

## 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 first language. Korea is not an *outer circle* country, which has a history of colonial dominance by an English-speaking country and which still uses English in areas such as governmental documents, such as India and the Philippines (p. 5). Countries of the *expanding circle* nonetheless recognize the importance of English as a global language. English education is very important in Korea. Korean parents are enthusiastic about their children's English learning. According to Statistics Korea (2011), more than 62% of Korean students studying abroad went to English speaking countries, such as the United States, England, and Canada, in order to study English. Students are adamant in studying English because of two main reasons: English makes up approximately one-fourth of the College Scholastic Ability Test in Korea, and a large number of companies recruit employees who are fluent in English. The Korean Ministry of Education (2011) considered English as a global language used widely around the world (p. 19) and therefore strongly encouraged the learning of English by its young citizens.

The public education of English in Korea has undergone seven revisions since 1995. From the 6<sup>th</sup> English National Curriculum in 1997 to the 7<sup>th</sup> English National Curriculum in 2007, English curriculum focused on improving students' ability with English language skills. During this time, the English National Curriculum department made various changes. The 6<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum was called 'A Historical Curriculum Innovation' because it was the first curriculum to place emphasis on the students' communicative competence and the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2011, pp. 3-4). However, students' speaking and writing abilities were still poor, due largely to the fact that South Korea is an EFL environment. Students did not use English outside of the classroom and English class time was very limited. There were also problems with large classes and English teachers' inadequate speaking proficiency. The English assessment tests were based only on grammar and reading comprehension, but did not include listening or speaking. Therefore, the Department of English revised the 7<sup>th</sup> English National Curriculum in 2009. The main goal of this revision was to focus on improving students' communicative ability. The CLT approach has become a new goal in English teaching. Moreover, teaching multiculturalism, a sense of global community, creativity, multi-cultural

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 modified by the circumstances of our living changes (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 7). Everything that people can view around them is considered as an indicator of either cultural or social identity. Adler (1982) defined the term of cultural identity as “the symbol of one’s essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with whom such elements are shared” (p. 392). In other words, a cultural identity is shared by the same group of people who feel comfortable and secure around each other. Toomey (1999) stated that “social identities can include cultural or ethnic membership identity, gender identity, sexual orientation identity, social class identity, age identity, disability identity or professional identity” (p. 28). Language

learning and teaching have to do with the negotiation of cultural and social identity because “second language learning in some respects involves the acquisition of a second identity, and second language learning is often second culture learning” (Brown, 1986, p. 33). In other words, learning a foreign language directly means gaining a new identity as a speaker of the target language.

### **Cultural Elements in EFL Teaching Materials**

The CLT approach that the Korean Ministry of Education promotes puts greater emphasis on cultural content used in foreign language study than the traditional language approach, such as the grammar translation method. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) asserted that the learning of English promotes a way of developing international awareness and of helping the country to become part of a global economy. In accordance with this idea, many texts, including textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, encourage global themes and a consideration of other cultures, especially those of English speaking countries (p. 184). As a result, English textbooks in Korea contain many cultural and social identity elements, making them truly “cultural products” (Ihm, 1996, p. 4).

Many teachers are in favor of using a cultural component in teaching a foreign language because the inclusion of cultural matters in teaching material helps students to understand internationalism, deepens an understanding of students’ own culture, encourages students to visit foreign countries, motivates students (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008, p. 184). However, the major concern among educators is which and whose culture should be included in EFL teaching materials. There is a growing concern over the inclusion of Western cultures in textbooks, especially cultures of an English speaking country. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) observed that “Western Inner Circle cultures are portrayed as having modern and desirable behavior while those from other cultures, who

exhibit other ways of doing things, are seen as backward and lacking” (pp. 184-185). Such cultural polarization can be found in textbooks dealing with a variety of topics from gender issues to family relationships. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) advised against promoting Western culture and values in English teaching materials. This is because a number of studies have found that the inclusion of Western cultures in teaching materials is not advantageous to students, as the inclusion of Western cultures may contribute to students’ discontent with their own culture. Moreover, the inclusion of target culture leads students to a sense of dissatisfaction with their own culture as they judge their local culture against that of the target culture. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng then suggested that students will be more motivated when learning English through the context of their own country and culture.

At the same time, researchers have suggested that inclusions of intercultural aspects in teaching materials greatly help students to gain communicative competence in their foreign language (Dunnett, 1998). Intercultural communication competence helps students to communicate properly in intercultural contexts and also enables students to understand the communication patterns, expectations, and interpretations of others (Cortazzi, 1998).

