

Chapter 5

The Cultural Impact of Hidden Curriculum on Language Learners: A Review and Some Implications for Curriculum Design

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ABSTRACT

With reference to theory and research, this chapter discusses the hidden curriculum of language textbooks and other teaching materials where culture, gender, race, or other topics associated with equality, diversity, and representativeness were presented in biased ways. Hidden curriculum may describe, present, or elicit stereotypes and reproduce cultural, gender, and racial bias in subtle ways; sometimes even teachers may not notice what the curriculum refers to or they may perceive stereotyping as harmless. This makes sociolinguistic problems with regard to use of a purist and monolithic cultural content more salient than ever. Yet, the new sociolinguistic landscape of language teaching where changing needs of language learners might not be accurately represented in teaching materials require the revision of current curricula and pedagogical practices. Therefore, this chapter draws conclusions from empirical studies on the topic and provides some implications for teaching and materials design.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1962-2.ch005

INTRODUCTION

Hidden curriculum which contains culture-related elements such as ideologies, political agendas and preconceived notions on gender, age, religion, sexuality and nationality is considered a serious issue in language teaching materials (Hilliard, 2014; Matsuda, 2017). Language learning and teaching deals with cultural elements which are frequently mentioned in several teaching materials such as informative and descriptive texts, dialogues, writing tasks, lexical items, realia, visuals and audio recordings. Therefore, language teaching materials in which interactions between people, historical events or social practices of a country are mentioned through verbal and non-verbal (i.e. symbols, gestures) messages, might create prejudices on certain countries and nations or groups of people. What Pierre Bourdieu refers to as symbolic power (1991), which is imbued in the domination relationship that remains implicit in cultural and habitual practices. Such domination relationships lead to what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, subjugation of a group which is culturally dominated in representation by words, images and ideas. Implicit curriculum is such an interesting site in which relations of cultural domination and subsequently symbolic violence could be studied.

Language does not only convey communicative information but it also plays several important roles from establishing international relationships between nations to maintaining social relationships among members of communities (Byram, 1997; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Sharifian, 2013). From this point of view, the importance of learning a language (other than speakers' native languages) as a common means of communication has been increasing in recent years. In line, starting from the mid-1900s, English language has been widely used over a large geographical area as a language of communication. Although this view is contested with languages such as Chinese and Spanish being spoken rather widely, English language currently has 1.5 billion speakers of whom 370 million are speakers of English as a native language (Nelson, 2019). Therefore, content of language teaching materials in English containing hidden curriculum might be a powerful source of creating social interactions, thoughts and beliefs across English speaking domains (Byram, 2008; Chapelle, 2009). Indeed, English language has been a medium of cultural power and domination across a culturally diverse geography to which it has reached.

Yet, the presence of hidden curricula which go beyond factual information, such as imposing ideologies of individualism and materialism, representing target cultures superficially and overly positive, creating stereotypes and assumptions on gender, religion, sexuality, political beliefs and nationalities, is a problem not only in English teaching materials but also in other language teaching materials (i.e. French, German and Japanese) (Chapelle, 2009; Heinrich, 2005; Shin, Eslami, & Chen,

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