culture need to be covered in the textbook.

There are many studies further discussing English education within the countries in the Expanding Circle where they develop a variety of English since the sentence patterns and phonology of their first languages are different. As aforementioned, Vietnam and China as two countries located in the Expanding Circle, are similar in the context of language and culture.

Regarding national languages, Vietnamese and Chinese both belong to the Austroasiatic language which follows the pattern of “subject + verb + object”, and also the analytic language with phonemic tone. In this case, English learning in China and Vietnam is similar with regards to phonology and grammar. In terms of culture, Vietnam was influenced by Chinese culture in its history due to geographic and political factors, and thereby Confucianism is also deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture including its education system (Nguyen, 2003; Huong, 2008).

The research aims to investigate the similarities in Asian English textbooks and compare the differences regarding the presentation of culture content including products, practices,

perspectives, and persons according to the three concentric models with the intention of exploring how to enhance students' intercultural competency through English textbooks.

Positionality

English as a major subject plays a vital role in language learning in China, it has been included into college entrance examinations since 1980. However, controversy about English learning is still ongoing despite the 40 years that have passed. Most students in China start English learning from primary school, some are even from kindergarten along with parents' emphasis on English learning. With over a decade of English instruction from primary school to college, Chinese students are better at grammar, words, listening, and reading than speaking and composing in English. Besides the impact of the education system which depends more on the written-form assessments, arguments on ESL remain in China.

According to Kachru's (1986) three concentric circles model, which depicts the spread of English around the world, there are concerns about the varieties of English applied to diverse contexts. For the countries situated in the expanding circle, English is termed as an international language which aims at enhancing the world-wide communication, thereby focus of ESL has shifted to language use and function regarding interaction instead of linguistic patterns. As an English learner myself, it was still hard for me to interact with native speakers despite such a long history of learning the language in school and university. There are many language "codes" with which native speakers are familiar while "outsiders" cannot get the meaning since the slangs are relational to the culture background. Likewise, regarding my English teaching experience in China, some sentences and vocabularies utilized in textbooks are outdated or inappropriate in the context due to a disconnection with the culture.

Besides the ESL dilemma in China, learners from countries where English is neither a native language nor a lingua franca, which are categorized in the expanding circle, are somehow confronted with the anxiety of speaking English as well. Burdened with worries on accent, grammar, the mutual understanding within conversations, and cultural difference, they are more likely to be the listeners in a group. Further, with the long-term ESL in school, learners lack capacity in communication due to deficiency in culture knowledge.

Textbooks are the main resources ESL teachers and students rely upon and are supposed to contain cultural content to facilitate learners' intercultural competence. Furthermore, for the countries situated in the expanding circle, English language and culture are distinctive from their mother tongues and values. For this reason, culture content including target culture, source culture, and international culture, is an essential component of the textbooks. Language and culture are mutually associated in ESL, hence, is it effective to promote culture learning through English textbooks?

In this case, my research will shed light on the cultural content and elements of English textbooks applied in secondary schools in Vietnam and China, two expanding circle countries. Aligning with the similarities between the two countries such as the language pattern, and Confucianism culture, there are differences as well, for instance, the dynamics of Vietnam whose history reveals a country ruled by many countries while mainland China was relatively stable.

The research aims to compare English textbooks in these two countries and address the differences between the two countries, so as to inspect how they interpret the culture content in conjunction with their own background. In addition, it will analyze the culture content either included or overlooked in expanding circle nations to explore the strategies on improving the communication capacity in ELT through textbooks.

Literature Review

English as an International Language (EIL)

The expansion of English around the world has been a contentious issue for some time.

According to Crystal (2003), the number of non-native English speakers has exceeded that of native speakers since English today is functioning as a lingua franca and as a tool for intercultural communication. Both native speakers and non-native speakers have an impact on the English modification, which makes English a global language and termed as an International Language (EIL) (Seilhofer, 2003; Mckay, 2000).

Smith (1976) defined EIL as “one which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another”, which is not the first language or the second language, but as the “auxiliary language” (p.38). He claims that English is not owned by a country but by the world so that it is used to accomplish cross-cultural communication. As a result, many varieties of English, such as Thai English, Philipino English, etc., should not be framed by the norms of native speaking countries.

