

# A Critical Assessment of the Cultural Content of Two Primary English Textbooks Used in Nigeria

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**Abstract**—Culture (a people's ways of life) and literacy (the permanent possession of the skills of reading, writing and numeracy) are two sides of the same coin. The former prepares the individual through approved social roles, while latter ensures that the former is not only promoted and preserved, but also made more functional. Then the textbook is a powerful medium for cultural sustenance and literacy development. The language textbook in particular is vital to making culture relevant to intellectual development. One aim of language teaching-learning is to produce the learner who would not only be able to engage in the four language skills rewardingly, but also be culturally literate. Unfortunately, culture is not monolithic, just as different writers have different visions and styles for their art. Every nation also has what she wants education to do for her, which must include cultural revival and cultural integration. In this era of globalization, culture, especially if it lacks technological base, can be dangerously disadvantaged. This researcher sought to evaluate the cultural content of two basal textbooks used in teaching Primary school English in a Second context with a view to determining how the writers have reflected cultural context. Based on the findings from the study, recommendations were made to course book writers and relevant other stakeholders.

**Index Terms**—cultural content, primary school English, literacy

## I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is not possible to give a watertight definition of culture as it has been many things to many people. Kramsch (1998) views it as the membership of a discourse community that shares a common social space and history. They have common world views, beliefs and ways of assessing things, situations and events. In this regard, culture involves knowledge derived unconsciously and utilized as a social property. The knowledge dictates how the community socialise. Culture could inform their attitude to language. Miekley (2005) reports how major countries of South East Asia, seeing the international ascendancy being enjoyed by English, embarked on very intense programmes to entrench the language and how majority of the citizens had either not been able to use it appreciably or had refused outright the language. He gives a graphic insight into English language textbook situation in those countries involving massive production of instructional materials by native and non native experts. However, Miekley has not provided information concerning the cultural relevance of such materials. Akintunde (1993:391) suggests that the origin and design of language a textbook could influence its relevance and how successfully it may be used in the classroom. He identifies government polices, publishing infrastructure, intellectual and professional associations as the cultural matrices for book development. He is at one with Emenyonu (1993:402-404) who gives specific steps that could be taken in infusing relevant cultural experiences in a book. The steps the latter has proposed include:

1. reflecting the physical context of language learning.
2. considering the economic characteristics of the target readers.
3. examining the political aspects of the community.
4. defining the role of culture.
5. indicating the economic conditions of the people.

Any education situated in man's culture makes him not only well-developed and integrated but also enables him to appreciate other peoples' cultures. According to Courtney (1974:140):

Through his culture man learns to relate himself with the society and by storing up past knowledge in symbolic form, he can visualize future possibilities and consciously adapt himself through reason. Man emerged from primitive animism to being only vaguely aware of his separate existence.

Man's cultural experiences get him to a level at which he attains cosmic unity with the society and the world, by which he is not lonely and is better protected. The role man's cultural background plays in his fortune and misfortune has been attested to by Obafemi (1994:86) in his explanation of the source of drama: "In spite of this elasticity in form and content of drama, certain adamant characterizes the discipline", including:

- (i) imitation of human behaviour.
- (ii) characters acting in situation and style, and
- (iii) dramatic structure that involves time, place and action.

Indeed, as espoused by Holly (1990), language teaching carries cultural and ideological messages. The experiences shared in the classroom reflect a particular culture and promote specific socio - economic and political values; they also aim at advancing some spiritual inclinations. Such experiences - cultural contents - transmit more daily and effectively if they derive from textual materials which enjoy permanence.

The role that textbooks (especially language textbooks) play in behaviour modification has been well explained in the literature. Their vitality has made language educators and applied linguists suggest many criteria for assessing (critically pointing out the weaknesses and strengths of) such materials. For example, Kilickaya (2004) and Olajide (2004) are agreed that language textbooks should satisfy the cultural context in which they are going to be implemented. Kilickaya specifically suggests that the following criteria be applied in assessing the cultural component of the textbooks.

1. Does the book suggest how the cultural content may be handled?
2. What learner characteristics does the book address?
3. Does the book specify any role for the teacher using it?
4. Does the book reflect a variety of culture?
5. Is the content of the book realistic about the target culture?
6. What is the source of cultural information (author's view or empirically derived)?
7. Do the subjects of the book relate directly to the target culture, and are there topics not culturally suitable for the class?
8. What cultural and social categories of people does the content address?
9. Does the book contain cultural generalizations and specific inferences and insinuations?
10. Does it contain positive, negative or no comments about the cultural information it presents?
11. If illustrations are made in the textbook are they appropriate to the learners' native culture?
12. Are familiar activities presented to the learners?
13. Would the teacher need specialized training to be able to use the book?
14. Does the book encourage the learners to utilize the cultural experiences beyond the classroom?
15. What is your own opinion of the book?

