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Representation of Cultural Aspects at Grade Nine English Textbook and its Implications

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Abstract

Representation of cultural aspects in the textbook has become a prominent issue in the present context and it is also important for a multicultural country like Nepal. This paper explores cultural representations of the socio-culturally diverse groups of people in Nepal with reference to the Grade Nine English textbook published by the Curriculum Development Center and its implication by analyzing the content of the textbook. The information was collected through the Grade Nine English textbook, and in-depth interviews selecting two textbook authors using convenient sampling procedure and four Grade Nine students using purposive sampling procedure. The information was interpreted and discussed categorizing them into three themes: inclusion of cultural heterogeneity, typicality and organic cultural identity, and cultural tolerance. The study reveals that the Grade Nine English textbook seems to be inclusive and has tried to address the socio-culturally diverse groups of people in Nepal. This inclusiveness is essential for the cognitive and academic engagement of the culturally-diverse groups of students.

Keywords: Content analysis, cultural identities, English textbook, inclusiveness, in-depth interviews, Nepal

Introduction

The issue of cultural identity in the English language textbook has drawn the attention of many researchers, textbook writers, and English language teaching (ELT) material developers. A textbook is expected to represent the nation in terms of socio-cultural diversity which is characterized by the diversity in “caste, ethnicity, language, religion, culture, and region” (Bhattachan, 2012). These kinds of diversity sometimes result in misunderstandings and conflict. To avoid these kinds of misunderstandings, students should be educated to be aware of and respect each other’s cultural activities. Therefore, ELT materials including the textbooks are expected to represent linguistically diverse people by embracing the students’ cultural practices, values, customs, and beliefs; that is the ELT materials are assumed to be prepared in line with the concept of “multicultural education” (Banks & Banks, 2016).

Multicultural education refers to a form of education that assimilates the values, beliefs, and perceptions of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The major goal of multicultural education is “to change the structure of educational institutions” so that the

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students representing different groups such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, and so on will have “an equal opportunity to achieve academically” (Banks & Banks, 2016, p. 1) in school. Multicultural education is a comprehensive notion with some important dimensions such as “content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure” (Banks, 2016, p. 16). To implement multicultural education, teachers can use the dimensions as a guide in the teaching-learning activities to transform the traditional educational culture of the school. This paper concentrates on how the Grade Nine textbook incorporates the cultural aspects of different people representing their values in the text.

The English textbook for Grade Nine has been developed and revised in line with the Secondary Education Curriculum - 2071 (Curriculum Development Center, 2071 BS), which aims at making the learners become active participants and raising their awareness of the multilingual and multicultural world they live in. In addition, it has planned to maximize the learning of all students by recognizing and celebrating diversity and engaging all students in intellectually challenging learning experiences. It has also given clear guidelines for teaching strategies to meet different learning needs and explicit teaching to scaffold students’ learning so that they develop and consolidate the required knowledge and skills to meet the anticipated future demands of work and citizenship.

Regarding the inclusion and discussion of cultural and social aspects in the Grade Nine English textbook, Curriculum Development Center (2071 BS) states that the students are enabled to “use all four language skills in a variety of personal, social and academic contexts” and “use the English language to think creatively, critically and to solve problems that crop up in the real life and to promote tolerance and maintain socio-cultural harmony” (p. 51). In this context, we became interested to explore whether the textbook content represents the cultural identities of the diverse people settled in Nepal.

This paper explores cultural representations in the Grade Nine English textbook published by the Curriculum Development Center regarding the socio-culturally diverse groups of people in Nepal. The representation of cultural identity has become a global issue in language teaching and learning in the countries like Nepal. Relating culture to language teaching, Pasand and Ghasemi (2018) express their concern that with the emergency of communicative language teaching, culture became an inalienable part of language teaching. Aligning with the statement, Brown (2000) views “a language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (p. 171). He shows the importance of culture while learning the language and his view supports the inclusion of the cultural aspects in the ELT textbook.