Collier (1989) defined intercultural communicative competence as “conduct perceived to be appropriate and effective for both cultural identities being advanced” (pp. 296-7). Gudykunst and Nishida (1989) elaborated on Collier’s definition and added that “communication is intercultural when cultural interpretations emerge in discourse and that intercultural competence is a function of negotiation meanings, rules, and outcomes that are positive” (p. 36). Intercultural understanding encourages learners to query cultural content and recognize culture differences. Three benefits are evident: It eliminates cultural imperialism, raises students’ cultural awareness, and solves some of the dilemmas of intercultural

classrooms, such as loss of cultural identity. In other words, intercultural understanding helps students to stabilize their self-identity while comparing their culture to others (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989). An intercultural perspective plays an important role in raising cultural awareness and promoting cultural understanding in language learning.

## Research Questions

In order to examine the social and cultural aspects in Korean EFL textbooks, three research questions are formulated for this study.

1. What are the representations of social identity or social stereotypes found in selected Korean EFL textbooks?
2. What are the representations of gender identity and gender stereotypes found in selected Korean EFL textbooks?
3. Do textbooks contain elements of multiculturalism, global community, creativity, multi-cultural society, and global etiquette based on the addition of the 7<sup>th</sup> English National Curriculum?

## Methodology

Three of the most commonly used English textbooks in middle schools in South Korea were used for this study: one published by Doosan Dong-A (B. Lee et al., 2009), one by Chunjae Education (J. Lee et al., 2009), and one by Neungyule Education (Jang et al., 2009). They are currently used in middle schools for 7<sup>th</sup> graders. I examined the cultural and social aspects in these EFL textbooks. According to Ihm (1996), the cultural content examination includes visible and invisible categories. The visible category includes food, clothes, customs and traditions while the invisible category takes account of beliefs, values, and thinking patterns. Social identification involves gender, age, race, social class, and disability. Race was analyzed based on hair color, skin color, and facial features such as the nose and eyes. Races were divided into Asian, Caucasian, and African American.

Genders were divided into males and females. Both visible and invisible cultural contents and social identification were examined in the three textbooks.

## Findings

### *Representations of social identity or social stereotypes*

The first research question was formulated to investigate if there are any forms of representations of social identity or social stereotypes. In order to find social identity and social stereotypes in the three EFL textbooks, gender roles and racial aspects

were primarily examined. Images embedded in the three textbooks were categorized by the professions and activities of a character. Those images that depicted males and females equally in a situation were not considered in this study. The primary aspect that was commonly found in the three EFL textbooks was obvious gender roles, such as housewives and sports players.

Table 1 shows the gender and racial features commonly associated with certain occupations and activities in the three textbooks.

Table 1  
*Gender Role And Racial Aspects*

Occupations/ Activities	Gender		Race		
	Male	Female	Caucasian	African American	Asian
Teacher	88% (n = 22, N = 25)	12% (n = 3, N = 25)	64% (n = 16, N = 25)	4% (n = 1, N = 25)	32% (n = 8, N = 25)
Housewife	12% (n = 3, N = 25)	88% (n = 22, N = 25)	24% (n = 6, N = 25)	0%	76% (n = 19, N = 25)
Playing sports	67% (n = 42, N = 63)	33% (n = 21, N = 63)	60% (n = 32, N = 53)	23% (n = 12, N = 53)	17% (n = 9, N = 53)

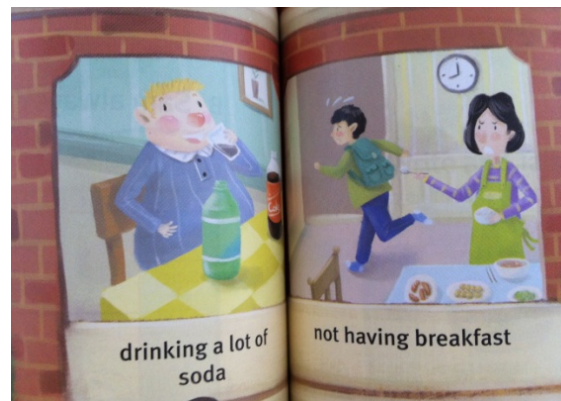
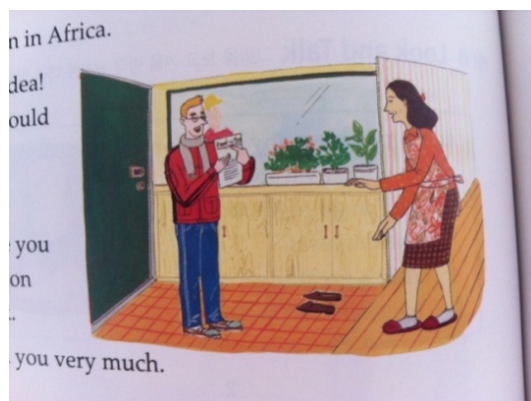


