

ANALYZING ETHNIC AND CULTURAL MATERIALS: INSIGHTS INTO ELT MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT: Ethnic and cultural materials and English Language Teaching (ELT) materials are related especially in terms of the emphasis on cultural knowledge and skills as well as the language and critical thinking skills. This study intends to research on ethnic and cultural materials within the perspectives of English language materials design. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to investigate the relevance and implications of such materials to ELT materials. The materials were selected from the content of Ethnic Relations course as it contained rich ethnic and cultural elements. When examining such materials from the perspectives of English language materials design, three aspects are considered: learner factors, text factors and task factors. The instrument used for the study was a checklist derived from works by Contazzi and Jin (2001), Nunan (2001), Tomlinson (2001) and Banks (1990). Basically, the checklist consists of 25 items and it was divided into three parts, learner factors, text factors, and task factors. The materials were analyzed using the checklist according to the specified criteria and the data obtained were represented in the form of description, examples and evidence. In addition, lecturers' perceptions on the materials were attained using a set of interview questions. The findings indicate that a) ethnic and cultural materials have positive impacts on students' interest and motivation, b) such materials include useful cultural elements and are comprehensible to students, and c) the tasks given are relevant and meaningful. The study also proves that lecturers dealing with ethnic and cultural contents are aware of the benefits of using such materials for teaching language and culture as it can foster critical thinking and develop communicative competence. Thus, the use of ethnic and cultural materials has a direct and significant implication to English language teaching and learning if the same criteria were to be applied when selecting and using ELT materials.

ABSTRAK: Bahan pengajaran etnik dan budaya serta bahan pengajaran bahasa Inggeris adalah berkaitan terutama dari segi penekanan terhadap pengetahuan dan kemahiran budaya serta kemahiran bahasa dan pemikiran kritikal. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bahan pengajaran etnik dan budaya di dalam perspektif rekabentuk bahan pengajaran bahasa Inggeris. Secara khususnya, objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji kepentingan dan implikasi bahan pengajaran tersebut kepada bahan pengajaran bahasa Inggeris. Bahan pengajaran ini dipilih dari isi kandungan kursus Hubungan Etnik kerana ia kaya dengan elemen etnik dan budaya. Tiga aspek dipertimbangkan untuk menilai bahan pengajaran tersebut iaitu: faktor pelajar, faktor teks dan faktor tugas. Alat yang digunakan untuk kajian adalah senarai semak yang diadaptasikan dari hasil kerja Contazzi dan Jin (2001), Nunan (2001), Tomlinson (2001) dan Banks (1990). Pada dasarnya, senarai semak ini terdiri daripada 25 item dan ia dibahagikan kepada tiga bahagian, faktor pelajar, faktor teks dan faktor tugas. Bahan pengajaran ini dianalisis menggunakan senarai semak berpandukan kepada kriteria yang telah ditetapkan dan data yang diperolehi dipersembahkan dalam bentuk penerangan, contoh dan bukti. Tambahan itu, pandangan pensyarah terhadap bahan pengajaran tersebut diperolehi menggunakan satu set soalan temuramah. Hasil kajian menunjukkan a) bahan pengajaran etnik dan budaya memberi impak positif terhadap minat dan motivasi pelajar, b) bahan pengajaran tersebut mengandungi elemen budaya yang berguna dan difahami oleh pelajar, dan c) tugas yang diberi bersesuaian dan bermakna. Kajian juga membuktikan bahawa pensyarah yang menggunakan isi kandungan etnik dan budaya sedar akan kebaikan-kebaikan menggunakan bahan pengajaran tersebut untuk mengajar bahasa dan budaya kerana ia dapat megalakan pemikiran kritikal dan kemahiran berkomunikasi. Oleh itu, penggunaan bahan pengajaran etnik dan budaya mempunyai kesan langsung dan penting terhadap pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris

sekiranya kriteria yang sama diaplikasikan apabila memilih dan mengguna bahan pengajaran bahasa Inggeris.

Kata kunci: English Language Teaching (ELT), Ethnic, Cultural.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

There are two main issues that reflect current problems which are the ineffectiveness of the existing ELT materials and ER materials in terms of their contents as much as their tasks that generate positive learning activities and the apparent lack of collaborative efforts towards conceptualizing these two courses within their status as compulsory general university subjects which generally aims at instilling thinking and social skills. Prodromou (1988) maintains that one reason students are not motivated by culture learning is the way culture is presented in many ELT textbooks. He sustains that globally designed textbook have continued to be stubbornly Anglocentric. It often presents a western, middle-class life style in contexts that are not only imaginary but also vacuous. Such materials can easily alienate learners as they marginalize the students' own experience. Thus, he maintains that it is understandable why students find little to motivate them in the foreign language class. He argues that when *"both the materials we use and the way we use it are culturally alienating then, inevitably, the students switch off, retreat into their inner world, to defend their own integrity"* (ibid.: 80).

