An evaluation of the intercultural orientation of secondary English textbooks in Vietnam: How well are students prepared to communicate in global contexts?

Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh and Cao Thi Hong Phuong

V. C. Le, T. M. H. Nguyen, T. T. M. Nguyen, & R. Bernard (Eds.), Building teacher capacity in Vietnamese English language teaching: Research, policy and practice (pp. 150-165).

Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Copyright © 2019 Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Building teacher capacity in Vietnamese English language teaching: Research, policy and practice on 6 August 2019, available online: http://www.routledge.com/9780429457371
An evaluation of the intercultural orientation of secondary English textbooks in Vietnam: How well are students prepared to communicate in global contexts?

Minh Thi Thuy Nguyen

Phuong Hong Cao

Background

With the global spread of English as a means of international communication, there is an increasing demand for people in non-English speaking countries to learn and master the language. In the particular context of Vietnam, recognizing the benefits of the English language for the country and its citizens in the world arena, the government has recently launched an English language education initiative, known as National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (NFLP 2020), in order to enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning in the national education system. An objective of the project is to enable school learners to become effective English language users who can function successfully in multilingual and multicultural environments (Le & Do, 2012). This is expressed in the most recent National English Language Draft Syllabus, which states that English language education should aim at “providing learners with an important means of international communication, which will enable them […] to explore different cultures, hence contributing to building mutual understanding among nations and developing their own capacity as global citizens.” (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2018, p. 3).

Nonetheless, despite the strong emphasis placed on global cultural awareness and intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2011) in the English language education policy of Vietnam, it is observed that monocultural and monolingual norms still largely underpin actual teaching and assessment practices. In the Framework of Foreign Language Proficiency for Vietnam (MOET, 2014), for example, ‘native speaker (NS) standards’ are often referenced as the benchmark for evaluating English users in Vietnam while other varieties are not considered (Ho & Nguyen, this volume). Similarly, multiculturalism is barely portrayed in instructional materials, while British English models and norms of communication are over-emphasized (Dang & Seals, 2018). These practices, however, cannot adequately prepare learners to communicate in the context of globalization and multiculturalism where English users are not only from Anglophone countries but can come from all different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As plausibly pointed out by Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 11), in such a context, “it is not possible to anticipate all the knowledge one might need in interacting with people of other cultures”. Therefore, it would be more beneficial for learners if, in addition to knowledge about one particular ‘NS’ variety of English, they are also equipped with a broader repertoire of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes to help them interact and “develop (…) human relationship[s]” with people of more diverse languages and cultures (Byram et al., 2002, p.7).

Aim and rationales of the study

As part of the NFLP 2020, a series of new English textbooks have been developed for use in schools nationwide in order to renovate teaching practices and cultivate students’ abilities to
communicate effectively in intercultural situations (Hoang, 2016). The goal of our chapter is hence to examine the extent to which these books enable teachers to achieve the aim of developing competent intercultural speakers in order to recommend implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in the context of Vietnam. Intercultural speakers, as defined by Byram et al. (2002, pp. 9-10), are mediators between cultures who understand intercultural human relationships and are able to engage with multiple norms and perspectives, seeing such interaction as an enriching experience. Our analysis will be centered on the Project’s upper-secondary school English textbooks, which have not yet been investigated in previous research (Dang & Seals, 2018, evaluated primary-level textbooks).

Our focus on textbook evaluation stems from the fact that although textbooks are the “visible heart of any ELT programme” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237), research has repeatedly shown that they do not adequately prepare learners to communicate in a multicultural, highly diversified and globalised world (Hu & McKay, 2014; Kiss, 2018; Nguyen, 2011). Although globalisation has radically expanded the communicative needs of English learners, textbooks still tend to privilege NS cultural norms and values over other cultural practices, thus failing to raise learners’ awareness of multiple perspectives inherent in intercultural communication and prepare them to cope with this diversity (Dang & Seals, 2018; Shin, Eslami & Chen, 2011; Syrbe & Rose, 2016). Textbooks have also been found to present a monolithic, static view of culture (Syrbe & Rose, 2016), which may lead to “overly simplistic and stereotypical understandings of (…) cultures and people”, thus hindering rather than aiding communication across cultures (Baker, 2015, p. 134). These findings are not surprising, given the mismatch between textbooks and theories of language learning and teaching often reported in the literature (see Tomlinson, 2016 for a collection of studies around this issue). This indicates that textbooks need to be carefully evaluated before being adopted for a language programme. Textbook evaluation can help teachers select the most appropriate books for their teaching purposes and students’ learning objectives. In the case of prescribed textbooks, such as the NFLP 2020 textbooks, textbook evaluation will also help inform teachers of the strengths and weaknesses of the books and thus assist them in the process of textbook adaptation.