In line with the view of Brown, McKay (2000) highlights the importance of the representation of the cultural aspects in the teaching materials, and she states that teaching materials should have space to varieties of cultural elements along with local culture so that the students can learn the language relating to their local culture. Besides, understanding cultural awareness is essential which makes the students aware of others’ cultures. Regarding this, Andrew (2009) expresses that cultural awareness raising can actively seek to engage learners and “broaden their understanding, increase sensitivity and promote flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity” (p. 85) which can be possible through language teaching if the content of a language textbook represents multiple cultures.

Several research works (e.g., Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018; Qodriani & Kardiansyah, 2018; Rini, 2016; Thumvichit, 2018; Wilhelmson, 2016) have been carried out to study relating to foreign and local cultures analyzing, comparing, and contrasting their values and norms. However, less attention has been given to the diverse Nepali culture focusing on the representation of cultural identities in the prescribed textbooks at the school level of education in Nepal. Concentrating on the cultural aspects, this study aims at exploring how diversified Nepali culture has been maintained in Grade Nine English textbook (Joshi, Joshi, & Dhungana, 2017) published by Curriculum Development Center corroborating with the Secondary Education Curriculum (Curriculum Development Center, 2071 BS) and its implication in teaching-learning activities. The findings of this paper may cast light on the cultural representation issues in the textbook. These findings also suggest the textbook authors prepare the textbooks of school level education with the cultural inclusiveness.

Methods and Procedures

We employed the qualitative research design which “adopts a flexible and data-driven research design, uses relatively unstructured data, emphasizes the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, studies a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and uses verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 12). We used the “content analysis” (Gläser-Zikuda, Hagenauer & Stephan, 2020; Kleinheksel, Rockich-Winston, Tawfik & Wyatt, 2020; Kondracki, Wellman & Amundson, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004; Kyngäs, 2020; Schreier, 2014) to observe the occurrence of the cultural aspects in the Grade Nine English textbook, and “in-depth interview” (Yeo et al., 2014) as research methods to explore whether the Grade Nine textbook represents the cultural identities of the diversified nationalities of Nepal.

To collect the information, we selected the Grade Nine English textbook published by the Curriculum Development Centre (a Government publication) for content analysis, two authors of the same book using the convenient sampling procedure, and four Grade Nine students applying the purposive sampling procedure for qualitative in-depth interviews. To maintain anonymity, we used pseudonyms such as Author A, B, and Student A, B, C, and D the participants were interviewed using the interview guidelines as a tool. During the interviews, an audio recorder and diaries were used to note down the information. In the entire research process, we followed ethical concerns keeping the issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and trust in mind as informed by Creswell (2007), Ryen (2007), Ary, Jacobs, Irvine and Walker (2019), and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018).

We read the content of the textbook many times and listed the words and phrases which represent the cultural identities of various ethnic groups with the page numbers the cultural representation of different nationalities were used. We listened to the audio records time and again, then we transcribed and translated the data set received from the interviews. Finally, we coded the information and analyzed it by classifying it into different themes following ‘thematic networks’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Results and Discussion

The key findings of the research have been interpreted and discussed into three themes—inclusion of cultural heterogeneity, typicality and organic cultural identity, and cultural tolerance. They are discussed relating them to the previous studies.

Inclusion of Cultural Heterogeneity

The Grade Nine English textbook incorporates some expressions which represent the words and phrases of the heterogeneous culture practiced in our country. It tries to cover

the cultures considering people of different social, ethnic, religious, economic, political, and geographical diversity. With reference to these issues, Author A expressed that the authors selected the teaching items following the guidelines at the secondary level curriculum and they tried to “address the culture of the people signifying different social, ethnic, religious, economic, political, geographical, and natural diversity”. He further clarified that it “critically considered the socio-cultural diversity” of the learners. He further specified that the authors “incorporated the names of people representing from different communities, for example, Sherpa, Gurung, Rai, Newar, Brahmin, Chettri, Dalit, and so on” in the Grade Nine English textbook.

Providing similar information, Author B emphasized that “diverse cultural aspects of the students occurred in reading, writing, listening tasks with multiple guiding questions, and exercises in the textbook.” Turning on the pages of the book, and showing the pieces of evidence of occurring the cultural-related terms in the book she described “the issue of multiple culture-related activities contained on pages 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 125, 145, for example”. She further added “through which students can enjoy each other’s differences” in terms of culture. With regard to the issue, Student B, aligning with Authors A and B, mentioned that the textbook includes “the culture of the people with different religion, language and culture”. Similarly, Student C expressed that their English textbook incorporates “the culture of diverse people”. All the participants opined that it is good to represent the cultural aspects of various nationalities in the textbook.

