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## Can We Learn about Culture by EFL Textbook Images?: A Semiotic Approach Perspective

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### Abstract

A close look at the education system reveals that too much attention is attached to text while visuals, such as pictures and cartoons, are often deemed as “decoration”, or are not incorporated in the textbooks at all. Visual texts constitute a part of daily communication, which can potentially bear many layers of meaning. Such a complexity involved in visuals turns them into an ideal resource for not only L2 learning but also the improvement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), along with cultural awareness. The status of cultural elements and representation of culture in English instruction has proved to be a tricky issue. This is mainly because of the diverse range of contexts where English is used on an international scale globally. Given the integral relationship between language and culture, it is essential to teach cultural elements in L2 classes, in particular, the representation of cultural values and elements as an integral part of the L2 curriculum of English language teaching (ELT). Furthermore, from a critical linguistics viewpoint, language textbooks should be viewed as social and cultural vehicles. Therefore, the incorporation of cultural symbols and raising cultural awareness are considered essential issues in ELT textbooks, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Furthermore, multiple approaches to the analysis of textbooks and cultural contents have been adopted by different researchers. Here, the present study is based on the core principles of semiotic analysis which implies that texts, pictures, and other modes of communication can be used as potential semiotic resources. This review study can yield important theoretical and pedagogical implications for researchers, L2 instructors, and the developers of ELT textbooks to take the images into account to represent culture in the textbook.

**Keywords:** culture, cultural representation, English as a foreign language, semiotics, textbook evaluation

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## **1. Introduction**

Interest in English courses in China, as well as the growing interest in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), leads to an increase in the number of English major students, given that English is considered an international language (Zhang & Wang, 2011). There is a consensus that the learners' capability of engaging in communication in the target language should be enhanced to help students obtain adequate knowledge about culture (Baker, 2012). Given the previous debates in the literature on the association between culture and language, culture can be seen as an important component of L2 instruction (Zhang & Yan, 2006), and the interaction between the target language and culture plays an important role in the quality of L2 learning (Tolosa et al., 2018). Since culture has proved to play a quintessential role in foreign/ second language education, cultural elements should be regarded as important elements of any L2 curriculum (Canale, 2016; Kramsch & Vinall, 2015; Sun & Kwon, 2020; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015). Therefore, there has been a focus on the incorporation of culture in language education (Bewley, 2018). Meanwhile, ELT has recently sought to promote ICC which is related to the learner's cognizance of different cultures as well as his /her own culture (Hamiloğlu & Mendi 2010) so that such a skill is sometimes called the fifth skill (Tomalin, 2008). Indeed, cultural knowledge is considered an essential factor in preventing misunderstanding and the occurrence of serious miscommunication (Chlopek, 2008).

Accordingly, learning the international language and the use of reading materials in education is very important (Long, 2005) and it has emerged as an essential concern in applied linguistics (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015; Kramsch & Zhu, 2016). Consequently, presenting cultural elements in textbooks, learning tasks and materials contributes to enhancing intercultural competence as there has been an interest in the incorporation of culture in L2 instructional materials recently, especially in the context of EFL (McConachy & Hatta, 2013; Xiong et al., 2022). Indeed, textbooks used in language classes (e.g., ELT textbooks), as part of the social milieu, shape their spectators' visions and undoubtedly, they serve as an important vehicle for transferring cultural knowledge (Derakhshan, 2018). Moreover, the cultural content involved in EFL textbooks is of great prominence to students' knowledge of the target language, achievement of cross-cultural communication skills, and growth of comprehension of associated cultural information and value (Xiong et al., 2022).

In the EFL context, research focuses on the synergy of culture and language, how intercultural messages can be transferred, and how one can use a reliable source to raise students' intercultural attentiveness (Oakes & Sunders, 2004). Furthermore, textbooks play a significant part in learners' identification of the disparities between their own and target cultures, and in the view of Tomlinson (2003), textbooks serve as a roadmap for both teachers and learners, enabling them to predict what will unfold in a lesson as well as to look back on what has been done. Moreover, as observations show, a single context would be provided to all learners in different classes; therefore, the same method is used when it comes to evaluation (Abdelwahab, 2013).