The foregoing criteria by Kilickaya (2004) and those by Emenyonu (1993) are considered appropriate for the present study because of their cultural focus.

The English Language textbooks used at the primary school level (referred to as Primary English in this paper) are important. They are a part of the process of forming the impressionistic adolescents whose experiences at that stage would shape their lives thereafter. For example, in Nigeria, English occupies a critical place in education and is fast assuming the status of a Nigerian language (Olajide 2004 & 2009). The primary school teacher of English in the country in particular has a great role to play, because he/she is responsible for granting the platform where the young learner is encountering English probably for the first time and requires careful facilitation to be able to transit from his mother tongue base. The country expects English to take over after the first three years as the medium of instruction. Thus, the language influences the acquisition of litero-numeracy skills as from mid-primary level (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2007). Incidentally, the textbook situation in Nigeria is hardly different from that of South East Asia as reported by Miekley (2005) and many other developing countries. There are many English language textbooks that the Nigerian primary school teacher needs to choose from, but not all of the textbooks would do teaching-learning much good. Hence, there is need to assess the books before selecting from them.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

Language and culture are intertwined and teaching the former in the second or foreign situation requires the teacher to be sensitive to the latter Kramsch (1998). Second or Foreign language situation poses unique challenges in that the learners come to the classrooms with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It becomes necessary for the materials implemented in the classroom to reflect the culture of the learner. Different scholars (Holly 1990, Akintunde 1993, Emenyonu, 1993, Holly 1990, Olajide 1995 & 2004, and Kilickaya, 2004) have justified the assessment of language textbooks. And there have been unending outcries about poor pupil performance in English at the primary school level in Nigeria. It is not certain how much the content of the English textbooks implemented at that level reflects the pupils' cultural backgrounds. It is also a problem that available literature has not shown quantitatively if the cultural contents of the books cut across international boundaries as recommend by Kilickaya (2004) Olajide (2004) and Miekley (2005).

Thus, the general purpose of this study was to ascertain if each of two English textbooks popularly used in Nigeria primary schools have adequate cultural contents. Specifically, the study sought to provide answers to the following questions motivated from available literature.

1. Does each of the books reflect physical features?
2. Does each of the books include socio-economic characteristic?
3. Does each of the books relate to political activities?
4. Does each of the books portray living condition?
5. If each involves living conditions, do such living conditions reflect rural urban- dichotomy?
6. Does each book suggest how the cultural content may be used in, and beyond the classroom?

7. What learner characteristics does each of the books contain?
8. Does each book reflect a variety of cultures?
9. How realistic is each of the books about the culture it aims at portraying?
10. Is the culture aimed in each book based on author's opinion?
11. Is the culture contained in each book derived empirically?
12. Do the topics in each book directly refer to target culture?
13. Are there cultural items in the books not relevant to the users' culture?
14. What cultural and social categories does each of the books address?
15. Does each of the books contain cultural generalizations that ought not to be made?
16. Does the book contain positive comments about the cultural information passed?
17. Does the book contain negative comments on the cultural content presented?
18. How appropriate are the cultural illustrations made, if any, in each of the books?
19. Are familiar activities presented in each of the books?
20. Does each of the books encourage the learner to utilize the cultural experiences beyond the classroom?

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study involved two textbooks – “Nigeria Primary School English Pupils’ Book 1” and the “Longman Advantage Primary English Pupils’ Book 1, the former having been published by Longman and the latter by Pearson and Longman. (The former will henceforth be referred to as PSEB1 and the latter as ADVE1.) The choice of both books by the same publishers was informed by the international experience of the publishers and the fact that this investigator once evaluated a series of Longman’s publications for secondary schools (Olajide 2004) and wished to see if Longman is consistent in its attitude to learners’ culture. More important is that this investigator considered the primary school level as being crucial to the formation of language habits and building of literacy and numeracy skills. The investigation involved careful isolation of the cultural content available within each text. The tabulation of the content was done in line with the 20 specific purposes already stated which derived from Emenyonu (1993) and Kilichaya (2005). The specific purposes may be viewed as equivalents of, and alternatives to, research questions this investigator could have posed separately. Frequency count and percentage were used to analyse the cultural data observed in the books.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, the relevant cultural content of each book is identified, analysed and discussed in Table 1.

