Cultural Pigeonholes in English Language Teaching Materials

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Abstract
This paper problematises the cultural content presented in many English coursebooks. It examines the issue of cultural bias in both written texts and visual images, explains how such distortion of culture has entered textbooks, highlights the consequences of such bias, and finally suggests ways to deal with the cultural bias in order to help language learners develop intercultural understanding and competence. For illustrative purposes, the paper presents specific cases of stereotypical information selected from English language coursebooks. These cases fall into four distinctive categories, namely stereotyping appearance, stereotyping gender, stereotyping behavior, and stereotyping lifestyles.

Stereotypes in cultural content
Culture is so essential to communication that it is sometimes considered the fifth skill, with the other four being listening, speaking, reading and writing, which have always been taught in the English language classroom (see, for example, Tomalin, 2008). In the context of globalisation, learning about the cultures of others serves to achieve ‘a sense of humanity of other people’ (Moran, 2001, p. 8). Unfortunately, the depictions of the various cultures described in many current English textbooks have in many instances been recognised as being too stereotyped to reflect the real world, and thus do not facilitate intercultural understanding and mutual respect. Many cultural groups are either absent or under-represented. Controversial debates are avoided. Also, controversial ideas are treated with caution and, according to Hall (2013), commercial English textbooks remain as neutral in content as possible in order to sell widely. Restricting, misunderstanding, or distorting culture is disrespectful to the learner.

The word stereotyping, first used by journalist Walter Lippman in 1922, indicates ‘judgment made about others on the basis of their ethnic group membership’ (Jandt, 2001, p. 71). Various authors have explained what it is about:
‘selected characteristics of a group or category which are thought to represent the members of the group’ (Garrison and Bly, 1997, p. 548);

‘generalizations about a group of people which are often based on insufficient evidence’ (Collins, 1995, p. 198);

‘not based on objective evidence’ (McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears, 2002, p. 9);

‘not usually ‘triggered’ by observed patterns of behaviour but by characteristics that are immediately accessible, e.g. visual (age, gender, and race)’ (Makin, Copper & Cox, 1996, p. 93);

‘sufficient for our purposes if our intention with the other person is at a fairly superficial level.’ (Makin, Copper & Cox, 1996, p. 94).

Stereotypes often come from mistakes or illusions of the brain (Nisbett 1980). Stereotyping is a common and natural function of human mentality. It reflects a tendency to classify and label others (Moran, 2001). Since our mental processing capacity is limited, we need to simplify events ‘to deal with the enormous amount of information we receive about objects and people’ (Hinton, 2000, p. 55). In other words, our world is so full of complicated reality that sometimes we think it saves us a lot of headache to organise thoughts in convenient ways. We do this by putting people in compartments in our brain (e.g. Japanese are silent, Americans are talkative, Dutch are stingy) and label them the way we label files on our computer. We may think that to know an American is to know all Americans; having had a conversation with a Chinese person, we think that we already understand all Chinese people. In assuming that all individuals from one group share a set of common qualities, we become a photocopy machine generating multiple copies from a single model. In sum, stereotypes are based on insufficient evidence, unfounded generalizations, immediately accessible yet shallow data, and superficial communication.

I would like to recapitulate and expand the definition by focussing on the destructive effect of this process. A stereotype is a simplified pattern with limited characteristics imposed on a population. It thus reduces complex people to an icon or a statement for convenience of
explanation and reference. Stereotypes, which I often hear about when travelling, include the following:

‘All Asians are good at math.’
‘Most Black Americans are lazy.’
‘Most Black people outside of America are poor.’
‘All Jews are greedy.’
‘French and Italian people are the best lovers.’

I have a friend who has never been to Australia but has met three Australians at different points in life, and it happens that they are all left-handed. The friend thus believes he has discovered that Australia is a society full of left-handed people. If the human mind can make such generalizations, there is a need to be careful about what we educators do with the learner’s mind.