Furthermore, considering the internationalism of English, Widdowson (1994) advocates that bilingual speakers ought to customize English concerning their needs in communication. Similarly, Modiano (2001) discussed colonialism in English learning, which illustrates how linguistic imperialism affects learners’ awareness in practice. For instance, students might be implanted with the idea that native English excels other varieties when the teacher normalizes a specific variety including American English or British English.

For this reason, deliberation on English language teaching (ELT) is kindled with the spread of English. In ELT practice especially within non-native speakers, English varieties from outer and expanding circles are overlooked and thought to be atypical even incorrect, which

strengthens the forces of linguistic hegemony of western countries. Therefore, changes in terms of decentralizing English have to be realized in ELT.

Culture and ELT in the context of EIL

Being positioned as an international language, EIL does not belong to a single country while being altered into a medium by which it achieves the intercultural communication between native speakers and non-native speakers. In this case, it seems not to be necessary to emphasize a specific culture in ELT, as well as materials utilized in ELT. Kramsch (1993) maintains that culture learning aims at understanding the diversities, which means that learners need to acknowledge the target culture in conjunction with their own culture, trying to comprehend and respect the differences. As she points out, intercultural competence (ICC) is accentuated in the context of EIL.

Regarding ICC, Bennett (1986) raised the term “intercultural sensitivity; this concept is *difference* – that cultures differ fundamentally in the way they create and maintain world views” (p.181). Central to Bennett’s (1986) definition is that it indicates ICC is based on the capability of integrating cultural differences for the people who are from varied contexts. Kramsch (1993) contends that intercultural competence in ELT refers to discerning the values of target culture rather than accepting the beliefs. In a similar manner, Byram (1998) identifies that interculturalism refers to “knowing about another culture” while bilingualism is “accepting another culture” (Mckay, 2000, p.8).

The prefix of interculturality means the two-way cultural influence including that of sojourner and host countries’ culture, and thereby people being capable of tolerating and valuing the differences. Communicative competence is mainly concerned with the dimensions of

communicative abilities. Therefore, ICC means capacities to conduct effective communication between people from various contexts.

In the context of EIL, developing ICC is concerned with knowledge of the culture of the English-speaking countries where the language originated, and with the mutual understanding which involves values and beliefs of both cultures. Therefore, the focus of culture learning in ELT is progressing the capacity of introducing one's own culture to others in order to facilitate mutual understanding and communication.

Culture Models in EIL

As an international language, Kachru (1985) categorized English into three circles containing the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle, which is the result of migration, colonization, and globalization.

The Inner Circle refers to the countries where English is the native language, such as the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Englishes in these countries are called “the norm-providing varieties” (Kachru, 1992, p.5).

The Outer Circle represents the spread of English in non-native contexts, where it has been institutionalized as an additional language. It involves many of the former British colonies where English was imposed as the official language in colonial times and thereby remained as a lingua franca till today. The circle includes the Asian countries of India, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and the African countries of Kenya, Nigeria, and Zambia, to form “the norm-developing” circle (Kachru, 1992, p.5). Englishes in this circle are not identical due to cultural factors and develop into diversified varieties, for instance, Indian English, Singapore English etc.

The Expanding Circle, with a steady increase in the number of speakers and functional domains, includes nations where English is used primarily as a foreign language rather than an official language or a second language. The countries in this circle include Japan, Korea, Egypt, Vietnam, and China etc., which are categorized into the “norm-dependent” circle as well (Kachru, 1992, p.5). As aforementioned that, the sources of culture in EIL textbooks are supposed to include the three circles in a balanced way, as to promote ICC in cross-cultural communication.

Besides the sources of culture, inquiries into culture are concerned with its dimensions as well. As stated in the American *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* that, cultural components are defined as *products, practices and perspectives*. Considering it as an iceberg, *products* are the part floating on the water, referring to the tangible and intangible productions of culture: tangible products such as artwork, clothing, and food, while intangible products include dance, music, economy, and political institutions. *Practices* are described as the norms of actions and social interactions, for instance, body language, table manners, holiday traditions, and notions of time and space. At the bottom layer of the iceberg are the *perspectives*, which represent the values and beliefs of a culture. Moran (2001) claimed that *persons* who are well-known individuals can also be a constitution of culture.

