

# Keeping Content Current: Are Culture-Based Textbooks Obsolete in the Modern Classroom?

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## **Abstract**

The teaching of culture has now become firmly established as an increasingly important part of the foreign language learning curriculum. As this part of the studying experience has grown in prominence, and as students become more used to instant access to facts and information over the Internet, are culturally-based textbooks still the best method to teach students about the countries where the languages they are studying are spoken? What are some possible alternative sources of information if textbooks are no longer seen as being relevant? The first part of this paper will explore the meaning of culture as it is applicable to students of foreign languages. What does the term 'culture' encompass, and what should it incorporate in foreign language studies? The second part of this paper will then look at textbooks in use in classrooms today. Are textbooks still the best source of information available? I will examine the pros and the cons of the continued use of textbooks, particularly regarding their application in teaching culture, and offer alternative resources which in some cases have been used as a substitute to traditional texts. The final part will then offer suggestions as to the best method of teaching culture.

## **Introduction**

For students of foreign languages, it is naturally and correctly assumed they will need to have an understanding not only of the language which they are studying, but also the culture associated with that language. To this end, there is a plethora of textbooks available specifically to educate students about major cultural concepts. With English being so important in Japanese education from elementary

school or junior high through to college, every year sees a large number of cultural texts being produced to inform students about British, American, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand culture. However, with recent generations of students growing up with Internet access a natural part of their educational and regular life, are textbooks sufficient to teach culture when up-to-the-minute information is available online? By the time textbooks are produced and published, there is a good chance that some culturally relevant information may already be out of date. What are the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to use textbooks in the teaching of foreign culture, specifically the cultures of English-speaking countries, and what alternatives are available or preferable?

### **The Teaching of Culture**

In order to understand the various ways culture can be taught in the modern classroom, it is perhaps best to first define culture as it is to be understood in the context of this study. Broadly speaking, there are two ways of looking at culture, sometimes referred to as culture with a capital 'C', and culture with a small 'c'. The first, 'Culture', refers to the idea of what would make a person be considered 'cultured' in their society: an appreciation or understanding of and possible participation in the arts, literature, and music. The second concept, 'culture', would be the everyday goings on that makes a group of people form a united society, including shared habits, fashions, beliefs, entertainment, attitudes towards lawful behaviour, crime and punishment, housing, or any other number of ideas which come together to form a group of people whose behaviour can be seen as distinct from another group.

Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede is often cited as defining culture as:

...the commonly held traditions, values and ways of behaving of a particular community. It includes what we used to call 'British and American life and institutions', 'daily life' and also cultural artefacts, such as the arts or sports.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Tomalin, Culture - the fifth language skill)

Barry Tomalin, writing on the British Council's TeachingEnglish website goes on to say that teaching culture should also help students "...develop cultural sensitivity and cultural skill... cultural awareness, what qualities you need to deal successfully with other cultures, and how to operate successfully with people from other cultures."<sup>2</sup> Based on these assumptions, Tomalin believes that in order to teach culture in second language classes, the aim should be to teach cultural knowledge (the knowledge of a culture's institutions which correspond to the culture with a capital C as outlined above), cultural values (what Tomalin describes as the "psyche" of the target country, for example feelings towards family, fairness, and patriotism), cultural behaviour (meaning everyday activities), and cultural skills (developing intercultural sensitivity and awareness through English). Ultimately, Tomalin goes on to declare that culture should be thought of as "the fifth language skill" alongside the more traditional listening, speaking, reading and writing due to the "international role of the English language" and globalisation.

Hemat Purba also believes that teaching culture alongside language is unavoidable in his article, *The Importance of Including Culture in EFL Teaching*. He gives three reasons as to why: first, he believes that language and culture are inseparable; secondly, because of this language teaching also has to be culture teaching as well, and his third reason is that he sees the goal of learning a language today is to have communicative competence. In order to do that, he says:

...a learner should be able to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person [*sic*]. For many people, this is difficult to do for although grammar books gives [*sic*] so called genuine examples from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In other words, one needs a sound grasp of the background knowledge of the target culture in order to communicate successfully with the speakers of another language.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> (Tomalin, Culture - the fifth language skill)

<sup>3</sup> (Purba)

In addition, he also believes that the study of culture is motivational for the student as they learn about “singing, dancing, role playing, or doing research on other countries and people”<sup>4</sup> as well as what may be considered the conventional language class requiring grammar, reading or writing. These other activities provide students with a look into the real life of the speakers of the language which they are studying, as opposed to the more traditional areas of study such as grammar or translation, making the target culture more than just another subject taught to them in school and more of a motivational experience as they can see the language is not only book work, but also something that is used for communication by people in the same way their language is for them and thus giving their studies more of a purpose than simply to advance their grades.