ELT materials at tertiary level must be challenging and engaging students' critical thinking. They should be able to generate active interaction among learners in the classroom. Besides, the materials should also address the authentic goals associated with university students which are the ability to think, make decision and execute social skills in order to function well in the campus community as well as society in general. If the theories of language teaching that we have at present fail to account sufficiently for the diversity in teaching contexts, we ought to try develop a more general or comprehensive (and probably more abstract) theory to account for more of the diversity. (Prabhu, 1990: 166)

While the intention is good, the contents of ethnic relations module are still being scrutinized. It has been criticized that some of the facts in the module were misleading while some of the interpretations were biased. Also, the content is presented from mere historical perspectives and does not focus on social, communication and thinking skills. An ethnic relations course should be contemporary and include important current examples on interethnic relations. In order to be relevant and meaningful cultural materials, the module should give factually accurate and up-to-date information and also present a realistic picture of the content. In addition, it should present phenomena in context rather than as isolated facts (Banks, 1995 and Cortazzi and Jin, 2001).

Besides that, to what extent the content of the ethnic relations module is really multicultural has been questioned. Is there well-balanced presentation in terms of the content among the various races or ethnics in Malaysia? The content of the module has the tendency to give emphasis on the promotion of Malay and Islam and their dominance and hegemony as the framework for interethnic relations in Malaysia. In fact, it is crucial to pay equal attention to all ethnic groups and their cultures regardless of their religions or beliefs so as to advance social science and national unity. Therefore, this study hopes to examine the gaps in the ER materials that may have affected their effectiveness as teaching materials.

Furthermore, Ethnic Relations classes may not achieve the objective of enhancing interethnic interaction and communication amongst undergraduates that is needed to address the issue of racial polarization in the universities. Students are more likely to gather in their own group of the same race with lack of interaction with students from other races. Normally, when students didn't interact with other races, they might not have better understanding and appreciation of ethnic diversity. It is hard for them to learn or to

really understand about other cultures and values. Thus, it is difficult to strengthen ethnic relations and nurture a culture of inclusion among the multiethnic nation in our country. Taking these problems as a consideration, this study hopes to look at the nature of interaction that ER materials can potentially generate.

Moreover, students may not be given the opportunity to participate and interact in ethnic relations class. Due to classroom constraints, the teaching of this course may not engage students to participate in discussion whereby they can interact with their friends and express their ideas and opinions about certain topics or issues. In fact, the teaching and learning process is more teacher-centered and students are more likely to be passive listeners than active participants. Thus, students would find that the class is boring and they will not feel interested or motivated to learn more about the content. Hence, it will impede the effectiveness of teaching this course in order to encourage unity and team spirit among students of different races.

In addition, although it is claimed that the objective in formulating the module is to inculcate critical thinking among graduates, it seems to be that students are not critical with the readings. They seem to read only for exams and thus, the content is more into something that they have to accept and memorize than to understand or question about. Thus, it does not stimulate critical thinking whereby students have to make their own interpretations after readings and try to understand the meaning in context as well as relate it to their real life experience. In fact, the teaching of this course is to promote unity and nurture critical thinking as well as to encourage language learning. Therefore, it is important to get students to be critical with the readings.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. to examine factors that affect learners when ethnic and cultural materials are used
2. to determine factors that affect text when ethnic and cultural materials are used
3. to investigate factors that affect tasks when ethnic and cultural materials are used

Significance of the Study

This study is significant and will offer insight into the following areas; syllabus design, multicultural curriculum, teaching methodology and tertiary level education.

Firstly, the study is significant to the syllabus design of both English and Ethnic Relations course as it emphasizes on the effective incorporation of cultural themes and tasks in the syllabus. The incorporation is meaningful to students as they would be able to do the tasks based on their understanding and acquired knowledge of the cultural themes. From this syllabus design, students would also be able to articulate beliefs and thus it encourages critical thinking. Since this course incorporates the language skills in learning, it would be effective and relevant to use an integrated approach to syllabus design. Nunan (2001) provides five steps in the integrated approach to syllabus design which are to (1) identify the general context and situations in which the learners will communicate, (2) specify the communicative events that the learners will engage in, (3) make list of the functional goals that the learners will need in order to take part in the communicative events, (4) list the key linguistic elements that learners will need in order to achieve the functional goals. Essentially, this approach will encourage students to engage actively in the teaching and learning process and most significantly to work on the tasks effectively while interacting with others.