**An intercultural approach to teaching English as a lingua franca**

As stated earlier, successful communication in the globalised context requires more than knowledge of the target language culture. It requires that learners acquire intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC), or the ability to ensure mutual understanding among people of different language and cultural backgrounds and to communicate effectively and appropriately with one another as “complex human beings with multiple identities and [our] own individuality” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 10). The notion of ICC has emerged over the past years to respond to the criticism that the conventional model of communicative competence (CC) has become inadequate in accounting for language learning and use in intercultural situations, and therefore there is a need for an alternative pedagogic model (Alptekin, 2002; Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013; Byram & Wagner, 2018; McKay, 2002).

The CC model emphasises that learners need to develop not only knowledge of the grammar of the target language, but also the ability to use this knowledge to communicate meanings appropriately for purpose, audience and social contexts in the target language setting (Canale & Swain, 1980). In other words, learning to use a second language is equated to learning
to express oneself in the way that is appropriate for the cultural values and ideologies of the people who speak the language. However, as Alptekin (2002) has pointed out, the CC model with its standardized NS norms is based on the monolithic perception of language and culture, which is simply flawed, as there is no single correct and appropriate way to use English. The CC model also tends to neglect the lingua franca status of the English language and the fact that NS norms may not be at all relevant in intercultural communication involving multilingual English users of different languages and cultures, for whom the ability to understand one another is more essential for successful communication than conformity to the cultural norms of the target language community. As such, it has become clear that the monolingual English-speaking model is inadequate to meet the communicative needs of learners in the globalised context, who learn English not to become similar to English NSs but to use the language effectively for specific communication purposes in local and international settings, while preserving their own cultural identities (Canagarajah, 2006).

In a similar vein, Byram et al. (2002, p. 9) have indicated that the assumption that the aim of language learning is to “imitate a native speaker both in linguistic competence, in knowledge of what is ‘appropriate’ language, and in knowledge about a country and its ‘culture’” represents simplistic understandings of social identity based solely on national origins. This simplification disregards the multiplicity and fluidity of identity. As further explained by Byram et al. (2002), although we acquire our cultural values, beliefs and behaviors through growing up in our cultural community, we do not have only one identity. On the contrary, we are all different individuals with distinctive perspectives and qualities, which constantly develop and expand as we enter a new social group. However, by assuming that learning a language means becoming like a person from the culture speaking that language, the CC model necessarily “reduces the individual from a complex human being to someone who is representative of a country or ‘culture’”, seeing them through a single identity (Byram et al., 2002., p. 9). This may lead to generalisations and stereotypical assumptions, which can undermine mutual understanding and impede our communication with other people.

Unlike the CC model, the ICC model does not assume such a static and stereotyped view of language, identity and culture. On the contrary, it emphasises the importance of developing an awareness that people have different social identities, and the corresponding ability to engage with such complexity and multiple perspectives in intercultural interaction (Byram et al., 2002). To this end, the ICC model proposes that instead of being imposed with the unrealistic idea that they should acquire the NS competence, learners need to develop intercultural awareness that is more useful for successful communication across diverse linguacultural boundaries. According to Byram (1997), this awareness includes: the understanding that appropriateness of norms is culturally relative, and openness to other cultures (savoir être); knowledge about other cultures and how one’s own culture is likely perceived by other cultural communities (savoirs); ability to see things from a different cultural perspective and evaluate how differences might give rise to misunderstanding (savoir comprendre); ability to acquire new knowledge about other cultures and to apply this knowledge to real-life communication (savoir apprendre/ faire); and critical awareness of self and other (savoir s’engager).

