

## **The Hidden Curriculum and Internationalization in EFL: A Call for Heightened Criticality**

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The notion that English as a foreign language (EFL) education is instrumental in fostering internationalization and intercultural competencies is widespread. Governments around the world often make such claims. For example, the Taiwan Ministry of Education touts the value of English in helping Taiwanese people to become “global citizens” (Republic of China Ministry of Education, 2022). Such a stance has great intuitive appeal: Those acquiring English ability certainly are poised to expand chances to interact with others outside their own sphere. Ironically, though, ample research reveals how the hidden curriculum within EFL materials can favor powerful social groups, actually hobbling just internationalization. In light of the likelihood of such a hidden curriculum in EFL materials coupled with the power of EFL overall, I argue that habitual criticality is needed to cogently trouble EFL materials.

The hidden curriculum is defined as unintended information conveyed via educational practices and reflecting the biases of those who create them. EFL is susceptible to containing a hidden curriculum in the depictions of social groups because including social group information in EFL materials is difficult to avoid. Materials may be designed to inform students about world locales and those inhabiting them. Visual illustrations of people are often included simply to enliven lessons. Even dialogs intended to serve as models of spoken language often include oblique information about those speaking. This sets the stage for relations of social power to come to the fore. For example, in my own research, an analysis

of the names used for dialog characters in EFL materials from Japan reflected a strong bias toward stereotypical "Anglo" names such as Mary and John, while other ethnic groups were rendered invisible. One notable example was that the name Muhammad was virtually missing, despite the popularity of the name not only around the world but within the traditional English-speaking societies as well. In the U.K., for example, Muhammad is now likely the top male baby name. Such biases are even the more troubling when juxtaposed against the explicit claim of the Japanese government that a rationale for English study is internationalization and intercultural awareness.

One of the most thoroughly discussed forms of bias in English materials among scholars is the dominant position afforded to the traditional English-speaking societies, or what sociolinguist Braj Kachru referred to as the "Inner Circle" of English (Kachru, 2005). EFL materials typically focus on these countries and their inhabitants in a lingering outgrowth of the colonial legacy of English. This bolsters the power of these locales and sends the message that these places and the people within them represent the rightful "owners" of the language. To the uninitiated, focusing on the Inner Circle and the English spoken there might seem appropriate. Yet most speakers of English neither hail from these contexts nor speak these varieties of English. The undue focus upon them cements the learner's position as eternal aspirant to full English competency rather than fostering the feeling that they too can make the language their own. Overall, beyond the Inner Circle (and Global North) focus, research into the hidden curriculum in EFL materials indicates that they convey the idea that the people who count are Anglo, young, well-to-do, urban, able-bodied, hetero, light-skinned, Christian (e.g., Baleghizadeh & Motahed, 2010; Brown, 2021; Paiz, 2015).

This is not to suggest that such problematic social group depictions necessarily represent an intentional agenda on the part of materials creators. Instead, the phenomenon seems to be due to a combination of implicit beliefs of materials creators who inhabit the same socio-cultural milieu as other actors, the push to appropriate materials to use in language learning from the mainstream media ecosystem in the name of language "authenticity," content currency, and learner appeal, and the broader "mediatization" of social life so as to make commercial materials marketable. Intended or not, there is ample evidence for the impact of problematic social group representation upon learners. First of all, English education is powerful and ubiquitous; it is a required subject of study

around the world. Also, great trust is placed in English education. English courses are typically perceived to represent neutral sources of language skills immune to politics and ideology. Finally, media studies amply document the role of media as a powerful socialization force, especially among the young. Witness the deleterious impact of illustrations of people in the media upon perceptions of desirable body image and the accompanying incidents of eating disorders, some fatal (not to mention the popularity of practices such as cosmetic surgery and use of skin whitening products). Yet mainstream media images of people are routinely appropriate by EFL teachers to decorate their own worksheets, PowerPoint presentations, and other materials.

I see much of the social group content associated with EFL as *confirmatory* rather than *transformative*: It reinscribes students' preconceptions rather than disrupting them as education should. EFL students often *do* associate names like John or Mary with English speakers, Australia or Canada as locales from which "real" English speakers hail, and Christmas as universally celebrated among them. While it may be understandable that commercial educational materials must pander to the consumer by refraining from challenging stereotypes, government-sponsored and typically mandated education cannot be excused. This is especially true when the entities responsible make such robust claims about EFL as a force for intercultural empowerment, and for education overall as a public good. This is particularly ironic in light of the claim among many policy makers that one overarching curricular goal is the promotion of "critical thinking" among students.

Troubling the hidden social curriculum of English language teaching should be one integral dimension of the broader critical stance toward internationalization. The challenge is difficult, though. The issue of undue focus on the Inner Circle has been a topic in English teaching scholarship for decades now. The other issues I have mentioned have long been within the purview of critical media analysis as well. Yet, little attention is paid to them in ground-level English teaching practice. In a recent project in which I analyzed assessment frameworks for evaluating English teaching materials, attention to these issues was scant. Some considered the strength of textbook bindings and the quality of the paper but not potentially harmful social group depictions within the bindings and printed upon the pages (Brown, in press). Rose (2019) has spoken of the disconnect between the "ivory tower" of English education academe and ground-level practice. The issues discussed here appear to represent one

more manifestation of this phenomenon.

As it stands, then, EFL practice itself often *promotes* social injustice through depictions of the social world embedded in its materials. Responses could include training in critical media analysis for materials creators and teachers, sensitivity toward these issues in ELT materials assessment schemes, and instructing developmentally ready learners themselves how to engage in critical reads of ELT materials as historically and politically situated and infused texts. Troubling English education in this way seems to me to represent one important activity for those embracing the paradigm of critical internationalization.

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