**Stereotyping by learners**

I once had the opportunity to observe an English lesson in a young adults’ class in which the teacher showed her students pictures of three characters taken from a movie based on William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*: a young, good-looking Caucasian man, an old bearded Caucasian man, and a young, good-looking Black man. One of them was a villain while the other two played the role of good people. The question was: Which of these characters do you think is a villain? And why? Within seconds almost all the students pointed to the black man. Amused, the teacher asked the class why. There was a puzzled look on everyone’s face; the class could not come up with any clear explanation. Some mentioned they only ‘feel’ that the man was a villain without knowing why; others thought that they vaguely resembled some bad characters that they often saw in action movies, yet could not recall which one in particular.

I discussed this interesting reaction with the teacher after class and we decided to run the test again in another class. This time we chose a different set of pictures. The Black person this time looked more innocent and cheerful, and was waving his hand in a gracious gesture. The other two characters were White people. Since the topic of that lesson was about dealing with life’s troubles, the question was, “Which of the characters do you think is a troublemaker?”
Within a few seconds after the pictures were held up, the students’ reaction, sad to say, was no different.

The response from the students suggests that people take delivery of stereotypical images and information from movies, the media, television commercials, crime-related television programs, friends, parents, public opinion, and a variety of other sources. Interestingly, what is often overlooked is the fact that EFL books undeniably contribute to such stereotypical images and information. Although one may be tempted to reason that coursebook writers are exclusively responsible for teaching language and not cultural content, Moran (2001, p. 39) indicates that in the language classroom, ‘culture is the topic, and language the means to comprehend, analyze, and respond to it’.

I thus argue that the relationship between how learners view their own culture and how the English coursebook views their culture plays an affective role in learning English. In particular, the misrepresentation of the learners’ culture in a coursebook might offend the learners and have a detrimental effect on the learning process. Culturally biased interpretations that ‘offend or disturb (…) learners’ have been highlighted in the discourse on the cultural impact of ELT materials (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 171). I would like to provide a number of concrete examples of cultural stereotypes taken from many current, popular EFL global course materials that can offend and disturb learners.

**Stereotypes in ELT materials**

I investigate eight English coursebooks which have been distributed around the world, namely:

*Headway* (Soars & Soars, 1991)

*Language in Use* (Doff & Jones, 1991)

*English File* (Oxeden, Seligson & Foley, 1996)

*English File* (Oxenden & Latham-Koenig ,1999)

*High Season – English for the Hotel and Tourists Industry* (Harding & Henderson, 1999.)

*Wavelength* (Burke & Brooks, 2000)

*Opportunities* (Harris, Mower & Sikorzynska, 2000)
Cutting Edge (Cunningham, Moore & Eales, 2001)

I found a fair amount of stereotyped cultural content in the visual illustrations, and, to a lesser degree, in the connections between visuals and texts. I could identify four cultural elements that seem to be the substance for stereotyping: nationality, gender, behaviour, and lifestyles, which I shall now explain and exemplify with concrete examples.

Stereotyping appearance that denotes nationality
Members of various cultures can be reduced to cliché or commonly seen looks in the writer’s attempt to make the characters recognisable to serve certain language practices. For example, in English File (Oxenden & Latham-Koenig, 1999, p. 92), an intermediate level book, one water colour drawing illustration shows a collection of characters to teach such structures as ‘He must be American’, ‘He could be South American’, ‘She can’t be English’, etc. The characters represent their countries and learners are invited to look at their appearance and decide which country each person comes from. In the picture, an overweight American is depicted wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a cowboy hat and is using a pair of binoculars in a manner which suggests that he is a nosey person. A slim young lady looks elegant and the statement ‘She can’t be English’, implies that one cannot find such graceful styles among English women. The mean-looking South American is wearing sunglasses and smoking a pipe, and is dressed in a flamboyant, flashy suit to demonstrate a well-off mafia figure.