In this study, Kachru’s (1985) model will be adopted to investigate the extent to which cultures from the three circles are presented in the EIL textbooks, Moran’s (2001) four facets of culture will be the measurement for how the culture content is depicted in the textbooks.

Research regarding culture content in ELT textbooks

Many research studies regarding culture presented in English textbooks have been conducted on the basis of Kachru’s (1986) three concentric circles model. Matsuda (2002)

studied seven textbooks applied to 7th-grade students in Japan, aiming to explore the impact of curriculum on facilitating “international understanding” (p.437). She found that the variety of English from Inner Circle is still a focal part of these textbooks; and the characters are mainly from Inner Circle as well, who play a significant role in demonstrating language patterns in dialogues.

Similarly, Yamanaka (2006) analyzed which countries are highlighted in junior high and senior high English textbooks in Japan. Results showed that America takes a great position in both junior and senior high education; while information about Outer circle countries are quite lacking. In terms of countries in the Expanding Circle, Japan itself is the spotlighted country in these textbooks, whereas other countries are mentioned in a low frequency. Likewise, in Hanashiro’s (2016) analysis of cultural representation in three Japanese 11th-grade English textbooks, findings are similar with previous research.

Rashidi and Meihami (2016) investigated and compared the culture content and elements presented in ELT textbooks in inner, outer and expanding countries’ secondary schools. They found that all countries include more L1 culture than any other cultural content in the textbook. The focal cultural content for inner countries is L1 and L2 culture while the expanding countries tend to emphasize the international culture. For outer-circle countries, they are on the path of disassociation with L2 culture and focus more on international culture. In addition, the study found that esthetic elements are centered in ELT textbooks of inner and outer countries, whereas in expanding countries, the sociolinguistic aspect gets highlighted as well.

In the context of European countries, Syrbe and Rose (2018) examined three EFL textbooks in Germany to evaluate the extent to which they foster students’ ICC, shedding light on the ownership, norms, and target speakers of English. They claimed that the materials in

German EFL textbooks overly rely on the British English models and get “stuck” in a “fixed inner circle cultures” (Syrbe & Rose, 2018, p.161).

In Indonesia, Setyono and Puji Widodo’s (2019) study aimed to explore the depiction of multicultural values in an English textbook which is approved by the ministry of education, and the relevance with enhancement of learners’ ICC awareness. It revealed that four values are covered in the textbook containing the respect for differences including various ethical groups, living with nature and all forms of life in peace, and gratitude of cultural products. They proposed that outer and expanding circles cultures are supposed to be a part of textbooks since English is operated as an international language.

With regards to the representation of intercultural communication, Nguyen, Marlina and Cao (2020) carried out a similar inquiry on the extent to which English textbooks in Vietnam portray multiculturality and prepare students for intercultural communication. They came to the conclusion that depictions in the textbooks are primarily targeted towards communication with native speakers, and lack of “linguistic pluralism” (Nguyen et al., 2020, p.13). In addition, the authors advocated for a pedagogical approach oriented towards globalizing English as well as preventing cultural and linguistic biases.

Tajeddin and Pakzadian (2020) selected three most popular English textbooks used in Iran; and evaluated the differences on how ELT textbooks display Inner, Outer, and Expanding circles cultures, as well as the types of World Englishes. Findings show that Inner circle cultures and social values occupy the largest proportion in ELT textbooks while local cultures are rarely contained, which is inconsistent with the previous studies. Moreover, the three textbooks mainly include American, British, Canadian, and Australian accents, lacking diversities of English such as non-native accents.

The ELT context in China and Vietnam

English plays a significant role both for individual and national development with the emergence of a global market. With the proposal of “reform and opening up” policy in 1978, reviving English has been a part of innovation in China. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education (MOE) revised the curriculum syllabus which started English education from Grade 3; and included it as a subject in the college entrance examination (Hu, 2005).

