

## ESL and Cultural Bias:

An Analysis of Elementary Through  
High School Textbooks in the  
Western United States of America

Elavie Ndura

Tonya Kaushik    ESL 5311    February 8, 2011

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## What is cultural bias?

- ▶ Definition of culture:
  - ▶ Beliefs, language, behaviors valued by the community that are transmitted from generation to generation
- ▶ Definition of bias:
  - ▶ A particular tendency or inclination, especially one that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question; prejudice

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## Excerpt 1: An overview

- ▶ “Instructional materials play the role of cultural mediators as they transmit overt and covert societal values, assumptions and images. Thus, they have the power to positively or negatively influence immigrant students’ perceptions of their new culture and their ability to acculturate and succeed” (Ndura, 143).

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## Why examine textbooks?

- ▶ They develop student knowledge.
- ▶ They influence student perceptions of self and others.
- ▶ They transmit cultural models.
  - ▶ Bonvillain definition

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## Major questions

1. Since past research has shown textbooks in general to be biased, how biased are ESL textbooks in particular?
2. What can teachers do to make instruction more inclusive?

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## Literature review

- ▶ Ndura's overview of relevant research revealed two major themes regarding bias in American textbooks.
  - ▶ Misrepresentation and underrepresentation of cultural minorities and their life experiences
  - ▶ Sexism

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## Why these textbooks?

- ▶ They were being used in a school district in the Western U.S. and are representative of the books used to teach ESL in the U.S.
- ▶ The selected textbooks focus on different things and are used in different grade levels from elementary to high school.
- ▶ The books were not specifically designed for these students but were adapted by this school system from a different market.

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## Selected textbooks

- ▶ *Tools* (1992) – a picture book used with very young children
- ▶ *Into English, Level D* (1994) – a comprehensive text designed for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ESL students
- ▶ *Voices in Literature, Bronze* (1996) – literature-based text for multi-leveled ESL classes
- ▶ *High Point: Success in Language, Literature, Content, Level C* (2000) – a comprehensive text designed for 8<sup>th</sup> grade ESL students
- ▶ *ESL: Accelerating English Language Learning, Level I* (2001) – thematic comprehensive text for ESL learners in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade
- ▶ *Launch into Reading, Level I* (2002) – a reading and writing based text for high school students

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### Ndura's textbook analysis

- ▶ Read the publishers' introductions as well as the editors' and contributors' remarks in order to identify the philosophical framework within which the texts are constructed
- ▶ Examined the tables of contents, noting the selection and distribution of themes
- ▶ Read each textbook from cover to cover, marking pages and passages of interest
- ▶ Read both the students' and teachers' editions, as well as supplementary workbooks

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### Textbook analysis, continued

- ▶ Examined illustrations
- ▶ Paid special attention to the story line in the reading selections and imagined how it might affect the student's self-image and their perceptions of other people and the world around them
- ▶ Looked at the activities provided and weighed their relevance to students' diverse life experiences and need for superior critical thinking skills

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### Findings

- ▶ Ndura's research uncovered three major types of bias among the ESL textbooks she examined:
  - ▶ Stereotyping
  - ▶ Invisibility
  - ▶ Unreality

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### Stereotyping

- ▶ Definition:
  - ▶ Portraying one set of people exhibiting one set of values, behaviors, and roles

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## Stereotyping

- ▶ **Examples:**
  - ▶ Depictions of men and women using different types of tools
  - ▶ Gender roles in story of computer-user Kevin and “helpless female” neighbor
  - ▶ Cultural stereotype in story of Christopher, an African boy
  - ▶ Racial stereotype of a Black man and Native American woman in service to a White explorer

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## Invisibility

- ▶ **Definition:**
  - ▶ The omission of information regarding any of the main variables that make up our individual and collective cultural identity and the influence that they exert on our everyday life

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## Invisibility (of question 2)

- ▶ **Example:**
  - ▶ No mention of religion or religious activities or worship of any kind in any of the books either as text or images

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## Unreality

- ▶ **Definition:**
  - ▶ Avoidance of controversial topics such as discrimination and prejudice in favor of a more idealistic and traditional view of national history or current issues

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## Unreality (cf. question 3)

- ▶ **Examples:**
  - ▶ No mention of intolerance, discrimination or racism in any of the books
  - ▶ No mention of divorce
  - ▶ No mention of local and international wars that are a major cause of immigration to the United States
  - ▶ Examples of suffering or hardship are shown in the past and often out of context

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## What do biased books teach?

- ▶ Skewed perceptions of gender roles
- ▶ Incorrect assumptions about the world
- ▶ Limited ability to confront and reconcile religious differences
- ▶ Limited opportunities to learn the discourse of survival in order to deal with discrimination and prejudice they may face in their lives
- ▶ Further marginalization

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## Excerpt 2

- ▶ “Uncovering textbook biases and reflecting upon their potential influence on students’ learning experiences and on their self-image will empower teachers to become more culturally responsive and to motivate their students to take charge of their acculturation process and actively participate in the transformation of current unfavorable societal realities” (Ndura, 150).

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## Ndura’s suggestions

- ▶ Ndura offers teachers 5 tips for confronting textbook bias in their classrooms:
  1. Become aware
  2. Critically examine instructional materials
  3. Prepare supplementary teaching materials
  4. Avoid the avoidance game
  5. Listen to the students

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### 1. Become aware

- ▶ About 87 percent of teachers in the U.S. are White, but almost 40 percent of their students are not.
- ▶ Therefore, teachers need to increase their awareness of the possibility of bias and their effects on students' perceptions and learning experiences.

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### 2. Examine materials

- ▶ Look closely at the story lines and the illustrations, and consider the possible effects on students' self images.
- ▶ Watch for loaded words and outdated representations of people and cultures.
- ▶ Uncover any hidden messages (good or bad), and try to empower students.

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### 3. Prepare supplements

- ▶ If a textbook is overly biased, create your own additional materials to present your students with a more balanced lesson.
- ▶ Rather than relying solely on the official textbook, incorporate authentic materials and guest speakers to diversify the lesson.

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### 4. Avoid the avoidance game

- ▶ Students are faced with complex choices in their daily lives, so address those issues in class.
- ▶ Don't avoid talking about topics like intolerance or discrimination. Instead, expose those issues, and help students learn how to deal with them.

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### 5. Listen to the students

- ▶ Have your ESL students share their personal stories about their home culture. This will both empower them and enlighten you and their classmates.

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### Conclusion

- ▶ Unfortunately, most American textbooks include some type of bias. Teachers must be aware of this in order to plan more inclusive learning experiences.
- ▶ Teachers must understand how textbooks aid acculturation and supplement potentially harmful texts with multiple perspectives.

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### Excerpt 3

- ▶ “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” (Ndura, 152)

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### Question 1

- ▶ What have your experiences with textbooks been like? Describe any encounters you may have had as a student or teacher with a blatantly obvious example of bias.

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## Question 2 [\(back to Invisibility\)](#)

- ▶ Ndura's example of invisibility in ESL textbooks focuses on the omission of religion; however, most public schools do not want teachers discussing religion unless it is a specific part of the curriculum like in world history. How could a teacher explain the role of religion in America without "preaching" to his/her students?

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## Question 3 [\(back to Unreality\)](#)

- ▶ Should textbooks (and teachers) offer contemporary examples of Americans struggling with discrimination and/or prejudice, or should the classroom be used as a haven away from the "drama" of students' daily lives? Explain.

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