Teaching and learning culture also constitute an essential part of L2 courses in China and teachers cover the culture in their English classes as cultural awareness is always regarded as the most significant thing in these classes (Jiang, 2002). The class observations in China show that the teaching of language depends heavily on the requirements of the curriculum and the coverage and teaching of culture in ELT are tied closely with textbooks. However, some educators (Zhang & Zhu, 2002) maintain that L2 cultural contents are not adequate for English learners in that they fall short of providing a similar environment for learning English. Given the fact that textbooks constitute an essential source of language and culture in the milieu of second language instruction, they have turned into a key medium for the representation of cultural elements, convictions, and even cultural stereotypes (Canale, 2016; Raigón-Rodríguez, 2018). Culture and its elements have caught the attention of L2 professionals for a long time and recently there has been even more interest in cultural aspects based on the emergence of transnational, multilingual, and multicultural developments in the modern world (Kramsch & Vinall, 2015; Sun & Kwon, 2020). Also, some investigations consist of a wide range of topics, including the representation of multicultural values in EFL textbooks (Pashmforoosh & Babaii, 2015; Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

As it is stated previously, textbooks are used as one of the important learning materials in L2 teaching, and they usually consist of pictures and other visuals (Weninger, 2018). Literature shows that the use of pictures and images in EFL course books stimulates learners' interest, allowing them to involve themselves in L2 learning creatively and critically (Curtis & Bailey, 2001). Indeed, pictures create a rich context of L2 situations and culture, streamlining various practices in L2 teaching. Consequently, textbook producers occasionally convey messages

using images across textbooks. In fact, such ideas may not be imparted through the linguistic text (Bezemer & Kress, 2010; Petrie, 2003).

Literature shows that visual representation has emerged as a dominant characteristic of teaching materials (multimodal ELT textbooks). In the same vein, Janko and Peskova (2013) assert that visuals pave the way for the realization of manifold layers of meaning, serving as a helpful tool for L2 learning and strengthening learners' ICC (Kiss & Weninger, 2017; Mofidi & Hashemi, 2019; Shen & Su, 2015). These researchers and educators have attached great importance to the contribution and value of the pictures in English textbooks, emphasizing the significance of visual components and graphic schemes in English textbooks. They have concluded that textbooks containing both aesthetic elements and functional purposes can make teaching more attractive (Kiss & Weninger, 2017; Mofidi & Hashemi, 2019; Shen & Su, 2015). This, in turn, can lead to a better learning experience and the promotion of students' learning motivation and aesthetic experiences (Chan et al., 2012; Derakhshan, 2021).

Furthermore, some studies have been carried out on the usage of visuals for cultural learning in L2 classrooms. For example, a study concluded that more frequent use of visuals in the EFL classroom leads to better learning outcomes. Furthermore, there is consensus among the researchers (Derakhshan, 2021; Kiss & Weninger, 2017) that the application of visuals can lead to an improved understanding of the learner's cultural ideas in a foreign language classroom. Furthermore, pictorial books enable the learners to concentrate on experience as a real part of their life since these pictures stand for the reality in the world (Dimopoulos et al., 2003; Shen & Su, 2015). Pictures also enhance the learners' ability to focus their attention, allowing them to process textual data more effectively; as a result, the majority of English textbooks benefit from various images given the important contribution of the images to the learning process as images serve as a vehicle for transferring cultural knowledge within texts and pedagogic tasks; that is, pictures are not merely decorative (Derakhshan, 2021).