### V. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the analysis in table 1, above, the following summary of findings can be made:

1. Both books contain familiar physical features, although to differing degrees (8% in PSEB1 and 23% in ADVE1).
2. They also contain relevant economic activities differently (12% in PSEB1 and 22.6% in ADVE1).
3. While only 1% of PSEB1 relates to political activities, ADVE1 pays no clear attention to such activities.
4. However, the books address living conditions of people (12% in PSEB1 and 5.3% in ADVE1). Also, they reflect the urban-rural dichotomy in living condition (10% in PSEB1 and 4.3% in ADVE1).
5. Both books pay attention to how their cultural content may be handled by both pupils and teachers.
6. Nevertheless, the books fairly reflect the characteristics of learners in the cultural activities they contain (15% in PSEB1 and 13.1% in ADVE1).
7. They also reflect a variety of cultures (09% in PSEB1 and 2.7% in ADVE1).
8. They are somewhat realistic in the culture they portray (3% in PSEB1 and 2.7% in ADVE1).
9. In both books, authors express no personal opinions.
10. More of the cultural content of PSEB1 (6%) is empirically derived than that of ADVE1 (2.7%).
11. Neither of the books directly refers to a target culture.
12. Neither of the books contains cultural content irrelevant to the learners.
13. The books are weak regarding the categorization of socio-cultural elements (only 4% of PSEB1 relates to such categorization, while only 2.7% of ADVE1 does).
14. While 2% of ADVE1 contains unexpected cultural generalizations, PSEB1 has not made any of such generalizations.
15. Both books contain neither negative nor positive comments on their cultural contents.
16. The books make equally considerable illustrations of the cultural contents involved (24% each).
17. PSEB1 contains more (24%) of familiar activities than ADVE1 that has only 8% of such activities.
18. While PSEB1 does not encourage the learners to use the cultural information provided in the classroom, 3.4% of ADVE1 does.

TABLE 1:  
PRESENTATION OF THE CULTURAL CONTENTS OF THE TWO BOOKS.

S/NO	CULTURE RELATED QUESTIONS	PSEB 1					ADVE 1				
		Y	N	PAGES FOUND	F	%	Y	N	PAGES FOUND	F	%
1	Does the book reflect familiar physical features?	√		1,2,15,16,26,57,75,83.	08	8	√		1,2,7,9,12,17,21,24,32,33,36,39,41,42,45,49,60,63,66,84,92,94,97.	23	24
2	Does the book contain socio-economic activities relevant to the environment?	√		28,29.	02	28	√		9,17,21,24,28,32,36,39,42,45,49,52,59,63,66,71,74,77,84,85,100,104	22	23
3	Does the book relate to political activities?	√		73.	01	1		√	Nil	Nil	Nil
4	Does the book project living conditions?	√		30,32,33,55,58,61,68,71,74,77.	10	10	√		28,32,36,52,54,56.	05	5.3
5	Does the living condition projected reflect rural-urban dichotomy?	√		16,17,30,58,61,71.	07	7	√		32,36,56,104.	04	4.3
6	Does the book suggest how its cultural content may be handled?		√	Nil	Nil	Nil		√	Nil	Nil	Nil
7	What learner characteristics reflected in the book?	√		1,2,11,12,31,57,58,59,61,68,71,79,83,84,85.	15	15	√		1,2,5,7,9,11,17,21,28,61,67,81,88.	13	13.
8	Does the book reflect a variety of culture?	√		11,12,35,58,75,76,77,78,83.	09	9	√		81,104	02	2.7
9	Is the book realistic about the culture[s] it portrays?	√		75,76,77.	03	3	√		81,104	02	2.7
10	Is the culture aimed in the book based on the author's opinion?		√	No authorial intervention.	Nil	Nil		√	Nil	Nil	Nil
11	Is the culture the book contains derived empirically?	√		15,58,70,75,78,83.	06	6	√		81,104	02	2.7
12	Do the topics in the book directly refer to target culture?		√	Nil: cultural references are made pictorially	Nil	Nil		√	Nil	Nil	Nil
13	Are there cultural items in the book not relevant to the users' culture?		√	Nil	Nil	Nil		√	Nil	Nil	Nil
14	Are there socio-cultural categories in the book?	√		1,75,76,77.	04	4	√		81,104	02	2.7
15	The book contains cultural generalizations not expected?		√	Nil	Nil	Nil	√		81,104	02	2.7
16	Does the book contains positive comments on the cultural information passed?		√	Nil	Nil	Nil		√		Nil	Nil
17	The book contains negative comments on the cultural information it passes?		√	Nil	Nil	Nil				Nil	Nil
18	Are appropriate illustrations made in the book?	√		11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,58,61,74,75,76,77,78,79,80,81,82,83,84,85.	24	24	√		2,4,11,17,24,32,42,45,49,59,63,66,71,74,75,77,81,84,88,91,92,95,100,104.	24	24
19	Are familiar activities presented in the book?	√		11,12,13,14,15,16,7,18,19,20,21,22,23,35,36,71,73,76'	21	21	√		9,39,45,52,88,97,100,104	08	8.
20	Does the book encourage the learners to use the cultural information?		√		Nil	Nil			9,17,19	03	3.4