Similarly, since the Vietnamese government launched the Renovation Policy in 1986, the collaboration in terms of economy and politics with western countries has been increased, making English the tool of engagement with the world. Therefore, English education gets highlighted as a vehicle for growth of business and tourism in Vietnam. The government implemented the National Foreign Language 2020 Project which claimed that English would be taught from Grade 3 instead of Grade 6 and advocated the application of English-medium instruction in other subjects besides English (Nguyen, Marlina, & Cao, 2000).

During nearly 40 years of ELT revolution, China and Vietnam both emphasized the significance of culture in English learning, which facilitates cross-cultural communication with the rest of the world to speed national modernization. However, little research has been conducted to explore the cultural content in Asian countries’ ELT textbooks, especially a comparison of those in the two countries of China and Vietnam. This study will explore the following two questions:

1. To what extent is the culture from Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles presented in the ELT textbooks of China and Vietnam?
2. How is culture regarding Products, Practices, Perspectives, and Persons presented in the ELT textbooks of China and Vietnam?

Methodology

Two textbooks designed for Grade 8 students are analyzed in this study. The introduction of culture is compulsory and comprehensible for Grade 8 students after five years of English learning. The textbook from China was chosen from the *Go for It* textbook series and contains 10 instructional units, each of which was made up of two sections covering listening, reading, speaking and writing in various topics. The Vietnam ELT textbook was picked up from *Tieng Anh* series, including 6 units which are composed of four skills as well.

Content analysis was adopted in the study. The materials (mainly texts) relating to culture elements were categorized according to the culture models mentioned before. As the unit number of the two textbooks was not consistent with each other, the ratios of each domain were taken as the parameter of this study.

Results

	Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle
<i>Go for It</i> (China)	60.38%	1.89%	37.73%
<i>Tieng Anh</i> (Vietnam)	19.2%	2.4%	78.4%

Table 1. Percentage of culture sources

	Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle
<i>Go for It</i> (China)	US, UK, and Australia	Malaysia	China, Japan, and Russia
<i>Tieng Anh</i> (Vietnam)	UK and US	India	Vietnam, Japan, Phnom Penh, Korea, Ha Noi, Mongolia, Thailand

Table 2. Countries appeared in the textbooks

As shown in Table 1 and Table 2, in *Go for It* series from China, 60.38% of the culture sources are from inner-circle countries including the US, UK, and Australia, while 37.73% of the culture sources belongs to expanding circle countries, such as China, Japan and Russia; and 1.89% from outer-circle culture, mainly from Malaysia.

In contrast, in Vietnam's textbook, 19.2% of inner-circle culture is from the US and UK. Culture from expanding-circle countries, mainly involves countries around Vietnam (Phnom Penh, Ha Noi, and Thailand) and other Asian countries (Japan and Mongolia) accounts for a great proportion, which is 78.4%; and only 2.4% of culture is characterized as outer-circle countries, for instance, India.

		Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons
<i>Go for It</i> (China)	<i>Inner</i>	33.96%	11.32%	9.43%	5.66%
	<i>Outer</i>	1.89%	0	0	1.89%
	<i>Expanding</i>	35.85%	0	0	0
	<i>Total</i>	71.70%	11.32%	9.43%	7.55%
<i>Tieng Anh</i> (Vietnam)	<i>Inner</i>	9.6%	9.6%	0	0
	<i>Outer</i>	2.4%	0	0	0
	<i>Expanding</i>	47.2%	20%	7.2%	4%
	<i>Total</i>	59.2%	29.6%	7.2%	4%

Table 3 Percentage of culture content

The proportion of culture content as well as the three-circle countries is shown in Table 3.

In the textbook from China, most (71.70%) of the culture content refers to the Products domain, nearly half of which is regarding Inner-circle countries while half is concerned with Expanding-circle countries. Both practices and perspectives are relevant to inner-circle countries, coming in at 11.32% and 9.43% respectively. The elements with respect to persons only account for 7.55%; and nearly two over three are from Inner-circle countries.

In terms of the Vietnam textbook *Tieng Anh*, not so much but still over half (59.2%) of the content is related to Products. Differing from *Go for It*, most of the Products introduce the culture from Expanding-circle countries, especially Vietnam. More items (29.6%) are associated with the Practices, but only one third of them are from Inner-circle countries while the rest are

related to Expanding-circle countries. With regards to Perspectives and Persons, they are taking less proportion but all are abstracted from expanding-circle countries.