In order to support learners in developing the above savoirs, the ICC emphasises the need to bring together materials from different origins to create a ‘sphere of interculturality’ (Kramsch, 1993) in which learners are encouraged to compare and critically reflect on cultural materials with
different perspectives to develop self-awareness and awareness of others (Byram et al., 2002). An example of how this can be done in the classroom includes getting students to compare texts about how a specific issue is dealt with in two different societies to help them learn to consider the same issue from different perspectives, thereby avoiding presumptions and enhancing awareness of ideological pluralisms (Muller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2007). Another example is analysis of texts for implicit meanings and ideologies to encourage learners to engage with texts critically and develop the ability to identify and challenge cultural biases (Byram et al., 2002). As strongly stressed by Byram et al. (2002), the ICC approach to materials is always inclusive and critical.

**Teachers’ use of instructional materials**

Textbooks are an important source of language input and cultural knowledge in most foreign-language teaching contexts, and can exert a major influence on learners’ language and cultural ideologies. However, they do not necessarily present a neutral view of social reality, but more often present selective forms of knowledge suited to authors’ and publishers’ interpretations of this reality (Ilieva, 2018). Although teachers need to develop a critical stance toward textbook use so that they can exploit the textbook in a way that does not limit but enrich students’ learning experience and empowers them as critical text consumers and producers, research has indicated that this is not always the case (e.g. Forman, 2014; Grossman & Thompson, 2008). Tomlinson (2012), for example, notes that while experienced teachers are not constrained by prescribed textbooks and often adapt teaching materials to suit the needs of their students, novice teachers tend to view textbooks as an absolute authority and rely heavily on textbooks for guidance. Similarly, Grossman and Thompson (2008) have shown that beginning teachers’ classroom practices are largely shaped by teaching materials; however, as their knowledge of students and the curriculum grows, they become better aware of the need to adapt the materials.

An important explanation for the new teachers’ tendency to uncritically ‘latch onto’ textbooks is the lack of adequate training during pre-service education, which seems to limit their experience with materials analysis and adaptation for real classroom teaching (Grossman & Thompson, 2008). As such, it is important that teachers have opportunities to critically reflect on curriculum materials not only during pre-service training but also as part of their continuing professional development (Grossman & Thompson, 2008). When teachers develop practical knowledge and strategies to use textbook resources for context-appropriate teaching, they can successfully centre the NS-based resources prescribed in textbooks and provide learners with opportunities to learn beyond the scope of these resources (Yu, 2018).

Since teachers’ beliefs and values can determine how they engage with teaching materials, thereby having an effect on students’ learning (Grossman & Thompson, 2008; Nguyen, 2013), it is also important that teachers become aware of their own values and perspectives, and challenge their own stereotypes (Byram et al., 2002). With specific respect to the context of English as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2001), that would mean developing the awareness that textbooks presenting only voices and values of the target language community are biased and unhelpful in fostering intercultural sensitivity and respect for cultural pluralism. Consequently, teachers need to ensure the use of inclusive materials that reflect multiple perspectives and voices and engage their learners in discussion of the materials from critical perspectives in order to enable them to develop as intercultural citizens who understand the subtleties and complexities involved in
intercultural interaction (Ndura, 2004). As discussed by Byram et al. (2002), the aim of teaching ICC after all is not to transmit cultural information because culture is not static and teachable as a set of separate facts. Rather, it is about raising learners’ awareness of the dynamic processes of intercultural interaction and how one’s beliefs and perceptions about oneself and others may influence the outcome of these processes.

**The present study**

**Research questions**

In light of the above discussions, our chapter aims to evaluate the extent to which the NFLP 2020’s secondary textbooks support students in developing intercultural awareness for communication with people from different first language backgrounds in the context of globalisation and multiculturalism. Specifically, based on Byram et al.’s (2002) discussion of materials to promote intercultural learning discussed above, we focus on two particular issues: (1) the use of inclusive materials from an intercultural and critical perspectives and (2) the depiction of culture itself in the books.