Figure 1. Gender role I: Housewife (B. Lee et al., 2009, p, 117, p. 146)

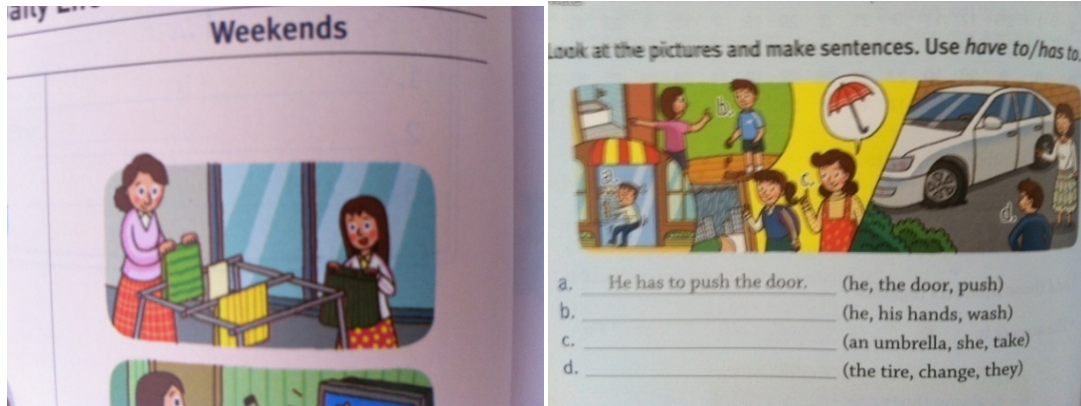


Figure 2. Gender role I: Housewife (J. Lee et al., 2009, p, 42, p,72)

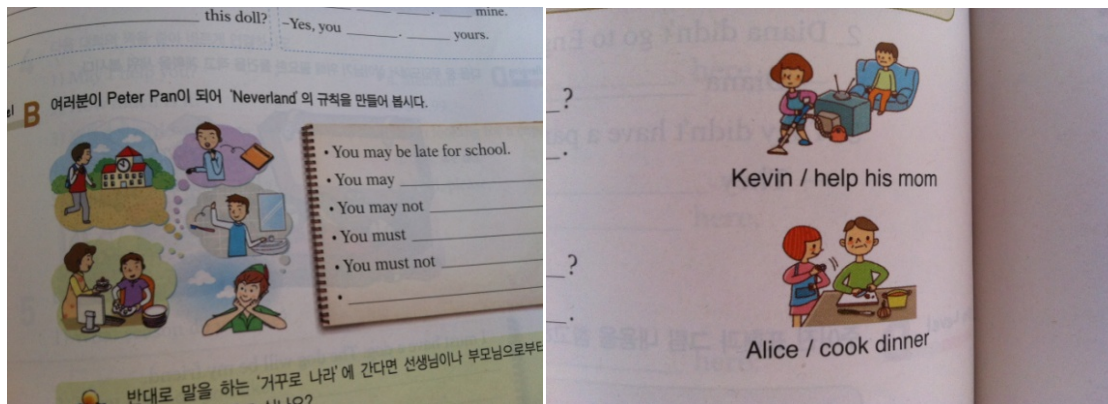


Figure 3. Gender role I: Housewife (Jang et al., 2009, pp. 94, 123)

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	Male	Female
Doctor	5	2
Officer	2	2
Scientist	3	1
Engineer	1	0
Quizmaster	1	0
Driver	1	0
News caster	0	2
Clerk	0	6

According to Table 2 and Table 3, some activities and occupations are portrayed as being limited to a particular gender. There are seven images of men working on a computer, but only one image relates to woman using a computer found in the textbook by Doosan-Dong-A (B. Lee et al., 2009). In the textbooks, none of the male individuals involve in shopping and talking on the phone. The most frequent occupation in the textbook for males is a doctor and for females, a store clerk. It implies that the textbooks consciously or unconsciously contain sexism because a

doctor represents higher social class than a clerk at a clothing store.

Such aspects stereotype gender roles in a society. Lesikin (1998) insisted, "As ESL students acculturate, they may seek role models and identify with the female and male characters in their ESL textbooks" (p. 83). According to Lesikin's idea, students could identify themselves as characters that are the same gender as themselves. The problem is that students could potentially limit their gender roles in society to the roles portrayed in a textbook.