The textbook represents diverse ethnic groups in Nepal. The names and surnames of the people in different localities mentioned in the textbook include Fulmati (p. 8), Mr Chulgen Chaudhary (p. 10), Lhakpa, Nima (p. 12), Miss Adhikari, Kiran Thapa Magar (p. 23), Imran Ansari (p. 25), Sarita (p. 41), Norbu (p. 43), Harina Ramjali (p. 57), Jaimati Parki (p. 57), Bamdev Bhatta (p. 57), Jaganath Bohara (p. 58), Tembakhiri, Chirikaji (p. 60), Nabin Subedi (p. 77), Bacchan Jhoshi (p. 78), Mrs. Sherpa (p. 114), Phurba (p. 125), Pradip Adhikari (p. 146), Oscar Ojha (p. 158), Nhyma Tenging Sherpa (p. 158), Pari Lakhani (p. 170), Meher Moktan (p. 171). This representation is a form of inclusion of cultural heterogeneity.

The textbook is also furnished with different pictures that carry the professionals and cultural meanings, for example, the pictures of different professionals: cobbler, doctor, tailor, photographer, and barber (p. 49) of the textbook. It also consists of pictures representing different greeting cultures (p. 109 and 115), a picture that represents the mournful scene in the loss of a family member in Nepali culture, and a picture of a woman wearing “Bakhu” which represents Sherpa custom called “Aangi” in Sherpa language (p. 148). This set of dresses is composed of different parts. The hat is called “Chhering Somu” and the apron type of clothes wrapped in the waist is called “Dongdil” in the Sherpa language. The name of the festival “Lhosar” (p. 12), particular Nepali names of streams, places, trees, and things such as ‘Naudi Khola’, ‘Paudi Khola’ ‘Sabadi khola’ (p. 102), ‘Khalte’, ‘Ulyhahar’, ‘Peepal’ (p. 89), ‘khuwa’ (a milk product) (p. 33), ‘mamaghar’ (p. 9), ‘paicho’ (barter) ‘pasal’ (shop) (p. 69) are also included in the textbook. These images and Nepali names of streams, places, trees, and things are the forms of representation of various cultures.

The inclusion of cultural heterogeneity in the English textbook found in the present study is informed by the concept of “multicultural education” and Al-Sofi’s (2018) study. Al-Sofi suggested that “being aware of the different cultural aspects and the inseparability of

language and culture is crucial for an efficient use of English in diverse contexts” (p. 184). This finding is also in line with Ariawan’s (2020) study conducted in the Indonesian context which concluded that “the present English textbook is on the way to perfection in terms of proportionally represented cultural dimensions” facilitating the intercultural competence of the students. It is also in consonance with Riadini and Cahyono’s (2021) study that “the sources of cultural information in the English textbook are represented through written texts in the form of source culture, target culture, and international culture frequently in reading, speaking, writing, and vocabulary sections” (p. 293-294) which help students develop multicultural awareness.

Typicality and Organic Cultural Identity

The Grade Nine English textbook contains many typical and organic Nepali words. The authors used these kinds of terms without their equivalent English translation which reflects a kind of representation of typical, historical, and multiple organic cultural identities of the Nepalese society which consists of multiple diversities. The words used in the Grade Nine English textbook include some traditional tools like “Dhiki” (a wooden thresher; a simple traditional rice mill) “Janto”, (a traditional local technology used for grinding grains like wheat, maize, rice, millet, etc. to convert them into flour) “Madani” (a thick wooden stick with turbines at one end used for in the process of butter churning), traditional lights such as “Ranko”, “Diyalo”, and “Kamara and Kamari” (names used to refer to the boy and girl in the kind of slavery tradition), “Aama” (a typical Nepali name for mother) “Jhola” (a Nepali name for a bag), “sati” (an ancient custom of a Hindu widow burning herself to death on the funeral fire of her husband).