Moreover, the literature shows several definitions of content and materials assessment. For example, Tomlinson (2003) defines the evaluation of text as a process whereby the materials and textbooks are appraised systematically in terms of their pedagogical value concerning the goals of the curriculum and learners. It is easy to analyze the cultural representation in the textbooks; therefore, multiple approaches have been taken to this issue, with some focusing on the textual

information (lexical items, passages, exercises, etc.), while others tend to use both visual and textual means, yet others only focus on the visual content of the materials. As for the research methodology, some of them use qualitative methods and some others use quantitative techniques. Discourse analysis is used as one of the current approaches through which cultural content is analyzed (Gulliver, 2010). Some studies resort to a more thematic approach when it comes to the analysis of content in the teaching materials (Su, 2007; Wu, 2010). Semiotics has proved to be one of the best approaches to textual analysis, with a focus on structural analysis (Derakhshaan, 2021; Weninger & Kiss, 2013). As an analytic means, the semiotic approach allows the researcher to carry out a discursive examination of how people engage in the communication of meanings using signs (Al-Naimat & Saidat, 2019; Xiong & Hu, 2022).

Indeed, since the majority of EFL textbooks incorporate multimodal texts, one cannot fathom the reasons for scant studies conducted on how textbook images contribute to general learning (Weninger & Kiss, 2015). Researchers can examine intercultural competence along with cultural meaning contained in multimodal textbooks, along with the use of visuals (e.g., photos and pictures) accompanied by texts from a semiotic perspective. More specifically, one can examine the semiotic relationships between pictures and texts in textbooks. Semiotic research is characterized by the in-depth analysis of both text and pictures; this approach implies that the integration of different modalities can make it easier for the learners to construct meanings (Alemi & Jafari, 2012; Kilickaya, 2004; Liu, 2013).

The semiotic perspective seeks to account for how contextual semiotic resources contribute to making meaning (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). This approach is deemed a powerful analytic tool that a researcher can employ in multiple EFL contexts. This requires a consideration of the integration of texts and images and that they are not tied to a fixed meaning. Instead, they represent meaning potentials through their complex interrelations (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Academically, social semeiotics is a subset of semiotics that seeks to account for sense-making as a social practice. It emanates from the merging of structuralist semiotics and Halliday's general functional linguistics (Aiello, 2006). For instance, taking into account functional assessment and multimodality, they have examined the semiotic angles of the perspectives taken by EFL textbooks in a curriculum (Chen, 2010), the systematic ways of representing meanings in visual images contained in EFL textbooks (Guo & Feng, 2015), and the inclusion of

moral values in EFL textbooks (Feng, 2019) through semiotic tools. A strand of research has dealt with the benefits of the application of pictures and visuals in offering contextual clues through which writing, listening (Mueller, 1980; Omaggio, 1979; Rong, 2002), and reading comprehension are facilitated. One more benefit obtained from incorporating pictures in EFL books is the provision of excellent testing prompts; In fact, pictures can be used in the test for changing language structures, vocabulary, functions, situations, and skills to figure out what the student has learned (Canning-Wilson, 1999). In their study, Weninger and Kiss (2013) conducted a thorough analysis of the pictures contained in two Hungarian EFL textbooks in terms of semiotic elements. They concluded that the majority of the analyzed images only conveyed literal meanings; that is, both textual and pictorial elements were used only as a linguistic resource, excluding cultural connotations.

Drawing on the semiotic theory developed by Peirce, great attention has been paid to the examination of image-text-pedagogy combinations by Weninger, and Kiss (2013) to shed light on how guided semiotics unfolds. They maintained that the textual-visual meaning relations in L2 textbooks put too much emphasis on the literal meaning at the cost of cultural connotations. Considering the findings of the studies discussed above and given the importance of textbooks in L2 classes and culture learning on the one hand and the semiotic analysis as a helpful tool in this regard, on the other hand, this review took into account the importance of culture in the textbooks and how the semiotic approach can consider cultural elements through images in EFL textbooks.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 EFL Textbooks***