KEY:

Y: Yes

N: No

F: Frequency of occurrence.

PSEB1: Primary English Book1 (see References.

ADVE1: Advantage English Book1 (see References.)

The attention paid to the physical environment in the books may be viewed as appropriate, since young learners require familiarity with their environment in forming their worldviews as advocated by Akintunde (1993), Emenyonu (1993), Kramsch (1998) and Kilichaya (2004). Also, the use of familiar activities by the authors of both books can make the learning of English easy for the pupils. However, the authors' neglect of political cultures would seem not quite appropriate, because learners need to be sensitized to democratic values right from their formative years. The slim attention paid to living condition in both books is also not good enough, because exposing the young learners to such conditions could develop in them the sympathy, appreciation and empathy which human community need to be able to live in peace and harmony and make excellent progress. By not providing information on how the cultural content of the books may be used, the authors have not helped creativity, whereas the world can best be preserved and promoted through creative intellect (Courtney 1974, Emenyonu 1993, Obafemi, 1994, Kilichaya 2004). Also, as suggested by Kramsch (1998) and Olajide, 2004, increased creativity through language learning could lead to appropriate language attitude, and vice versa. Both books should have utilized the considerable insights they offer into learner characteristics in promoting creativity. The variety of culture the books provide is, however, adequate. It will be prepare learners for living across geographical boundaries, which is in line with globalisation. Akintunde (1993) and Olajide (2004) are agreed that effective language textbooks should prepare learners for international living.

By being realistic and empirical about the cultural experiences they offer the learners, the authors made the books usable, memorable and apt. That the authors have not included their personal opinions in the books is also instructive: they seem not willing to force ideas into the young and impressionistic learners! Also, the children cannot be engaged in long and intellectually demanding discourse because of their limited experiences and weak language base. The illustrations made in the two books are also useful devices; they aid and stimulate the learners by appealing to their senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, movement and hearing. The use of familiar activities can also increase the sense of identity among the children as advocated by Akintunde (1993) and make education a productive enterprise for them. Education for creativity is what the world encourages greatly today. However, such productivity would seem to have been lacking in Nigeria education, which has resulted in the un-employability of graduates!

The books seem to rate low for not providing information about how their cultural contents may be used. They should have used appropriate evaluation modes to cause the learners to use the cultural contents. The exercises provided by the authors have mainly targeted the development of language skills rather than situating such skills in cultural, creative and productive contexts.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two books under investigation have shown considerable but differing sensitivity to cultural content. They have paid attention to the psychological age of the learners and reflected Nigeria's desire for education that can globalize the learners, apart from sensitizing them to their immediate environment. However, the authors will need to build in evaluation modes that can ensure that learners actually utilize the cultural contents provided. Such cultural contents may also be improved upon by being further categorized, to include the traditional elements.

The present study is itself not exhaustive. It has not gone beyond two Primary One textbooks produced by the same publishers, whereas there are hundreds of reputable publishers in Nigeria who have also produced basal materials. Even textbooks by one publisher may vary the ways they address cultural content across the different classes of the Primary School, up to the Junior Secondary School which is now regarded as the Upper Basic Level (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2007). Thus, further investigation is needed to redress these and other lapses of the study.

## APPENDIX: TEXTS INVESTIGATED

Macauley, J., B. Oderinde, F. Badaki, B. Somoye, N Hawkes & D. Dallas (2007). Nigeria. Primary English: Pupils' Book 1 (UBE Edition). Longman Nigeria PLC.  
Ekpa, A., F. Vanessa, C. Minkley, F. Moh, D. Utsalo & G. Ikpeme (2008) Advantage. English: Pupils' Book 1. Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited.

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