The learners of English who are not familiar with the terms mentioned in the previous paragraph can have a peculiar feeling while reading the textbook. These terms represent typical Nepali culture. The gravity and sensitivity of these words seem to be impossible to communicate through their equivalent English translation. For instance, the term “Aama” creates a different image in the mind of the learners than the word “Mom” in the Nepalese context. The term “Mom” is supposed to reflect the image of a modern lady in terms of dress and lifestyle whereas “Aama” is assumed to replicate the image of an innocent village woman engaging in different kinds of traditional activities. The gravity of the word “Aama” in addition to the other terms mentioned above in this theme cannot be perceived with its English translation and “the translated words cannot carry the actual cultural meaning” (Author A).

Author A clarified that they “included the typical Nepali words in English text to address and bring cultural meaning inside the English classroom.” In line with this view, Author B added that they “focused on the text that can address the identity of the local people as well as the marginalized groups in addition to the target culture” while selecting the text in the Grade Nine English textbook. The finding (i.e., the inclusion of cultural identity in the textbook) is informed by Rao’s (2020) study that the inclusion of multiple citizenships’ identities in education is essential “to advance learners’ identifications of different communities” (p. II). Though the Grade Nine English textbook may not cover the typical and organic cultural identities of all the nationalities of Nepal, it has incorporated some Nepalese cultures.

Cultural Tolerance

Society is composed of multifarious social dimensions; all the members of the society are to be aware of their existential values and celebrate the uniqueness of themselves and others. Understanding the significance and uniqueness of other cultures helps to create a

more egalitarian society and foster cultural harmony between the members of society, and so is the case in the classroom. In regards to the cultural tolerance, Author A reported that “it depends on the performance of teachers how they facilitate their students inside the classroom” while talking about the existential value of cultural awareness and tolerance. He added “if the teacher asks students to write or collect materials about different aspects like cultural identities in the classroom and asks them to share inside the classroom” there can be an encouraging environment of knowing each other’s values and the “teacher should have a positive role to help the students respect each other’s cultures” while making a discourse in the English language classrooms based on the content of the textbook.

In respect of the issue, Student A agreed that the “textbook includes the different cultures of different people”. Similarly, Student B expressed that the “textbook has generally included cultures of different people” which she liked and according to her, “this inclusion makes them [the students] know each other cultures” and “it also helps us respect all the cultures.” With a happy mood, Student C shared that the textbook “talks about our greeting culture; that is ‘namaste/namaskar’ and other people’s greeting cultures as well.” She expressed that they sometimes greeted each other using terms of other cultures. She added “these activities created a joyful environment among us” inside and outside the classroom. This result is in accord with a recent study conducted on Islamic education by Alhashmi, Bakali, and Baroud (2020) indicating that “other concepts that could further supplement the Islamic education program to more thoroughly address the notion of tolerance.” (p. 1). Similarly, Adijaya (2020) expressed that “Teaching students tolerance values play an important role to give them knowledge about how to live together in harmony, respect others, avoid potential conflicts, and so on”. It is also in line with the present research study, and “multicultural awareness” (Ariawan, 2020) is essential for cultural tolerance in the students, and it can be developed by incorporating the different cultural identities in the textbook.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the cultural representations of the socio-culturally diverse groups of people in Nepal in the Grade Nine English textbook published by the Curriculum Development Center and its implication in teaching-learning activities. The major findings of the study reveal that the Grade Nine English textbook seems to be inclusive to some extent, and has tried to address the socio-culturally diverse groups of people in Nepal. This inclusiveness is essential for the cognitive and academic engagement of the culturally-diverse groups of students.

The students can be benefitted from the inclusiveness of the multicultural ideas in the textbooks. From the textbook, students can have exposure to different cultures which encourages students to think about the subject matter critically. Another important thing is that it enables students to attain skills and develop a constructive attitude to interact and develop a sense of acceptance and patience with individuals from wide-ranging cultures to generate a moral and civic society. It also helps build a national network and unity among the nationalities. One of the best points is that students with a multicultural concept in education are often supposed to be better fitted out to work in diverse workplace backdrops and have strong social responsiveness. This study adopted the qualitative design to investigate the representation of diverse cultures in the textbook, and further research is recommended to calculate the proportionate representations of each group of nationalities in the textbook quantitatively.

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