Apart from syllabus design, the study is also significant to the teaching methodology as it is believed that ER course promotes teaching that generates active learning and interaction among learners. Therefore, the study is also crucial to English language teachers or educators since they are responsible in imparting knowledge, values and cultural identity to the students. In a multicultural country, it is essential that students are being taught about other cultures, beliefs and values so they can learn to respect and understand each other in order to live harmoniously together. According to Campbell (2000), schools and teachers play an important role in preparing students for cultural pluralism. They do so by presenting a curriculum that reflects multiple perspectives on issues as well as diverse life experiences, both favourable and unfavourable, and by empowering students to identify the missing, misconstrued and misrepresented voices. Students must learn that the viewpoints presented in textbooks can be questioned and challenged, and that there is not one truth, but multiple truths. Most of all, they must learn that uncovering biases and stereotypes and discussing them openly is a constructive way to counter the development of new misconceptions and to promote mutual understanding. Hence, teachers should equip themselves with the skills and knowledge of teaching methodology to deliver the content effectively and meaningfully.

Furthermore, the study is significant to English language curriculum since it is based on multicultural curriculum and it focuses on the role of curriculum to foster multicultural understanding. In fact, the ER materials are used to teach students from diverse cultures and ethnicities with the aim to promote and encourage multicultural understanding. According to Anita Lie (2001) who has done a study on multicultural issues in the 1994 English Curriculum in Indonesian Senior High Schools, the broad goals of delivering a multicultural curriculum are basically to help students develop positive gender, racial, cultural, class, religious, and individual identities and to recognize and accept their membership in many different groups, to enable students to see themselves as part of the larger society and to empathize and relate to individuals from other groups within that society, to foster respect and appreciation for differences, to promote the development of a sense of shared humanity, and to support the development of educational and social skills for students to become full participants in the larger society in way that are most appropriate to individual styles, cultural orientations, and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, this study is essential in order to look at ER curriculum as multicultural curriculum that can foster multicultural understanding among the students.

Besides, the study is significant to tertiary level education as it intends to look at ER course as a subject that encourages critical thinking, social and communication skills. In other words, the study is important to students as it creates their awareness of the importance to be an active learner and to think critically and rationally about the issues discussed in the materials. In order to become an active learner, students need to get in the habit of asking critical questions which can help them to analyze and evaluate what and how they are learning (see McWhorter, 2003, p. 24). This implies that students need to be critical with their reading and not just accept what is being taught to them. They have to consider the issues or topics being discussed from various perspectives and to make assumptions or interpretations on their readings to show their active participation or learning by sharing ideas and opinions with their friends in class. From the discussion, they would be able to get additional information and better understanding which can help to enhance their knowledge. Furthermore, by being able to read and think critically, students can develop good language skills and improve their own learning. Besides, they can also enhance their social and communication skills through discussion and interaction in class.

In addition, cultural materials within ELT, especially on multiculturalism, are readily available and can easily be found from any relevant sources such as from the Internet. The availability and relevance of the cultural materials is essential in promoting active learning as students will be motivated to learn when they have the access to look for further information about the topics or issues in order to enhance their knowledge and understanding. Since Ethnic Relations materials contain rich ethnic and cultural elements,

it would be effective and meaningful to use the materials for teaching cultures to multicultural students within the English language content-based syllabus. This is because students have the accessibility to look for the information related to the subject from various types of resources.

Scope of the Study

The study, which is on the topic of analyzing ethnic and cultural materials within the perspectives of English language materials design, involved the examination of Ethnic Relations materials. Three aspects of ER materials were considered which are learner factors, text factors and task factors. The examination process was done through content analysis using a set of checklist adapted from works done by Cortazzi and Jin (2001), Nunan (2001), Tomlinson (2001) and Banks (1990). In addition, four lecturers of ER course were selected randomly for interview in order to examine the three mentioned aspects associated with the materials and to support the findings obtained from checklist analysis.