The second interesting finding is that the proportion of Asian to Caucasian English teachers reveals a big disparity. A Caucasian English teacher appears ten times, while an Asian English teacher appears only once in the textbook by Doosan Dong-A (B. Lee et al., 2009). Only Caucasian female and male

English teachers appear in the textbook published by Neungyule Education (Jang et al., 2009). It is hard to distinguish race by most of the illustrations in the textbook by Chunjae Education (J. Lee et al., 2009), however, when it is clear, it shows Caucasian English teachers, but no Asian English teachers (Figures 4-6).

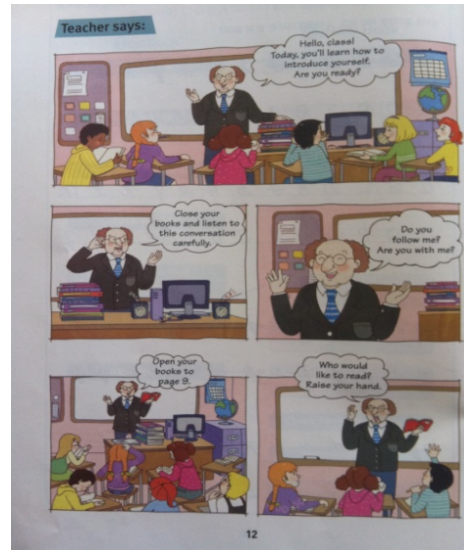
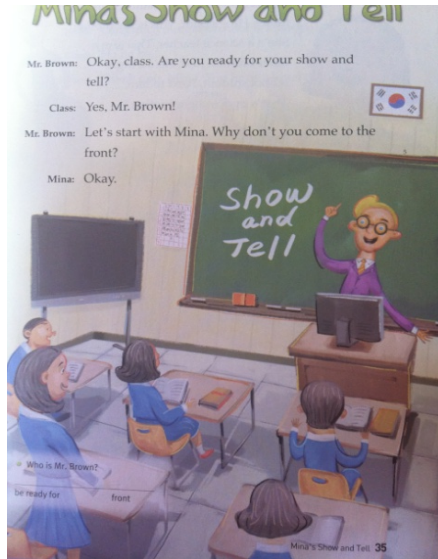


Figure 4. Gender role II: English teacher (B. Lee et al., 2009, pp. 12, 35)

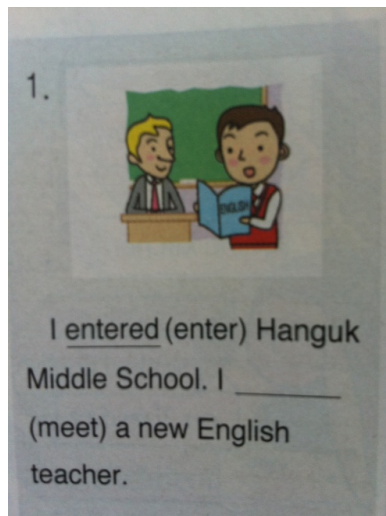


Figure 5. Gender role II: English teacher (Jang et al., 2009, p.16, p.64)



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.

### 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

forum, roughly two-thirds of respondents consent that Korean schools prefer their English teacher to be Caucasian (Schroeder, 2011). Similar racial discrimination in preferring and hiring English teachers also is found in China. One possible explanation of such a social phenomenon is that parents did not believe non-white people are able to be native speakers of English (Tom, 2012). Future textbooks must consider gender roles, English teachers, and names.

Prevalent social and cultural biases in ELT textbooks are gender bias, racial discrimination, and biases based on ethnicity, nationality, social class and minority status. In order to avoid such bias, some principles for using images in the textbooks are necessary. Some suggestions are made by Triyoda (2010):

- Photographs and illustrations should convey the ethnic diversity of the country.
- The names and personalities of the characters should reflect a diversity of cultures and social tolerance.



- Teaching material should portray a balance of men/boys and women/girls in active roles and different age groups.
- Both sexes should be depicted as being engaged in independent activities as well as in leadership roles.
- Both sexes should be depicted equally in domestic situations, doing household chores and caring for children.
- In portraying groups, illustrators should bear in mind that some women are taller than some men.
- When depicting children at play, do not show boys playing only with traditionally “boy’s toys” and girls playing only with traditionally “girl’s toys.”
- Authors and illustrators should bear in mind that people of both sexes experi-

ences a wide range of emotions: fear, terror, anxiety, anger, sorrow, affection, boldness, gentleness, tenderness.

Collier (1998) noted that “identities are multiple, overlapping, and contextually constituted and negotiated” (p. 134). In other words, when students learn a foreign language, their new identities are shaped in part by what they read in the textbooks at schools. In addition to textbook revision to include more balanced role relationships with respect to gender and race, EFL teachers could encourage students to seek and maintain their own cultural identities. This is because learning a second language is not just the mastery of its forms, it is also a process of identity formation and self-positioning in that second language.

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