	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons
<i>Go for It</i> (China)	TV show, cartoon, book, holiday, city, dance, places, food, magazine, clothes store, science, activities, sayings	email writing, friendship, invitation, celebration of Thanksgiving	attitude to “little man”, significance of Thanksgiving, values of relationship with parents, interpretation of wearing jeans in different occasions	Walt Disney, Mulan, Hemingway, scientist
<i>Tieng Anh</i> (Vietnam)	building, festival, place, costumes, legends, fairy tale, dance, terraced field, music, comics, activity, animals, ethic group	how to use abbreviation in text message, customs, traditions, table manners	comparison of city and countryside, thoughts on nomadic life, values of customs and traditions	architect, Saint Giong, Gods (Chu Dong Tu, Tion Dung, Po Klong)

Table 4 Topics of the culture content

The summary in Table 2 and Table 4 shows the results of a comparison of the textbooks regarding culture sources and culture content in China and Vietnam. According to Table 2, both textbooks are prone to selecting the expanding-circle countries that are close to them either in geography or in economy, for instance, Russia and Japan appeared in China's textbook while

Thailand, Ha Noi, and Mongolia are mentioned in Vietnam's textbook. Results from Table 4 shows that though all the four dimensions are encompassed in both textbooks, they do not address the same topics.

Discussion and Conclusion

As the above analysis reveals, most of the sources of culture are selected from Inner-circle countries in China's ELT textbook, which is consistent with previous studies. However, the result of Vietnam's textbook analysis indicates that expanding-circle culture takes the biggest proportion. In addition, in terms of content from the expanding-circle countries, apparently *Tieng Anh* contains more than *Go for It*, many of which are overlooked in China's textbooks, such as Phnom Penh, Ha Noi, and Mongolia. Although this study is conducted within only two textbooks, the data may not be convincing enough for the representation of the ELT curriculum in these two countries, it still implies that Vietnam's textbook focuses more on expanding-circle countries than those of the inner circle, whereas outer-circle culture content is neglected in both of the ELT textbooks.

In regard to the culture content, both textbooks emphasize the presentation of Products as it is relatively acceptable and understandable for secondary students. Moreover, compared with China, curriculum in Vietnam stresses more Practices and fewer Perspectives and Persons. One reason for this difference might be that the content designed for Grade 8 in Vietnam differed from that in China because two units of *Tieng* are concerned with customs and traditions in Vietnam, which might affect the data analysis.

In the course of this textbook analysis, Vietnam's ELT textbook mainly presents local culture instead of the introduction of the target culture, which fosters students' competency in learning and spreading their own culture. Furthermore, the ELT textbook in China tends to

balance various cultures so as to broaden students' cultural awareness. As suggested from the results, these two countries recognize the significance of cultural diversity and aim to prepare students to be proficient global citizens although they require more effort to adjust the ratios of culture content, especially in the outer-circle countries.

Saville-Troike (2003) claims that the culture emphasized in the textbook is relevant to the social context where the language is learnt and utilized. From the perspective of sociology, Vietnam's textbook tends to enhance learners' intercultural competency through demonstrating their culture in English, while China's textbook is by acquiring and understanding foreign culture. Though dependent on the economy and political situation, the issues regarding imbalance of cultural varieties might be readdressed by the textbook authors since English is an international language by which learners achieve cross-cultural interaction containing native speakers and non-native speakers. For this reason, reference to outer-circle culture ought to be included.

Preference to the Products and Practices in these ELT textbooks is noticeable as well, meaning that the values and beliefs of a culture are disregarded. This seems reasonable since Perspectives is complicated and abstract for learners, especially when they lack insights on cultural knowledge.

Besides the textbook authors and publishers, schools and teachers are responsible for the selection of language learning materials. Though demonstration of deep culture through textbook is challenging, it can be cultivated by how teachers deliver such content in class, such as multimedia materials, depiction of guest speakers, etc. Educators are supposed to advance the curriculum design in terms of its culture sources and dimensions in the future, in order to

cultivate students' intercultural competency both in understanding foreign cultures and in interacting with their own cultures.

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