Concerning the first issue, we ask to what extent materials from different origins are included in the books and what students are expected to do with these materials. That is, whether they are given opportunities to relate the materials to their real-life experiences and analyse the materials for deep-level cultural learning, or are they positioned as passive recipients of one-way transmission of information without opportunities to compare and analyse the materials critically to develop awareness of self and others.

Regarding the second issue, we ask whether the books present a static or dynamic view of cultures (whether culture is depicted as invariable and unchanging, or as fluid and complex) and to what extent multiple cultural values and ideologies are represented.

**The books**

The textbook series analysed in our chapter included three books *English 10*, *English 11*, and *English 12*, and their accompanying audio material, which were intended for Vietnamese Grade 10 (aged 16), Grade 11 (aged 17), and Grade 12 (aged 18) students. As stated in the books’ prefaces, the books adopted a theme-based curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and Training. This curriculum placed a strong emphasis on developing students’ communicative competence, intercultural awareness, sense of global citizenship, and knowledge and appreciation of the Vietnamese language and culture. Each book contained 10 teaching units to be taught over a period of 105 instructional hours, with three hours per week. The books’ various sections were focused on developing students’ linguistic competence, communication skills, and cross-cultural knowledge, including knowledge about the Vietnamese culture, and cultures of Anglophone and other ASEAN countries.
Analysis

Following the analytical procedures of Weninger & Kiss (2013) and Kiss (2018) for examining cultural contents in ELT materials, the units of analysis for our textbook analysis were both texts and pedagogical tasks accompanying them. Our coding categories, adapted from previous textbook studies (e.g. Hu & McKay, 2014; Syrbe & Rose, 2016), included directly observable items such as types of cultural contexts described (local, Anglophone/Western, other Asian, or cross-cultural), task requirements (comprehension-based versus analytical and reflective), and depiction of culture (as fixed Anglophone cultures versus as fluid global cultures) and cultural values (Anglophone/Western versus local). With regards to the coding of cultural contexts, note that our analysis did not make a distinction between Anglophone and other Western contexts because speakers’ national identities were not always provided, making it impossible to assign them to one culture or another. For practicality’s sake, hence, we considered both speakers’ groups together.

The data analysis procedures were as follows. First, we tested the coding categories on two units (Unit 1 and Unit 2) in English 10 book and modified the categories iteratively until they fitted the data completely and no further modifications were needed. The second author then used the finalised scheme to independently code the remainder of the data. Her coding was finally cross-checked by the first author and discrepancies in coding results were discussed until consensus was reached.

Findings and Discussion

Inclusiveness of cultures and promotion of intercultural awareness

As discussed earlier, in order to promote intercultural awareness among students, it is important that materials from different origins and with different perspectives be used together and students be invited to reflect upon these materials through different lenses (Byram et al., 2002; Kramsch, 1993). Consequently, our first research question focuses on whether the books are inclusive of a variety of cultures and enable students to critically engage with the cultural material to support their intercultural learning.

Our analysis shows that although a wide range of cultural contexts were present in the books, these contents were not equally represented. Cultural contents related to Anglophone/Western contexts and local contexts received the most attention, respectively contributing to 36% and 27% of all three books’ contents. On the other hand, features related to other Asian (e.g. China, Japan, and ASEAN nations) and cross-cultural contexts were seriously under-represented (11% and 9% of the books’ contents respectively).

The prevalence of Anglo-American/Western cultural contents is not unexpected and corroborates previous ELT textbook evaluation research (e.g. Hu & McKay, 2014; Shin et al., 2011; Sybre & Rose, 2016). However, the strong emphasis on the local context is a very much welcomed feature of this textbook series. As stated earlier, learners in multilingual contexts often study English for a designated purpose such as for higher education, work or travel, rather than to replace their first language and culture. In cross-cultural situations, English language may also be used as a vehicle for multilingual speakers to express who they are culturally. Thus, the provision of topics related to students’ own country and culture can equip them with not only knowledge of
their own cultural contexts, but also linguistic means required for communicating about their country, people and culture. As several scholars have plausibly argued, intercultural awareness involves not only acquiring knowledge about another culture but importantly an understanding of one’s own culture in relation to another, as in learning about another culture, one requires knowledge of one’s own culture (Kramsch, 1993; McKay, 2002). Textbooks with localised input are therefore helpful in promoting this perspective.