Taking all of this into account then, is the application of exploring culture alongside the more traditional areas concerning language learning sufficiently covered in textbooks? It is certainly true that most language textbooks generally have culture in some form or another, and there are entire texts devoted to teaching culture (frequently with the smaller ‘c’). To quote Tomalin, “Pretty much all textbooks at secondary level and upwards now have a cultural syllabus and many primary ELT books make room for a ‘culture spot’ or ‘cultural corner’.”<sup>5</sup> The concern of this paper, however, is to assess whether the culture presented in textbooks is done so in a timely manner, and if it is not, then what alternatives are available?

### **Textbooks and the Modern Classroom**

Textbooks are currently the preferred way to present course content to students; they provide a structured syllabus of prewritten material which is more efficient for teachers than class-by-class preparation of their own materials, and they allow students to follow lessons and understand in advance what will be taught over the period of a term all in one bound and printed copy.

There are a number of proponents of the continued use of textbooks to be found. Dr Joshua Kim of Dartmouth College considers

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<sup>4</sup> (Purba)

<sup>5</sup> (Tomalin, Making culture happen in the English language classroom)

the alternatives as he asks in *A Defense of Textbooks*:

Why use closed and proprietary content? Why ask the students to pay so much for the material when the Web offers so much good material for free? Why use a textbook at all in an age of online articles and videos, electronic article databases and high quality Web simulations?<sup>6</sup>

He answers his questions by listing three reasons why he chooses a textbook for his classes. First, textbooks give his courses “a narrative and a structure to hang a course around” meaning a course can be divided into sections corresponding to the textbook which is clear for both the teacher and the students to understand where their learning goals lie. The students get a sense of accomplishment when the course has been completed and the textbook has been taught. Second, texts often come with “numerous ancillary materials” such as tests and exams. His final reason is that if he works closely with the text, “it becomes feasible to integrate a large course project (usually a team project), that will require the students to add value to the textbook curriculum.” In other words, the use of textbooks allow the teacher to add extra content to his or her course while still retaining a clear understanding of what students should come away with from the class.

Textbooks also condense information or at least limit what information a student is exposed to so as to not make a subject too overwhelming in its scope or scale. Textbooks can filter, organise and deliver material in “manageable, digestible chunks and bites”<sup>7</sup> which makes learning a subject possible, providing “secondary sources... reliable, trained interpreters (and) editors who will provide some degree of quality control.”

The appeal of textbooks is undeniable: they present all the information a student is expected to know for a given subject, outline the course for the teacher, and are an excellent visual reference of the goals and aims of the class. For most disciplines, textbooks are without doubt the best method to introduce students to the objectives of a course. However, can the same thinking apply to the teaching of

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<sup>6</sup> (Kim)

<sup>7</sup> (McKenzie)

culture?

Culture, in the broader sense, can still without doubt be taught effectively with the use of textbooks. Some of the smaller 'c' cultural concepts such as changing seasons, preferred modes of transportation, traditional clothing or historical events for example, do not change or at least do not change so rapidly that they become obviously out of date even if a text is a number of years old. A problem arises, however, when items which are prone to frequent change are included in texts. Real world events are constantly changing. In the time between an author's submission of a final draft of a text and the publishing and sale of the same volume, many things can and often do change. Prime ministers, presidents, a country's financial health, industrial output, monarchs, popularity of television programmes, movies and musical tastes to name but a few are not going to remain constant for too long. What is beloved or popular now is often neglected or forgotten in a few years' time, severely limiting the 'shelf life' of a cultural text and marking a book only a couple of years old as out of touch and out of date. One such example that I have encountered was in an otherwise excellent British culture book which was unfortunately not updated in a new edition for a number of years so that Prince Charles and Princess Diana continued to be happily married, complete with pictures of the wedding ceremony at St. Paul's Cathedral, even after their subsequent divorce and the unfortunate death of Diana. Other examples I have seen are references to movies or entertainers that were popular at the time of publication, but then fell out of favour to the point that students were completely unaware of them when they appeared in the class text, requiring further explanation as to who or what they were and why they warranted inclusion in a textbook. With this in mind, it becomes obvious that in order to teach contemporary culture, textbooks alone may not be able to keep students up to date on the latest available information. So what alternatives are there?

