

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social And Cultural Issues in Some EFL Textbooks in Korea

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine whether EFL textbooks in Korea contain cultural and social biases and if so, what kind of issues are present. I selected three most commonly used English textbooks in public middle schools and private middle schools across South Korea. I found that particular social and cultural biases are ingrained in these textbooks.

English Education in Korea

Kachru (1988) divided countries into three types with regards to their use of English. Korea is included in the *expanding circle*, which includes countries that have not undergone a colonial period under the control of *inner circle* countries, countries such as England and the United States where English is the primary



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society, and global etiquette were newly added to the contents of the English curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2011, p. 4).

Given these new emphases on the cultural aspects of foreign language learning, an important question is how culture is represented in the current textbooks. Previously, Francis (1995) already noted that textbooks typically contain representations of a culture and its social identifications. This study aims to ascertain some of the cultural and social identifications in EFL textbooks in Korea. These issues are important in language teaching because language learning may go hand in hand with and identity development and transformation may go hand in hand. Before I discuss cultural elements in textbooks, I will first review the relationship between language and identity.

Language And Identity

Wardhaugh (2010) pointed out that “language is a profound indicator of identity, more potent by far than cultural artifact such as dress, food choices, and table manners” (p. 7). A number of factors impact on identity: race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, physical location, social class, kinship, leisure activities, and so on. An identity can be also

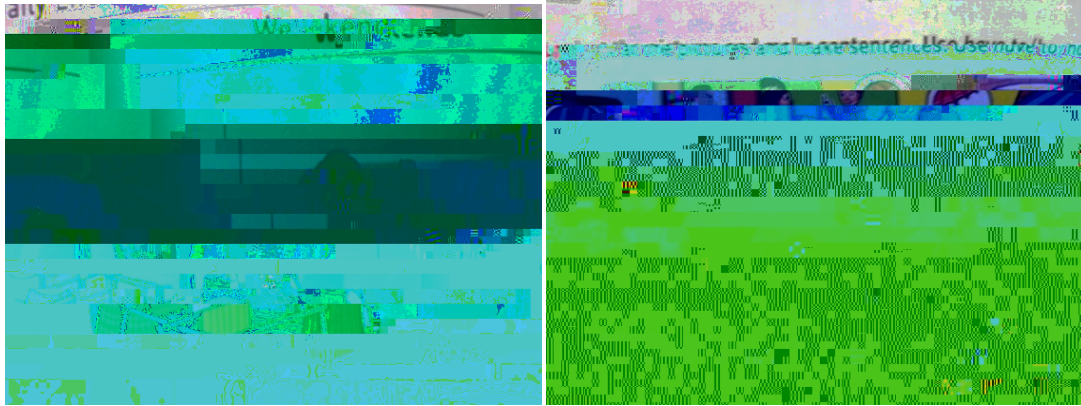


Figure 2. Gender role I: Housewife (J. Lee et al., 2009, p, 42, p,72)

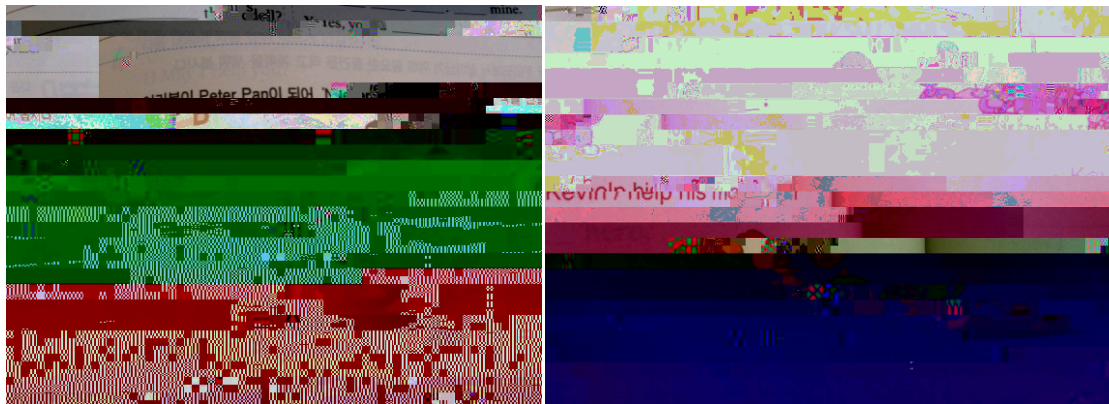


Figure 3. Gender role I: Housewife (Jang et al., 2009, pp. 94, 123)

As shown in Table 1 and Figures 1-3, the textbooks often present the image of a woman as a housewife. The identical description of a mother in the three textbooks is a woman who wears an apron, does house chores, and fixes meals for her children. The three textbooks tend to portray the role of a housewife through images of not necessarily mothers but women in general as well.

The second gender stereotype commonly found in the textbooks pertains to outdoor activities for each gender. The theme that the three textbooks used the most is sports. Table 1 shows the frequency of images related to playing sports, such as playing basketball and baseball. However, there is a great difference

in using each gender to illustrate sport activities. While there are forty-two (67%) images of a male playing a sport, there are twenty-one (33%) images of a female playing a sport in the textbooks. The two textbooks by Doosan Education (B. Lee et al., 2009) and Neungyule Education (Jang et al., 2009) contain male images related to playing a sport approximately twice more than female images related to playing a sport. The textbook by Chunjae Education (J. Lee et al., 2009) uses ten male illustrations related to playing a sport while nine female images related to playing a sport. The textbook by Neungyule Education (Jang et al., 2009) seems to contain balanced gender roles in its images.

Not only the ratio of images of a female playing a sport is barely half that of male images, but also the type of a sport relates to each gender is obviously biased. While the sports that the male characters play are team sports, such as soccer, basketball, and baseball, most sports related to female characters are non-team sports, such as running and jogging.

Only one image of female basketball players is found in the textbook by J. Lee et al., 2009. In order to examine whether certain activities or occupations are biased to a typical gender, some activities and occupations are categorized in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2
Gender Role in Activities

Activities	Male	Female	Male and Female
Computing	7	1	2
Dancing	1	3	1
Watching TV	4	3	4
Watching a movie	0	2	1
Shopping	0	4	5
Playing an instrument	6	3	0
Phoning	0	8	1
Painting	2	0	1
Cooking	1	0	1

Table 3
Gender Role in Occupations
Occupations

Figure 6. Gender role II: English teacher (J. Lee et al., 2009, p. 26)

Kachru (1986) pointed out that the number of non-native English speakers is higher than the number of native English speakers in the world. Although English is not used solely by people in North America, all three EFL textbooks use only English names and Romanized Korean names.

forum, roughly two

Conclusion

Textbooks are the primary material used in teaching a foreign language and language and culture are inseparable. Valdes (1986) claimed that teaching a foreign language without its cultural content is practically impossible. This preliminary study sought to identify the cultural and social aspects in some Korean EFL textbooks. I have shown that gender roles are obviously stereotyped in the textbooks. Moreover, a social aspect of an ideal English teacher is described as Caucasian. It actually reflects a part of Korean society toward its preference for Caucasian English teachers. According to an informal poll on Waygook.org, an online English teacher