Not only does the visual illustration reduce representatives of various cultures to stereotypical formulations centered primarily around their looks, but it also provides misleading images of what would occur in the real world: all the people coming from the same country must have the same public image and give the same simplified impression of their place of origin. If we look at how rampant stereotypes about various ethnic groups appear in the media, it is not surprising that they seep into language coursebooks. According to Jandt (2001), media which have contributed to stereotypes include the New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, TIME and Newsweek, among many others. One issue of the magazine TIME I have read, for example, shows a Latino model against the background of a wall filled with graffiti — simply because Latino people are often stereotypically seen as those who enjoy spraying paint over public spaces.
Stereotyping gender
Women are often depicted as people who gossip about each other and complain about insignificant matters all the time. For example, Harding & Henderson (1999, p. 77-79) present a unit about dealing with complaints. Two photographs serve to describe scenarios and in both of them the complainers are women. The first woman whines about a piece of computer software which does not function in the way that she would expect, and the second woman represents the customer who grumbles about mundane matters, such as the size of a room, check-out bills, the quality of food, the weather, and so on.

Cunningham & Moor (2005, p. 119) provides accounts of holidaymakers who sued British tourist companies because they did not get along with their traveling companions in a tour. The illustration depicts a group of sulky-looking women sitting in a public lounge. The theme of another part of the same lesson is about overweight teenagers who sued fast food companies in New York for making them fat. A picture shows two overweight women stuffing fast food into their mouths. The story also involves another woman who sued a beverage company for an unacceptable reason: she slipped on her spilt soft drink after throwing the drink at her boyfriend during an argument.

One unit in Cunningham & Moor (2005, p. 68) presents a story of a woman named Hannah who loses her car. Her partner Dan blames her for being disorganised, bothersome and forgetful. He says things like, ‘You need to get yourself organized with keys’; ‘This is annoying’; ‘You’re always losing things. It’s ridiculous!’ Although Hannah is patiently explaining the situation rather than whining, the picture presents her as an aggressive and bad-tempered woman. This is another example of how texts and visuals in coursebooks contribute to stereotypes.

Yet another example comes from a passage in Haines & Stewart (2000, p. 118), which notes that two-thirds of human conversation is taken up by plain and simple gossip about one another and refers to this habit as an obsession. The accompanying picture depicts three women, two of whom are squatting on a sofa and one on the floor, in a conversation. This picture is accompanied by a photograph depicting three monkeys in similar squatting postures. The text explains that human beings gossip for support in the event of conflict outside their group and compares this behaviour with the act of grooming among monkeys as a way of
maintaining mutual protection. What seems biased about the picture is that although it is said that gossiping is a human trait, the characters in the picture are all women.

Although prescribed gender roles are breaking down and women’s status is constantly changing, some language textbooks have unwittingly contributed to stereotypes which can shape learners’ perception of how women behave. While masculinity may be associated with assertiveness and femininity emotions (Jandt, 2001), it has been commonly known for half a century that, in real life, women and men possess cross-sex characteristics that are inconsistent with what is believed to be their gender traits, which means that both men and women are capable of expressing both masculine and feminine traits (Jung 1960; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Lindsey, 2016). Global coursebooks, unfortunately, have overlooked such sociocultural understanding and continued to place their characters into very narrow gender pockets.

**Stereotyping behaviour**

When behaviour is stereotypically presented, it is treated superficially, dissociated from the cultural values behind it. It also leads to the occasional poor selection of pictures to go with texts, which causes the content of the lesson to be misleading. Sometimes the text presents a sad story but the character smiles broadly. In other cases the text focuses on a happy event, yet the people involved happen to look sad. When such mismatch happens, it seems quite obvious that the writer and the artist did not communicate with each other. Arguably, such acts of stereotyping human behaviour often result in the damaging consequence of misinforming learners about cultural content, and therefore confuses them in unintended ways.