### **The Internet**

The obvious answer to the problem of teaching the most up-to-date cultural information possible is the Internet. Constantly updated, and available in real-time worldwide, the Internet provides an almost unending source of material of such breadth and depth most textbooks

cannot hope to compete. Practically anything is researchable, with multiple results and options for teachers and students alike. For a number of teachers, in many respects the Internet has all but replaced textbooks already.

In a 2010 poll conducted by the E-Learning Foundation charity and the *Times Educational Supplement* regarding the importance of the Internet and information technology in teaching, thirty per cent of teachers responded that textbooks will become obsolete in the future, and sixty-eight per cent said the use of IT equipment is now more important than textbooks in the classroom.<sup>8</sup> Quoting Valerie Thompson, the chief executive of the E-Learning Foundation: “Textbooks are always going to be out of date in the world we live in today because information moves so fast.”<sup>9</sup>

This study is not the alone in its views. Josh Baron, the director of academic technology and eLearning in Marist College, New York State, believes that electronic content in learning will continue to grow due to its being able to be constantly updated, but still says that while students like electronic books, they eventually want to use printed materials.<sup>10</sup> Rik Kranenberg of publishers McGraw-Hill Education says:

There’s a wholesale transition building steam around the way content is distributed and then accessed by students and teachers, and there are multiple formats, multiple devices, [and] multiple distribution channels... The combination of print and digital offerings does very impressive things; it opens up new opportunities to make instruction and study more effective, more efficient and more personalized.<sup>11</sup>

Trevor James of Chicago’s North Park University School of Adult Learning understands the benefits for instructors of using online resources. As reported on the EContent website, James says:

“One of the advantages from a professor’s standpoint is that all

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<sup>8</sup> (Wardrop)

<sup>9</sup> (Wardrop)

<sup>10</sup> (Gresing-Pophal)

<sup>11</sup> (Gresing-Pophal)

of the new revisions are so much easier to implement,” (James) says. There are no worries, for instance, that students will inadvertently get an old edition. “You just download, and it’s there.” Etextbooks also enhance interaction, he points out. “You’re going to be able to have Excel budgets, PowerPoints, videos, and links embedded right into the text, allowing a much more in-depth academic experience.”<sup>12</sup>

This is becoming a trend, not only for cultural textbooks, but for textbooks in general. Many teachers have decided that using online sources or their own electronic materials is preferable to an outdated textbook. There is, however, a very real problem in using the Internet that is for the most part not present in textbooks, and that is there may indeed be too much information available. Not only is there possibly an over-abundance of material making selection difficult, but not all of that material is consistent in the answers it provides. Using an Internet search engine will produce many results, but there are a lot of articles and information which possibly contain nothing which directly answers your problem or lacks examples to clearly illustrate what you were looking for. In this respect, a textbook may be a better source of material. Ian Sommerville, a professor of software engineering at Saint Andrew’s University in Scotland sums up the trouble of using the Internet to base a course on as follows:

...there is also the problem of integrating material from a diverse range of sources into a coherent course. More often than not, you will find that material from different sources has overlaps, contradictions and omissions and you will have to work (as a reader) to reconcile these. Alternatively, the course instructor will have to sort out the problems and, almost certainly, do more work than they would have done with a textbook.<sup>13</sup>

Another problem many perceive of using the Internet is also the trustworthiness of the material on hand. While there are many

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<sup>12</sup> (Gresing-Pophal)

<sup>13</sup> (Sommerville)



genuinely reliable sources available, such as government web sites, the Internet also allows anybody with a connection to the web to host their own page, whether the information they provide is true or not. I have encountered times when students have presented material I knew to be false in reports given in classes I have taught, and when asked about the source of their information, they replied, “the Internet”. The students simply believed the information was correct for the sole reason it was online in the same way many people assume information in books is correct because it is in print. A very popular search destination for research is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia that, like any wiki, can be edited and updated by visitors to the site, often by experts in the field they are editing but not always. This has led many to believe that Wikipedia cannot be trusted as a source of information. However, studies have shown that Wikipedia is in some cases as reliable as the Encyclopaedia Britannica.<sup>14</sup> A statistical measure of Wikipedia’s reliability was undertaken at the University of California Irvine. The results found that the quality of articles featured prominently on Wikipedia’s homepage based on the reputation of the editor involved was quite high, receiving a score of 86% (non-featured articles were awarded a score of 74%).<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that caution should not be observed when using Wikipedia, as with any online resource, but in general it appears to be a relatively safe destination.