Nonetheless, the paucity of the Asian contexts may invite criticism. As pointed out by Vietnamese scholars such as Ton and Pham (2010), in the past twenty years the need to learn English in Vietnam has been motivated by the influx of foreign investment from several Asian countries such as Singapore, Hongkong and Malaysia. As such, it can be anticipated that for Vietnamese learners of English, knowledge of regional countries is of no less importance than learning about Anglophone cultures. In order to prepare students to use English in this intercultural context, it is therefore important that Asian countries and cultures be represented more equally in instructional materials. A larger proportion of the cultural contents should also be related to cross-cultural contexts in which materials of different origins and with different perspectives are juxtaposed and examined so that students’ intercultural awareness can be enhanced. Such learning experiences are essential to enable learners to act as mediators between cultures, who are capable of negotiating mutliple perspectives, yet without losing their identities (Byram, 2003).

With regard to how cultural contents were treated and whether students were offered opportunities to engage with the material in a meaningful way, our analysis of text-based tasks indicates both strengths and limitations. The strengths lie in the plethora of tasks provided in each unit to enable students to relate the material to their own daily life and the wider local society (80% of all tasks accompanying cultural material). A typical example is the text-based tasks found in English 11 Unit 3, “Generation gap”. This unit appeals to Vietnamese students because it affords them multiple opportunities to associate their real world experiences and cultural knowledge of local family structure and dynamics. At the beginning of the unit, students listen to two foreign speakers, Sam and Ann, exchanging their opinions about generation gap and family relationships. After answering some factual questions about the text, students have a chance to share their experience living in a nuclear or an extended family and what they like and dislike about each type of family. In the subsequent Reading section, there is a text about conflict between parents and teenage children, which is again followed by comprehension-based activities and pair-work discussion, e.g. “Do you get into conflict with your parents? Share your experience with your partner.” Students subsequently have a chance to discuss how conflict in their family might arise out of generation gap, and how it could be resolved, using ideas and language input provided in the Speaking and Listening sections. In the Writing section, students write a letter about their family rules to an imagined English friend who is going to stay with their family on a cultural homestay programme. Then in Communication and Culture, they read a text about the rise of multi-generational households in the USA and the UK, answer factual questions, and subsequently discuss current family trends in Vietnam. At the end of the unit, students conduct an interview with other teenagers about their intergenerational conflict experience and report the results to the class. It is noted that the remainder of units across the three books were designed in the same manner. That is, apart from tasks aiming to check students’ understanding of factual information (20% of the tasks), there were always explicit efforts to involve students’ personal relevant experience in relation to the material in order to enable them to use English to describe their local
experiences in intra-/international communication (see Xu, 2013 for a similar discussion on this point).

On the other hand, the limitations of the books mainly concern the absence of tasks that enable students to critically engage with more profound cultural values and ideologies implicitly embedded in the material. In all three books, cultural contents were primarily presented as factual information about countries, places, people, practices, and cultural artefacts, which was subsequently used as a basis for students to express their own culture (see above). However, there was no attempt to encourage students to move beyond the texts’ surface for deeper cultural meanings. Unit 1 in *English 10* represents such a missed opportunity. In *Getting Started*, students are presented a conversation between a teenager and his uncle about the different ways in which household duties are divided in their families. In the teenager’s family, both parents work, and hence, the chores are split equally among all family members, whereas in his uncle’s family, the wife handles all the chores because the husband is responsible for the household finances. Students are subsequently asked to indicate their understanding of the conversation by deciding the truthfulness of a number of statements about the conversation. In follow-up activities, students are guided to identify meanings of new lexical items occurring in the conversation, and finally discuss with their friends how household duties are shared among members of their families. It is clear that the focus of these activities is on language development, not cultural learning. Hence, although the discussion might effectively enable students to associate their relevant experiences in a meaningful way, more could yet be done to promote critical cultural awareness. For example, students could be guided to compare the two types of household depicted in the conversation, and discuss the changing beliefs and values about gender roles that underlie household labour division in many modern Vietnamese families. Such a discussion not only enables students to examine and challenge their own assumptions and stereotypes, but also helps them see cultural values not as static but contestable and negotiable.