Here are more examples of mismatched text and illustration. Cunningham, Moore and Eales (2001, p. 43) show an image of a Japanese man smiling while talking about how long it takes and costs to travel from Tokyo to Disneyland. Oxeden, Seligson and Foley (1996, p. 14) have a photograph of a Hong Konger smiling while saying that he does not smoke or own a car. Oxeden et al. (1996, p. 20) present a portrait of a smiley Indian family talking about their relatives who have gone to live in Bradford, England, and who never wanted to return to India. One wonders why they need to look so happy. Though appearing in different books, these Asian characters are seen to share the same expression; they all wear a smile and the
text does not say why. I then made an effort to look for a non-smiling Asian face, and eventually succeeded in finding one, but the non-smiling face in an illustration accompanies a happy story. The story is found in Richards (2000, p. 71), which provides a cheerful account of a boy’s sixteenth birthday on which his relatives give him money in envelopes and wish him a long life. It is a happy occasion, but the boy’s face is somber and gloomy, and he looks as if he is about to weep. His facial expression seems to be at odds with the phrases such as ‘special birthday’, ‘get some money’, ‘lucky envelope’ and ‘My mother is going to cook noodles – noodles are for a long life’, which do not sound sad. The point I am making is that most pictures of smiley faces tend to go with neutral content and the occasional sad face accompanies a happy story.

Nelson (1995, p. 36), in a discussion related to cultural bias, mentions that while in American culture ‘a smiling face usually means that a person is happy’, it may not always have this implication for all members of other cultures. For example, ‘a smiling Vietnamese boy may not be happy; he may be embarrassed confused, or even angry’ (Cargill, 1987; 1, cited in Nelson, 1995, p. 36). There have been anecdotes about many Chinese students in England smiling apologetically rather contentedly. One of my Thai students who recently visited Japan noticed that many people look extremely puzzled when she approached them to ask for directions with a smile, a behaviour which is considered normal in Thailand. According to Jandt (2001), many Japanese smile to disguise embarrassment and other negative emotions since the public display of such feelings is considered discourteous in the culture. All of these cultural ways of behaving, however, are not mentioned in language coursebooks for the purposes of intercultural understanding. Instead, such representations of smiles could contribute to the misunderstanding that all Asians look, think, and act alike.

Coursebooks need to correct such misconceptions by allowing characters to demonstrate more diversity in appearances, behaviour, viewpoints, and personalities. As Dubin (1995, p. 17) highlights, writers and artists should create characters who ‘appear to be real people with recognizable ages, traits, backgrounds’. When a character appears weird to the learner, the context loses its significance. The coursebook writer, therefore, should allow characters to appear as they would in real life. If people in the book can express individual feelings and ‘exist in some kind of social network’ (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 91), learners can relate to them and find context for meaningful learning.
Stereotyping lifestyles and mannerism

Everyday life and traditional practices in many non-Western cultures are sometimes presented in a negative light or with poor connection with the present. For example, Doff & Jones (1991, p. 20) present a unit on public transport in which people from African and Asian countries are presented as leading a backward life. The illustrations are little more than stereotypical images of some cultures: passengers piling up on top of an old van and clinging to the rear of a rudimentary vehicle. In Gershon (1995, p. 76), along with photos of modern cable cars in San Francisco and peaceful gondolas in Venice, one can see the rudimentary Thai tuk-tuk (a Thai motor vehicle) struggling its way through a traffic jam in Bangkok. The modern Bangkok sky train is curiously not presented. While other vehicles are presented against the backdrop of a beautiful city, the tuk-tuk is presented against the backdrop of traffic congestion. One of my Thai students at Assumption University pasted a beautiful picture of a tuk-tuk from a magazine over the original picture of the tuk-tuk.

Although some of the vehicles look realistic, the contrast between the rich and poor representations unintendedly sneaks into the lesson, unwittingly turning the lesson’s focus from means of transport to economic comparison. Such a comparison might not be pleasant to learners from a third-world country who could easily see that the worst image of a vehicle from their country is presented as teaching material. The stereotyping act here involves a beautiful image from a rich country and a poor image from a poor country, because people think that things from a developed country must look good and things from a developing country, bad.