METHODOLOGY

Research Instruments Used

Overall, this research utilized the qualitative research methodology. The instruments used to collect the data were checklist and a set of interview questions. A set of checklist questions was prepared to analyze the content of ethnic and cultural materials based on three factors which are learners, text and task. The checklist was adapted from works by Cortazzi and Jin (2001), Nunan (2001), Tomlinson (2001) and Banks (1990). Basically, checklist analysis is a systematic evaluation against pre-established criteria in the form of one or more checklists. A systematic approach built on the historical knowledge included in checklist questions. Checklist analysis can be performed by a small group and not necessarily risk analysis experts. It is constructed mostly on interviews, documentation reviews and field inspections. Checklist was chosen as the primary research instrument in this study because of its suitability and practicality for materials evaluation.

The data for the research were also obtained from interviews. A set of interview questions had been constructed for the interviews. Interview was chosen for data collection because it can provide some of the valuable information, particularly on topics related to the respondent's feelings and belief. Interview is a two-way communication which permits an exchange of ideas and information. As a research instrument, interview is a conversation carried out with the definite purpose of obtaining specific information, to confirm and support the findings from checklist analysis as well as to triangulate the data collection methods. In interview, the interviewer can explain clearly what the research is about. She can also identify and ask only the information that she wants. If the interviewee misinterprets or does not understand the question, the interviewer can further elaborate or rephrase the question. At the same time, the interviewer can assess whether the interviewee is sincere in his or her response. The type of interview that was used is structured interview whereby the interviewer asking questions based on the list of previously prepared questions. Four lecturers teaching Ethnic Relations course were involved in the interview. The interviews had further explored the implications of the ethnic and cultural content to English teaching and learning.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study consisted of four lecturers who were teaching Ethnic Relations course to first year undergraduates from different courses in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai. An interview session was conducted with each lecturer at different time, depending on their time convenience. The lecturers were selected randomly in order to provide indepth information about the topic and to confirm or

support the data collected from the checklist. In addition to the interview data, one lecturer was involved in analyzing the content using the checklist in order to compare his responses to the researcher's.

Research Procedure

There are several steps involved during the data collection process. For the development of the checklist, the procedures include determining the factors, defining the factors for the analysis, subdividing the factors for analysis and finally, creating a relevant checklist based on the aspects that were intended to be examined. Basically, a set of checklist constructed for this content analysis were derived from works by Contazzi and Jin (2001), Nunan (2001), Tomlinson (2001) and Banks (1990) and the questions or criteria generated for evaluation were divided into three parts according to learner factors, text factors and task factors.

On the other hand, a set of interview questions were prepared earlier to collect the data. Four lecturers of Ethnic Relations course were involved in the interview at different time, depending on their time convenience. The interview was conducted in UTM specifically at Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development in February and March 2009. The lecturers involved were selected randomly and an appointment was made to set the time and place for the interview. Two of the lecturers however agreed to be interviewed together at that particular time. A set of interview questions that had been prepared earlier was used during the interview in order to obtain the needed information that can be used to support and confirm the data or findings on checklist analysis. Also, the researcher had asked permission from the lecturers to use a tape-recorder during the interview session. Nevertheless, out of four lecturers, only two agreed to be recorded. After each interview, the researcher summarized the ideas that she had discovered and thanked the interviewee for his/her time and cooperation. For analysis, the researcher looked over her notes and wrote any response that she missed right after the interview session. Then, she reflected upon the interview by giving her honest opinion. Also, she related the data or findings to checklist analysis.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings or data, ethnic and cultural materials are suitable to be used as English language teaching materials. Firstly, in terms of learner factors, the materials are likely to be able to cater for students' interest and motivate them to learn and participate in the class. This is because the topics discussed in the materials are interesting and related to students' background knowledge. Besides, as mentioned in the findings, students would also be able to relate learning to their lives and knowledge of the world. According to Steffensen (1987), "The subject of reading materials should be of high interest and relate well to the background of the reader, since strong semantic input can help compensate when syntactic control is weak. Students with the necessary schematic knowledge are more likely to be able to handle a linguistically difficult passage than those without this knowledge." By having the basic knowledge of the content, students would be able to comprehend the text although they are not proficient in the language. Also, they are likely to develop confidence in expressing their ideas and opinions. Besides, students would also be able to learn at their own time and pace, according to their preferred learning style.

In terms of text factors, the topic and content of ER materials are good because it includes real life topics and the content is related to students' knowledge system. Hence, students can enhance their understanding and gain more knowledge. Also, the content of the materials is holistic as it includes topics that are universal such as globalization. Nunan (1988) states that "As the focus will be on assisting learners to do in class what they will need to be able to do outside, materials should reflect the outside world. In other words, they should have a degree of authenticity" (as cited in Griffiths, 1995). Besides, the content of the book is suitable and relevant for the age group, which is the tertiary level student, as it caters for critical thinking and intercultural competence. According to Griffiths (1995), "Material suitable for an advanced

student will be beyond the beginner's comprehension while material suitable for a beginner will lack challenge for an advanced student. Thus, it is essential that material matches the abilities of the student.”