Textbook means a written media within the class, particularly for the educating-leaning procedure that is a structured, tangible manuscript for education, including various subjects in a particular topic, here, English (Simatupang et al., 2013). A textbook is considered a highly efficient and vital tool in language education and as a tool for indicating cultural and cross-cultural knowledge to EFL students (Byram, 1997). Therefore, examining the FL textbooks regarding their possibility for developing intercultural proficiency can be considered a new scope of study in the textbook assessment area. Scholars (Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997)



commonly hold that research done regarding textbook assessment motivates teachers to avoid impressionistic evaluations, and present well-structured and a proper attitude toward the overall identity of the textbooks and the target-specific characteristics. Textbooks indicate the course plan for educators, according to which they can control their educational advancement (Tomlinson, 2008). In addition, the textbook quality affects the education and learning procedure (Torki & Chalak, 2017). Therefore, evaluating textbooks lets obtain a systematic and precise concept of learning contents (Ellis, 1997).

## **2.2 Culture**

Another element in EFL books is as multiple definitions are suggested for this word which differs from one researcher to another and one field to the other (Duan, 2018; Saluveer, 2004). Conventionally, culture is considered as something described by particular characteristics such as an organization of common comprehensions and a similar identical team (Van Mejlil, 2008). However, anthropology experts describe culture as “the manner a group or individuals live” (Xiao, 2010). The culture was synonymous with civilization in the past; but, over time, such description altered to encompass “anything related to human life (Oguro, 2008). It is highly complicated to explain culture; therefore, culture has numerous definitions as there are numerous scholars, authors, anthropology experts, sociology experts, and those who addressed that notion for years. Culture is comprehensive, prolific, and inevitable (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016). Many linguists considerably propose that culture has to be merged into EFL/ESL educational content, emphasizing that in EFL books culture is vital in absorbing and motivating English learning (Kirkgoz & Agkam, 2011). In addition, representing culture in EFL books is a practical attraction. During trips and businesses, the students must learn about various cultures to guarantee consistent communication. Moreover, it increases the crucial feeling of the learning procedure.

Intercultural competence includes the foreign language learners’ (FLLs) capability to have an acceptable behavior and a resilient way when people encounter activity, viewpoint, or expectations indicating the culture of the target language. Such acceptance and resilience require FLLs to be conscious of the cultural variations between the culture of the first language and the culture of the second language (Meyer, 1991). Educating EFL lessons accompanies various kinds of content and each kind has a particular role in the class, however, books

have the most effective role. Often, books are enriched with subjects, visuals, passages, and language which indicate the course syllabus. Educators depend on books for planning and educating the FL classes to reach the goals of an EFL class. Furthermore, FLL depends on books for linguistic material and models. In addition, books act as the foundation for language input students acquire and the language activity that takes place in the class (Liu, 2013).

Textbooks influence teaching in the classroom and create a baseline for the design of the syllabus. They also serve as a platform for other activities and discussions, and provide a blueprint for inexperienced teachers, accelerating the process of socialization into L2 teaching and learning for learners (Chapelle, 2016). Therefore, textbooks are considered powerful vehicles for making the learners familiar with the target language societies and cultures. The development of the L2 textbook requires intricate political and ideological decisions on the part of both writers and editors (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015; Gray, 2010). The textbook is used as a cultural vehicle coded in an educational context. Therefore, it serves as a means through which the author and publisher approach language, cultural aspects of a language, and learning so that they develop an incorporated image of target language communities and cultures (Gray, 2010).

### ***2.3 Semiotic Approaches to the Study of Culture***

The concept of semiosis emanates from a study carried out by Charles Peirce on signs. As an outstanding semiotics scholar, Peirce put forth the conceptions in the 1860s. These concepts are now employed by discourse analysts to explain how linguistic products and nonlinguistic behavior are analyzed and explained in social interaction (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Semiotics refers to an interdisciplinary examination cutting across all types of communication. In the view of Chandler (2007), semiotics involves the examination of signs that encompasses lexical items, sounds, as well as body language. According to Chandler (2007), semiotics is mainly aimed at examining the meanings, their development, and their association with reality. Given the assumption that it is possible to analyze everything semiotically, Berger (2005) asserts that some semioticians consider semiotics the gem of interpretative studies. No one can separate semiotics and language as they can be combined in various ways. Each lexical item has its own meaning and it is represented by the symbols, i.e., alphabetic signs. Semiotics has emerged as a means for textual analysis. A semiotic approach allows the expert to



clarify the cultural senses generated by task, text, and image. To do so, semiotics adopts a flexible approach without sticking to any single preferred interpretation (Derakhshan, 2021; Weninger & Kiss, 2013).