Cultural elements that a writer does not understand can be distorted. Traditional customs are sometimes presented with a misleading context. A passage in Harris, Mower & Sikorzynska (2000, p. 36) describes female traditional costumes in Indonesia (e.g. the headscarf) as evidence of social oppression by commenting that ‘Nowadays, Indonesian women don’t have to cover their heads, but they usually wear traditional clothes’. My Indonesian students find the word choice ‘have to’ misleading as they think that it implies that it was compulsory in the past, which was not factual. Further, although the significance of the headscarf is about values such as beauty, identity, and maturity of faith, these are hardly mentioned in coursebooks. Again, talking about a cultural topic superficially while neglecting its most
essential significance has the potential to lead to stereotypes. In many cases, stereotyping is not always about negative remarks; it could come from the neglect of what is most meaningful characteristic of a phenomenon and a mere focus on something superficial. Another unit in Harris et al. (2000, p. 37) introduces a Chinese traditional wedding that is no longer in practice across most of China (according to my Chinese students who read this text) without mentioning it. My students feel that if a tradition is no longer in use it is worth mentioning it to the reader. When the content represents distortion or neglect of the most significant truth, students may learn the language but their cultural view and intercultural competence could be affected.

Sometimes stereotypes are created through comments that focus solely on one’s appearance, with little or no reference to one’s values. In Soars & Soars (1991, p. 44), the Sultan of Brunei is noted not for his ideas or policies, but for his appearance: “The Sultan is a very shy man. He is 42 years old but still looks like a schoolboy”. Although shyness and a schoolboy look may be considered complements in some South East Asian cultures, saying that a political figure looks like a shy schoolboy does not seem respectful (at least according to some of my European and American colleagues). This is a form of stereotyping; the writer does not focus on the Sultan’s role as a political leader, but remarks on his appearance, and thus reduces him to a few simple, superficial features.

What these stereotypical scenarios have in common is that they seem to suggest a sense of, to borrow two terms from Jandt (2001, pp. 53 and 356), cultural nearsightedness, which means taking one’s own culture for granted while neglecting others, and cultural separation, which may induce different levels of prejudice toward lesser known social traditions. Our lack of direct knowledge about other societies and our cultural framework of reference often make it difficult to comprehend many diverse lifestyles and interpret more objectively and favorably. I wonder how many times writers and publishers have paused and thought about how people from various parts of the world might feel when they have to learn from materials that present their local cultures in patronising terms. As Moran (2001) points out, how people of the target culture perceive and accept learners play a role in the learning process. If writers show little respect for the learner’s culture, the learning process may become an unpleasant, demoralising one for them. Steele and Aronson (1995) suggest that unflattering stereotypes
have a strong potential to distract and lower the intellectual performance of individuals who feel they are being stereotyped.

**How do stereotypes enter coursebooks?**

In this section, I explain how stereotypes enter coursebooks. Firstly, it is a common criticism among course evaluators that language teaching materials have a tendency to select and reduce information to make teaching uncomplicated and convenient. In particular, many materials have constructed a simple version of the real world (see, for example, Lipmann, 1922; Allport, 1954; Bruner, 1957; Hamilton, 1979; Hinton, 2000) simply because such stereotyping saves time and energy (McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears, 2002). Kahneman (1973) argues that when the human brain has to process two sources of information or perform two complex tasks at the same time, our mental capacity may experience difficulty in coping. When we are overloaded with complex information, we may feel the need to reduce the complexity of the information by simplifying it. Since materials writers have to deal simultaneously with the teachability of both linguistic data and content instruction (including educational values and affective engagement), they become so constrained that it would make life easier for them to present content information simplistically, which results in what we recognise in coursebooks as stereotypes.

Secondly, the coursebook writers, with their limited knowledge and experience of other cultures, produce materials that present stereotyped formulas about the national identity of others. As reported by Juan (2010), some examples of such formulas can be found in the textbook *College English* (Li, 2001), which misrepresents Japanese classroom conduct as being overly homogeneous (Susser, 1998). In the meanwhile, a number of coursebooks tend to imply that some cultures are superior to other cultures (Elham & Reza, 2013).