Moreover, ethnic and cultural materials are likely to be comprehensible to the students primarily because the students are familiar with the content. When students are familiar with the content, they would be able to understand the information or input given better although they are learning the subject in second language. Content familiarity will have an important effect on the ability of second language readers to process elements of the linguistic system which have already been mastered. Recent theoretical statements have favored a top down rather than bottom up approach to language processing (Nunan, 1985). Besides, when students have the basic knowledge of the content or topics discussed, they would comprehend the text better. This is basically related to content schema. Content schema refers to a reader's knowledge about the topic being read or discussed. Studies show that readers comprehend more of a text if: a) They are already familiar with the topic from experience; b) they have read something about the topic before; and c) they know in advance what reading concerns. (James, 1987)

Furthermore, ethnic and cultural materials examine the diversity within each group's experience as well as differing views of ideals and realities among ethnic and cultural groups. These elements are essential to be included in the ELT materials because the learning process would be more meaningful and students would be more aware of their own cultural identity and at the same time, learn to respect and be tolerant with others. According to Cortazzi & Jin, (1999), textbooks should be designed in such a way that learners are exposed about their culture to a visitor and that helps students become more aware of their own cultural identity. It is generally expected that second or foreign language textbooks should include elements of the target culture. On the other hand, McKay (2002) states that one of the primary aims is to use English to explain one's own culture to others. It is beneficial for learners to be asked to reflect on their own culture in relation to others. For this to take place learners need to acquire knowledge about another culture and then they need to reflect on how their own culture contrasts with it.

Last but not least, the tasks provided in the ethnic and cultural materials are relevant and meaningful. This is because the task assigned is flexible to various learners and learners are also encouraged to work in pair or group. Besides, the task encourages students to think critically by making interpretation and relating learning to their own. According to Halvorsen (2008), “*Critical thinking occurs when we think critically about an issue by considering the issue from various perspectives, looking at and challenge any possible assumptions that may underlie the issue and exploring its possible alternatives.*” In addition, like most ELT materials, the task designed in ER materials also can promote intercultural communicative competence. Intercultural communicative competence is the ability to communicate using language with other people and to be able to do so in a culture-sensitive way, taking as much account as possible of the cultural differences that can be predicted in the situation. So intercultural communicative competence is the ability to use the language “in culturally appropriate ways” (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000:3).

The data obtained from checklist analysis and interviews suggest that ethnic and cultural materials have positive impacts on students' interest and motivation and the materials include useful cultural elements and are comprehensible to students. Also, it suggests that the tasks given are relevant and meaningful. In addition, the study proves that lecturers dealing with ethnic and cultural contents are aware of the benefits of using such materials for teaching language and culture as it can foster critical thinking and develop communicative competence. Thus, the use of ethnic and cultural materials can contribute to effective teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the relevance of ethnic and cultural materials to English language teaching and learning. Primary data were collected through a set of checklist by analyzing the content of Ethnic

Relations materials according to the specified criteria as well as through interview. The purpose of this study was to find out whether ethnic and cultural materials could enhance learning and promote positive interaction among learners which will be useful for syllabus design for both ER and English language courses. Also, the study was conducted to examine how the aspects (learner, text and task) of ER materials are suitable to be used as effective English language materials.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the study. To begin, this study has shown that ethnic and cultural materials have positive impacts on students' interest and motivation as students can relate learning to their life and knowledge of the world. In terms of text factors, such elements include useful cultural elements and are comprehensible to students since the topics discussed examine the diversity within ethnic and cultural group's experience. In addition, the text presents realistic pictures and discusses phenomena in context which can aid understanding. The familiarity and knowledge of the topics discussed in the materials also enable students to comprehend the text. Last but not least, the findings suggest that the tasks given are relevant and meaningful. Also, the tasks encourage students to work in group and to think critically.

The results of this study indicate that the use of ethnic and cultural materials has a direct and significant implication to the teaching and learning of English language. However, these findings are only true if the same criteria were to be applied when selecting and using ELT materials and cannot be generalized to other ethnic and cultural materials. The same study needs to be conducted with students and lecturers from other universities to see if there are any similarities with the factors that determine the suitability of such materials for English language teaching and learning. Furthermore, further research could also explore the phenomena of teaching Ethnic Relations course to foreign students in English.

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