A similar example can be found in Unit 7 of the same book. In *Getting Started*, students listen to two Western speakers discussing Vietnamese traditional and modern weddings, and answer comprehension questions about the conversation. In fact, this text could effectively be used for students to discuss how Vietnamese cultural practices and values might be seen from an outsider’s perspective, thereby critically reflecting upon their culture in relation to others. Students could also be invited to challenge some generalisations made by the speakers (e.g. parents pay for their adult children’s weddings and guests give money as presents) and suggest another perspective. Unfortunately, however, throughout the books, there was a lack of conscious effort to engage students in such learning experience (see Shin et al., 2011 for similar discussions).

**Depictions of culture and cultural values**

According to Liddicoat (2001), although culture is always dynamic, it is, unfortunately, more often than not seen through a static lens in language education. This static view treats culture as unvarying, and cultural knowledge as discrete facts which can be transmitted in the way we acquire factual information. Emerging models of culture, however, view culture as a set of variable practices which can be enacted differently by individual members of the culture and continually created and recreated as they participate in interaction with other members. In this sense, cultural knowledge is not about learning facts about another culture, but knowing how to engage with it (Liddicoat, 2001). This view of culture is considered more capable of representing cultural
variability and dynamics in postmodern globalisation, and thus, has increasingly been advocated in ELT pedagogy (Xu, 2013). On the other hand, the fact-based approach to culture has been criticised for its simplification and incapability to account for cultural diversity and fluidity in intercultural interaction (Fang, 2011).

Notwithstanding this criticism, the fact-based approach still finds its way into many ELT textbooks (Shin et al., 2011; Sybre & Rose, 2016). This also holds true for the books examined in our study. We found that cultures were largely portrayed in these books as monolithic entities which are invariable and impermeable. Although there were some multicultural depictions (e.g. Singapore is a multicultural society; Vietnam has over fifty ethnic groups, etc.), it is observed that stereotypical, inflexible presentations of countries and people (e.g. Vietnamese people strongly believe in life after death; Americans holds high values about hard work and self-reliance) were more typical (12 out of 16 instances in which countries and cultures are mentioned). Such depictions actively contribute to the myth of cultural homogeneity (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2011) and hence are deemed untenable in today’s globalised world, where global and local norms come into frequent contact and are constantly negotiated. As noted by Canagarajah (2006), the strong ‘transcultural flows’ between nations have entailed an increasing hybridity of languages, communities and cultures. As such, cultures can change, be shaped, negotiated, and recreated “in each instance of communication” (Sybre & Rose, 2016, p. 10). Unfortunately, this dynamic, fluid, and negotiated aspect of culture was not sufficiently emphasised in the books to help raise students’ awareness of the complexities, yet adaptability and malleability of ‘doing culture’ in globalised communication.

Another noteworthy finding regarding the depiction of culture in the examined books is the biased representation of cultural values and ideologies in favor of Anglo-American countries. As with previous studies (e.g. Babaii & Sheikh, 2018; Hu & McKay, 2014) we found in the contents of these books various examples in which qualities and values often identified with the West were openly valorised. In a listening text in Unit 3 English 11, for example, two Vietnamese students are heard to discuss how they admire a common friend for being independent, self-reliant, and confident — i.e. values that are mostly associated with individualism-oriented societies but are less emphasised in a collectivism-oriented society such as Vietnam. On the other hand, values often associated with collectivism-oriented cultures such as interdependence, involvement and modesty are barely portrayed. The fact that externally-imposed values are depicted as being embraced rather than approached from a critical perspective by Vietnamese young people represents a clear case of ‘inculcation’ which has been s in current ELT scholarship (Fairclough, 2001). As such, instead of empowering students to engage with the material from an intercultural perspective, the books tend to position them as passive recipients of the ‘hidden curriculum’.