Thirdly, materials developers may have biased assumptions about gender roles. Although gender roles may not be a theme for discussion in the textbook, they may be reflected in the ways male and female characters behave in the content of many texts. Some content implies that men tend to be more helpful (Hartman & Judd, 1978), while women are generally weak (Lee & Collins, 2008), talkative (Gupta & Yin, 1990), overly emotional, superficial (Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012) and inferior to men (Khurshid et al., 2010). The danger here is
that each book may be read by many learners and the sexist message can affect the esteem and behaviour of the learners.

A fourth explanation, which comes from my own conversations with materials writers in the UK, is that many coursebook publishers have their own picture banks. However, many of these pictures feature stereotypical images which may not be the intention of photographers in the first place. This is because photographers often do not know what their pictures are to be used for and, in many cases, stereotyping occurs when a picture does not connect with the text it accompanies. For example, one item of dialogue in a coursebook shows a heated argument between two characters, Dan and Hannah. Dan aggressively criticizes Hannah who then politely justifies her behaviour. The picture that goes with this text, however, shows Hannah with an angry face and an aggressive hand gesture while Dan looks more like a patient listener, which completely contradicts the content of the text (Cunningham & Moor, 2005, p. 68). Most of my students spotted this mismatch right away and had a good laugh.

Materials writers, like everybody else, constantly receive information from the media and secondhand data from friends. In some cases, evaluating the information requires a tremendous amount of research, and makes the writing task much more difficult; it is often simply not done. For this reason, it would be simpler to present the world simplistically, as rich or poor, developed or under-developed, new or old, powerful or weak, modern or old-fashioned. Writers who wish to do otherwise would have to conduct research, collect information, and consider the appropriateness of writing tasks, all of which take time. Writers have to publish quickly as coursebooks can make money. In addition, course developers also want the social and cultural contexts presented in the book to be comprehensible to the learner (something they can relate to), and one convenient method (which writers should not do) is to give learners what they think they know.

**How do we recognise and repair stereotypical information?**

Although stereotypes are a common phenomenon in materials writing, they are not always easy to recognize because many people accept them as truths. However, as language teachers, we have the responsibility to point stereotypes out to our students, so they learn the right thing. The following five questions may assist teachers in becoming more aware of stereotypes in coursebooks.
• Does the writer simplify information on other cultures?
• Is the writer objective in giving such information or somehow distorting it?
• Is the content sophisticated enough to stimulate learning?
• Is there discussion to raise awareness of cultural matters?
• Can the learner interpret the relationships, feelings, behaviours, and viewpoints of the characters portrayed in the coursebook?

Stereotyping is a learned cultural process, which can be unlearned. Once stereotypes are identified in course materials, there are at least four things teachers can do in response. Below are some suggestions.

Replacing a picture to avoid prejudice
If the stereotypes appear in drawings or photographs, students can find more appropriate images to replace them. For example, in *On line: The Fast Route to Fluency* (Gershon, 1996, p. 76), the picture of a Thai tuk-tuk has a traffic jam in the background. Given that the lesson introduces means of transport rather than traffic jams, students can replace the picture with another which has a nice background. Arguably, such an exercise will have an impact on students’ learning and cultural awareness: not only can students learn about communication, but they can also develop cultural sensitivities through evaluating cultural content and justifying their choice of resources.

Keeping a picture for creative discussion
To stimulate learners’ thinking, it may be interesting to ask learners what they think about the stereotypical visual in the coursebook or about its relationship with the text. For example, the images of smiley faces in Cunningham et al. (2001, p. 43) and Oxeden et al. (1996, pp. 14, 20) can become a good topic for discussion; students could be asked to think about why the people are smiling. A witty teacher can always spot a problem in the content and turn it into an advantage (Barton & Sakwa, 2012).