Accordingly, a semiotic approach serves as an analytic tool used by researchers to carry out a discursive examination of how people convey meanings in the form of signs (Al-Naimat & Saidat, 2019). Such an approach seeks to explain how relative semiotic elements contribute to shaping the process of meaning-making. From a semiotic perspective, there are intricate interrelations between text and image, which is a representation of “meaning potential”. None of the meanings are fixed; that is, they hinge on their context this contextual interpretation is done through semiosis (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Moreover, social semiotics is concerned with the establishment of meaning by making use of semiotic modes, such as verbal and non-verbal texts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Visuals used as the semiotic representations of meaning-making have been the subject of growing interest in social semiotics. According to Jewitt and Oyama (2001), as far as social semiotics is concerned with communication, visual communication deals with describing semiotic resources, the things we can do and say about images, as well as how what individuals say or do with images can be interpreted.

### **3. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

Learning a second language, e.g., English has an essential role in the growth and maturation of learners and it also yields some results such as intellectual growth, the promotion of creativity and critical thinking, and expanding learners' perspectives on cultures. L2 learning programs are always aimed at enabling the learners to achieve goals other than the main four skills, namely, reading, speaking, and writing. That is learning culture through textbooks that incorporate cultural elements, using visuals, textual techniques, and task modes. The combination of these resources seems to make it easier for the cultural knowledge to be conveyed to learners either intentionally or intuitively (Yonata et al., 2016). Based on the review of literature, textbooks serve as a helpful medium for the conveyance of social and cultural values and elements (Gray, 2010). The production and use of these elements are influenced by several social factors and developments. The choices (linguistic, semiotic, and pedagogical) are not made arbitrarily; that is, they are ideologically determined, allowing the analysts to

track the traces of value-charged meanings within different contexts, including political, social, and cultural ones (Gray, 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Additionally, evaluation constitutes an important component of any L2 program, which looks into individual or social value systems driven by in-depth conviction (Thompson & Hunston, 2001). More specifically, evaluation can be deemed as the description of the lecturer or author's perspective, position, or feelings regarding what he/she is talking about (Prpić, 2009). Accordingly, EFL teachers are required to deeply assess the cultural contents of teaching materials, including textbooks, as these materials are likely to influence EFL students' awareness of the target culture. The underrepresentation of cultural elements may undermine the efforts made to enrich the learners' aptitude to interconnect in the target language. While learning EFL/ESL, learners need to know the cultural elements to understand linguistic and cultural messages so that they can cope with other cultures. Semiotic analysis has to do with the examination of how one interprets all cultural facets of human beings. These cultural aspects can be used to work out the linguistic symbols contained in EFL textbooks. The semiotic approach concentrates on multimodality and the examination of a semiotic framework made up of texts, pictures, and learning tasks (Kress, 2010). This type of analysis deals with how meaning is made based on the cultural contents. Thanks to the use of semiotics, learners can appreciate and obtain the wisdom associated with moral stories; moreover, this approach enables them to grasp life better, which, in turn, they come to know the unalienable values associated with various cultures (Nabifar & Baghermousavi, 2015).