### **Possible Solutions and the Future of Textbooks**

The problem appears to be that traditional textbooks are not the best solution to teaching culture due to the fact that cultural content changes reasonably quickly and unless editions are updated every year or two, they run the risk of falling behind the times. On the other hand, while the Internet is always being updated, it is too big and wieldy for students and teachers to find the specific information they need, or at least build a course around where students are also required to research their own material. What may be the best solution to this problem is a combination of textbook and the Internet. This could be done by sharing the workload between having a text for the basis of a cultural

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<sup>14</sup> (Wikipedia survives research test)

<sup>15</sup> (Lopes)

course, and then assigning students the task of finding more up-to-date information where applicable, for example population figures or unemployment rates which would change every year. If the teacher limits the sites where students could search for information, the teacher would also be able to easily verify the information the students have retrieved is accurate.

While this would be a solution which would afford students the opportunity of having a printed resource and access to the latest information, it is possible to take it one step further and remove the textbook altogether while still retaining control over the content which students are exposed to. With technology such as tablet computers and smartphones becoming more popular, students and teachers have access to new kinds of learning resources. Computer maker Apple have made available free of charge software called iBooks Author which allows educators to create their own Multi-Touch textbooks for use on the iPad.<sup>16</sup> Unlike traditional printed textbooks, these electronic textbooks can also include interactive elements such as enlargeable illustrations, photo galleries, animations, and audio content. Using an iPad, students can also take notes and highlight sections as they would a traditional paper book. Once the book has been completed, it is uploaded to Apple's iTunes Store where students can download it for free. After the iBook has been uploaded, it can still be easily updated and any student who has downloaded an earlier edition will be automatically notified that the title has been changed, which would be massively appealing for teachers of culture classes for reasons we have already explored. The downside to the iBook is of course students and teachers must all have access to iPads in order to be able to use them, and the iBooks Author software is currently only available to owners of Apple desktop computers.

Another interesting opportunity for teachers to create their own materials is the idea of a 'flexbook'. Designed by Brian Lindshield, a nutritional sciences professor at Kansas State University, a flexbook is an answer to expensive textbooks which is available online:

Designed to be used online, the flexbook includes more visuals and figures than text, as well as links to videos, animations,

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<sup>16</sup> (iBooks textbooks for iPad)

news, and other relevant Web materials... Students can access the flexbook through Google Docs, a URL, by downloading the PDF file posted on K-State Online, or by printing a copy.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Lindshield allows students to add comments which he calls 'flexnotes' to the flexbook giving him feedback about concepts students in his classes have difficulty understanding. He can then use this collaboration to update his text. Again, the appeal to culture teachers is obvious: a textbook that can be kept up to date with the latest cultural content which is closely controlled by the teacher. Says Lindshield:

Instructors can customize flexbooks to match what they teach ... The collaborative nature of flexbooks means that instructors of similar courses or members of professional societies can work together to make a base flexbook, then each instructor can make a customized flexbook off of that for their course.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusions

It is an exciting time to teach culture. As the teaching of culture becomes more important in the language learning curriculum, students need the latest information. Traditional textbooks are plentiful, but with students and teachers being accustomed to instant news over the Internet and other sources such as cable television, textbooks sometimes fall short in being able to deliver the latest information and go out of date quickly. Some cultural concepts may not change over a period of years, and for that textbooks can still provide a valuable source of information. However, it is becoming increasingly necessary to supplement texts with other sources, the Internet being the most obvious. However, the Internet by itself also has its share of problems such as the overabundance of information and its occasionally contradictory nature. If students are asked to research cultural topics using the Internet freely, the number of different answers is only limited by the number of students doing the research.

It seems that the best solution is a mixture of the two where the

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<sup>17</sup> (Namahoe)

<sup>18</sup> (Namahoe)

latest information is made available to students while the content is still closely controlled by the instructor. This can be done in a number of ways, such as the combination of a textbook with online assignments using a list of sites provided by the teacher. A more modern approach, providing the instructor has the time to prepare the materials and the hardware necessary is available, is to make an online textbook that students can download, such as an Apple iBook or a flexbook. The answer to the question posed in the title of this article is not an easy one. I personally feel textbooks are not going to go away any time soon, but to teach culture-based courses to Internet-savvy students requires more than perhaps they alone can provide.

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