In another example, cross-cultural materials with different perspectives are used, not to engage students in critical cultural awareness, but to celebrate American values. In a text discussing parenting practices across cultures (Unit 3 English 11), American parents are depicted as liberal and respectful of their children’s autonomy (e.g. teaching children to live independently, showing respect for them, letting them voice their opinions, etc.) — in other words, a parenting style that is generally deemed progressive and endorsed in the modern Western philosophy of education. These practices are placed in direct juxtaposition with Vietnamese parenting styles which are depicted in a less positive light such as being protective and authoritarian (e.g. providing for children, but seldom asking for children’s opinions), thus subtly ‘othering’ the Vietnamese
parenting values as inferior and less desirable. A similar example was found in a text describing what success means to the Vietnamese as opposed to the Americans (Unit 7 English 10). While the American culture is positively portrayed as valuing self-made and self-driven individuals (“success is the result of hard work and self-reliance”), the Vietnamese culture is portrayed, apparently in a much less favorable light, as placing more value on superficial things such as wealth and status when defining success. Strikingly, however, in none of the tasks accompanying these texts students are invited to challenge the generalisations and offer an alternative perspective on the issues discussed.

It should also be noted that many of the exonormative values popularized in the books can be difficult for local students to associate because they may not exist at all in the local cultural schemas. For example, in one unit students are asked to discuss whether they should take a gap year after secondary school to explore their future options, despite that this concept may be totally foreign to students’ lived experiences. Also, although the discussion involves local students, the book presents an image of a Western teenager traveling the world and holding a signboard in his hand which says “A world of opportunities. Take a gap year” (Unit 3 English 11). Such presentations tend to promote an outgroup’s perspective, while disregarding students’ own cultural experiences, and hence are likely to alienate them and make them feel marginalised.

In sum, as indicated by many scholars, textbooks are “carrier of cultures and ideologies” (Xu, 2013, p. 5). In the case of the books examined in our study, these cultures and ideologies appeared to be dominantly Western-based. Obviously, if textbooks are to promote respect for diversity and empower students to function effectively in the context of globalisation and multiculturalism without losing the sense of who they are culturally, it is imperative that no single cultural and ideological stance be afforded a dominant position (Xu, 2013). Instead, students should be made aware of pluralistic ideologies, and allowed to draw on their multilingual resources to negotiate these diversities and express their subjectivity.

**Implications and conclusion**

An important objective of the Vietnamese government’s NFLP 2020 is to develop intercultural language users who can successfully participate in global contexts. Our study therefore aimed to evaluate to what extent this objective has been achieved in the Project’s upper-secondary school ELT textbooks. We have found that despite an attempt to globalise their cultural contents, the books do not fully enable teachers to develop intercultural awareness among their students.

First, although intercultural communication in the context of English as a lingua franca involves a wide spectrum of speakers from vastly diverse backgrounds, the books tend to focus merely on preparing students to use English for communication with Anglophone/ Western English users. This is seen in the inclusion of a greater proportion of texts about Anglo-American/ Western cultures than texts about other international contexts (e.g. other Asian countries). As such, it is questionable that the books present linguacultural materials that are entirely representative of what Vietnamese students require for future intercultural communication.

Second, although materials from different origins are used, and there is a wealth of tasks to enable students to relate these materials to their lived experiences and practice language skills,
the materials are rarely approached from an intercultural and critical perspective to facilitate intercultural learning. As discussed earlier, intercultural learning requires not knowledge transmission, but opportunities for critical engagement with the materials to raise students’ awareness of underlying values and meanings, and enable them to challenge generalisations and consider phenomena from multiple perspectives. However, such opportunities are lacking in the books.

The development of intercultural awareness also requires that students be exposed to a multifaceted view of culture, and empowered to identify with multiple voices and perspectives. However, we have found that the books tend to display a strong favor for monolingual Anglophone/ Western cultures and a static view of culture, and hence do not seem to effectively support students in expanding their cultural awareness, thereby fostering respect for cultural diversity.