Furthermore, this review should be viewed as a resource for teachers who use the English textbook along with the images or symbols in the process of their teaching. Indeed, they would benefit from adopting semiotics in English by using instructional media (e.g., textbooks consisting of instructive visuals or symbols). These tools make it easier for the learners to grasp the subject. Regarding L2 instruction and learning, texts accompanied by visuals facilitate meaning-making in textbooks. Theoretically, visuals help students to visualize the reading content, providing them with ample examples, contextual cues, and helpful information. As far as the interpersonal aspect is concerned, visuals facilitate the readers' interactions with the texts (Chen, 2010). There is a consensus that pictures bear their own meaning besides their main function, i.e. as the illustrations of a text, so that they can be "read" independently (Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017).

Furthermore, learners' understanding of the semiotic relations among the text, picture, and learning task rarely pushes them to pinpoint new cultural elements on their own. The visual analysis through semiotic approach is responsible for a comprehensive and explicit method for analyzing the meaning proven by the relationships between individuals, places, and things represented in images (van Leeuwen, 2005). So this makes it easier for the learners to make meaning, engage in critical discussions and enhance their ICC development.

Moreover, the textbooks contain adequate cultural content, but its potential often is not materialized, particularly when there is no task manipulation or teacher's intervention that can facilitate cultural insight. In the same vein, the textbook must not be the sole teaching tool so tasks also should be flexible to cater to the cultural content. Accordingly, EFL teachers are highly advised to choose textbooks by taking into account the appealing nature of the visual elements, as some of them are counterproductive. Moreover, teachers should focus on the interaction between multiple aspects of local, target, and global cultures while using visual materials in ELT textbooks. As a result, ELT textbook writers must incorporate appealing visual materials and design supplementary materials that represent the intended issues. To this end, appropriate activities and tasks must be developed which take into account semiotic connection mediated by the link between images and texts. Based on the function of culture in the process of learning, the ELT material developers are advised to benefit from more culturally applicable and appealing visuals corresponding to texts and tasks that strengthens iconic/symbolic association.

As far as EFL tasks are concerned, a textbook serves as a vehicle to convey cultural elements by bridging language and culture materials (Toprak & Aksoyalp, 2014). A well-developed textbook in terms of cultural representation strikes a good balance between the cultural components represented in the EFL textbooks and EFL teachers and learners' possible misconceptions of the target culture. A review of related literature indicates that despite the progress made in terms of the presentation of cultural elements and values, the textbooks and tasks suffer from poor arrangement and design; therefore, they fail to raise cultural awareness. This can bring about potential and serious problems (e.g., underrepresentation of cultural groups, no cultural diversity, improper use of visuals for decorative purposes, and the irrelevance of images to learners, among others). As a result, educators, teachers, curriculum designers, and textbook

designers involved in ELT need a systematic and adaptive framework or tool through which they can analyze, and ultimately incorporate values in the materials that to this end, the researcher of this study intends to conduct a study to consider the issue through empirical study and by implementing a semiotic approach to evaluate the Chinese EFL textbook from the perspectives of students, teachers and teacher educators.

Education policymakers, language schools and institutions, and academics must be aware that organizing teacher training workshops on a continuous basis and holding pre-service and in-service programs for the enhancement of teaching skills play a vital role in producing interculturally competent learners. This helps them to guide their learners to gain effective ICC in their interactions. The present study yields useful insights for textbook designers, illustrators, L2 instructors, and L2 learners. Designers and illustrators should be cognizant of the fact that their selection of visuals can enhance the information given by the text. They should focus on the functions of pictures (i.e., information, illustration, or decoration) to raise their students' cultural awareness.

Despite the fact that one can interpret the signs in the text in multiple ways, and various meanings can be derived, depending on the reader's viewpoint, the focus of this review is on the semiotics approach that considers both images and texts as a semiotic component. However, more conceptual studies can be conducted correspondingly to focus on other approaches. Although this study seeks to focus on the potential role of meanings of the images, it also deals with the actual interpretations made by students; the ways in which pictures are currently used in textbooks; and how teachers can be trained to address this issue in the classroom. This review intended to shed light on the potential meanings of images in textbooks, yet empirical research is still needed to confirm it.

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