Invite learners to rewrite the text
When a text or its accompanying illustration presents a stereotype, students could be asked to revise the text. For example, students can be asked to produce another version of the wedding
in Harris et al. (2000, p. 37) by talking about a traditional wedding in their own culture, or any other customs, and how such events have been modified in the context of the present day.

*Design activities based on the stereotypes*

Communicative tasks can be designed to invite learners to come up with divergent options about the same topic. For example, the images and information about women who gossip and complain in Harding & Henderson (1999, pp. 77-79), Cunningham & Moore (2005, p. 119), and Haines & Stewart (2000, p. 118) could be used an activity in which learners discuss what issues different social groups often gossip and complain about; when teachers, students, alcoholics, etc. get together, what might they talk about? If women are stereotyped as housewives and men as heroes or intellectuals, the teacher can invite students to respond to the sexist stereotypes. As a rule, when cultures are misrepresented in coursebooks, they could become a great opportunity for the teacher and students to discuss what the real world is actually like.

*Revise the coursebook and turn the stereotype into a discussion topic*

In many cases, it may be useful for textbooks developers to re-evaluate the materials content that they have created; if a problem is recognised, the writer can then correct the stereotype instead of deleting it from the book. One example of this, as reported by Garcia (2005), would be the story of a Spanish boy who went to England and realised that English people were not cold as what people at home might assume. The boy also learned that he could find many ways to enjoy himself in the country. Such rethinking of common assumptions makes language learners realise how wrong they could be about other cultures. Su (2011) presents another example. A Taiwanese student questioned what he saw in American movies and wondered whether it was common for strangers who meet for the first time to exchange a kiss in public. By and large, self-corrected knowledge that moves away from stereotyping is a great way of building rich content into language teaching materials because such a practice taps into curiosity and promotes inquiry. Not only does it raise cultural sensitivity about others but it also generates debate among learners and allows them use language as a meaning making tool in an authentic manner.
Conclusion: the need to correct stereotypes in second language materials

Stereotypes in coursebooks about people and cultures provide an inaccurate picture of the real world that can influence student thinking in unfavourable ways. As Hinton (2000) points out, if a wide range of people hold the wrong view, the view can be accepted as a truth. Kumaravadivelu (2003) also highlights how a number of TESOL professionals have a tendency to simplify cultural information when they have to ‘largely deal with the unknown and the unmanageable’ (p. 716). As many coursebooks contain such stereotypes, teachers who use such materials can unwittingly introduce cultural bias in the classroom. This is a particularly problematic situation because ‘much of our knowledge of other people does not come from personal contact with them but through other sources’ (ibid, p. 25-26) and for this reason many EFL learners may never have a chance to find out the truth about other cultures.

While the aim of second language coursebooks is to teach effective communication, stereotypes, on the contrary, are impeding it by causing learners to think that widely held beliefs about a group are true. Stereotypes not only demonstrate a lack of respect for learners by oversimplifying or distorting the world they live in, but also prevent them from learning about the world. Moreover, stereotypes discourage learners from being open-minded, prevent them from understanding various perspectives, and cause them to become less knowledgeable about cultural diversity. As the language classroom is connected to a cultural learning process (Cunningsworth, 1995), learners while studying language also subconsciously acquire cultural elements, and it is the writer who has the power to affect that view in many positive ways. I believe that materials writers have the right and responsibility to repair potential stereotypes about other cultures in the learner’s mind and promote positive thinking about other people rather than place their values in small compartments or ‘cultural pigeonholes’. This will be a meaningful contribution toward building a more intercultural world.

References


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**About the author**

Dat Bao has worked with Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK, Cornell University in the US, the National University of Singapore, the Assumption University of Thailand, and presently lectures in Monash University, Australia. His expertise includes curriculum development, intercultural communication, classroom silence, creative pedagogy, and visual pedagogy in language education. He is the author of *Understanding Silence* and *Reticence. Ways of Participating in SLA*. 