Despite the above criticism, however, it is worth noting that the strengths of the books lie in the inclusion of localised material to enrich learners’ knowledge of their own culture. Local cultural materials are scarcely included in locally produced textbooks (e.g. see Hu & McKay, 2014, Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015). Therefore, this inclusion is a much-welcomed feature of the books in our study. A word of caution is also in order here regarding the interpretation of our findings. That is, since our analysis concerns primarily opportunities for intercultural learning, our study does not by any means diminish the quality of the books in other aspects, e.g. language skills development. Also, since the books are only one component of the curriculum, and we do not know how they are implemented in the actual classroom to impact students’ intercultural learning, our study by no means suggests the lack of success of the NFLP 2020 overall.

Still, in the light of the above findings, some important implications can be suggested with regards to building teachers’ capacity in exploiting textbooks for teaching ICC in the context of ELT in Vietnam. To begin with, because teachers are mediators between curriculum and students’ learning and a curriculum produces effects on students mainly by virtue of having an effect on teachers (Grossman & Thompson, 2008), it is first and foremost important that teachers have the requisite content knowledge base for successfully achieving curriculum goals. In other words, in order for teachers to make the best use of textbooks to cultivate students’ intercultural awareness, teachers themselves need to have an adequate understanding of culture, the role of teaching culture in ELT as well as what developing intercultural awareness means in practice for them and their students.

Although little is known about how secondary school English teachers in Vietnam view and address culture in the classroom, studies in the university context have indicated that Vietnamese teachers may have fairly limited understandings in this aspect. For example, Ho (2011) found that teachers generally held a static view of culture and believed in the subordinate role of culture in language teaching, which may have led to their neglect of teaching ICC. Similarly, Nguyen (2013) found that regardless of their teaching experience, many university teachers did not seem to be aware of their integrated role as teachers of both language and culture, and therefore tended to prioritize teaching language over teaching cultural knowledge. On the rare occasions they addressed culture, their teaching tended to focus more on transmitting cultural information than on developing learners’ critical awareness of deeper-level cultural elements such as values and beliefs. Their teaching was also heavily dependent on the contents prescribed in textbooks,
which tended to present culture in a biased way. This was largely due to their own limited cultural knowledge and lack of proper training in teaching intercultural communication.

Clearly, studies such as the above have suggested that in order to support teachers in utilizing the textbook for intercultural teaching, it is essential to first of all raise teachers’ awareness of the importance of integrating intercultural teaching into ELT, and enhance their ICC as well as capacity in teaching ICC. Presumably, this can be done by incorporating more cultural information and suggestions about how to teach it in teachers’ books. Currently, such information is absent in the teacher’s manuals accompanying the books under inquiry in our study. Further, teachers’ professional development workshops could also focus more on the role of ICC in language teaching. For example, teachers can be guided to work with Byram’s (1997) model of ICC to develop a better idea of what ICC involves and how to teach it most effectively. This kind of workshop may also direct teachers to self-access resources dealing with ICC development for teachers’ subsequent independent professional learning.

Next, teachers also need to be supported in how to work with textbooks in order to leverage these resources to benefit students’ learning while overcoming their potential limitations. Given that as cultural artefacts, textbooks are ideological, teachers need to adopt a critical stance and reflective approach toward textbook use so that they can assist their students to become aware of and able to challenge ideologies imposed by textbooks. As pointed out by Byram et al (2002, p. 21), “textbooks can be presented in a way that suggests that the materials are authoritative and definitive or in an intercultural and critical perspective.” Therefore, in order to use textbooks effectively to facilitate students’ intercultural skills, teachers should be guided in how to evaluate and customise teaching materials to reflect current thinking in ELT and intercultural language teaching as well as to suit their teaching contexts. For example, in the specific context of ELT in Vietnam, because of the restricted number of classroom hours allocated to English teaching in the school curriculum (105 hours), not all savoirs in Byram’s model can be addressed. Therefore, to make the best use of the limited time and make room for intercultural learning in textbooks, teachers need to develop effective selection strategies to help them determine what is important to teach and what is not, basing their decisions on the specific needs and levels of their classrooms. Obviously, in order to assist teachers in this aspect, greater autonomy should be given to them in terms of textbook modification and adaptation.

References


