

A Critical Reading of English Rhymes Taught at Primary Schools in West Bengal

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Abstract

Cultural hegemony tacit within the official school syllabi of post-colonial India has not been subjected to scientific criticism. School curricular content for young language learners (YLL) has the potential to create standardized human products of a hegemonic social system. Critical readings of primary level textbooks therefore hold relevance. This study undertook a critical reading of rhymes from the purposively selected English textbook of Class-III taught in West Bengal. Qualitative methods were adopted. Latent analysis (of content) was used for revealing complicated interests at play within the selected English as Second Language (ESL) textbook. The tacit themes emerging post analysis of the official content comprised of — socio-cultural hegemony and hierarchy, homogenization, gender neutrality, and contextuality. It was found that young minds could be instructed to become conforming, unquestioning mechanical products of a society through the teaching of English rhymes during primary schooling. The undermining of contextual representations through a globally dominant language and culture (English) was also prominent. An in-depth study of these English rhymes implied that their teaching sustained socio-cultural hegemony, promoted homogenization of thought and actions, thereby compromising upon critical consciousness of the YLL in context.

Keywords: ESL textbook, cultural hegemony, contextual education, critical reading

1. Introduction

Textbooks prescribed in schools do not promote “neutral knowledge” (Apple 1992, pp.4). Textual content, acting as legitimate or official knowledge for young learners, is the product of complex struggles, power relations and negotiations among contextual variables like race, class, caste, religion, gender, and ethnic groups (Apple 1992). Texts are designed, conceptualized and produced by real people with interests that are often complex and subjective in nature. Major conceptual and empirical studies have been conducted in the last few decades in gauging ‘what’ official knowledge transacted in school curriculum receives social approval. However, the one aspect which plays a key role in defining the culture of the students, and is taught through systemic legitimization of knowledge has more often than not been scarcely delved into. This aspect – the textbook, which defines the bounds of knowledge in schools, especially among young language learners (YLL), is a matter of critical reading. The need for embarking upon such an analysis is also justified by Vendramin (2004) who advocates that such researches on primary educational curriculum contribute towards better understanding of individual and social identities.

“Investigating primary education curricula as an important source of knowledge about our social and cultural worlds, and as factors affecting understanding about the self and social relations.”

[Vendramin 2004, pp. 113]

This study specifically aims to critically analyze the content of an ESL textbook taught at the government primary schools of the state of West Bengal, India. The objective is to perceive the official content of primary schooling in the light of a wider process of dissemination of cultural politics. Apple considers that critical reading of texts must focus upon “the complex power relationships involved in their production, contexts, use, and reading” (1992, p.4). He cautions against arriving at overtly narrow perspectives, and points to the significance of innovative forms of textual analysis that stress on the politics of how students actually create meanings around texts. This rationale behind an avoidably unbiased critical reading, as posited by Apple (1992), has been the guiding principle of this study.

In most countries teachers heavily depend on textbooks for teaching. Textbooks guide teaching in Indian schools no differently, and, the role of teachers in integrating culture into pedagogy, is a pertinent area of research. English textbooks are often used as the only resource and teaching aid in ESL classrooms in the context of Indian schools.

The concept of a hidden curriculum, as discussed by educationists such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and Ira Shor among others, deals with knowledge gained during primary and secondary schooling often associated with a negative connotation. These include any learning experiences taught through societal relationships and practices prevailing in school and social settings. A hidden curriculum is a set of lessons “which are learned but not openly intended” (Martin 1983). It also relates to what is being taught in terms of legitimate knowledge alongside affecting factors such as world view, attitudes, assumptions, and so on, which remain unseen and implicit in curriculum. All of this is surreptitiously passed on ‘invisibly’, ‘tacitly’, and ‘unknowingly’ (Vendramin 2004, pp. 118). Althusser’s ideological State apparatus – the school in question, therefore transmits ideology not only through curricular content but through a formative pedagogy. The ideological nature of curriculum is manifested in dual aspects: it implants ideas and also establishes hierarchical relations amongst different knowledge forms in the most naturalized way possible (Donald 1992). The paper thus attempted to expose the deeper implications of curricular content in nurturing YLL as homogenized products of a society in order to maintain the socio-cultural status quo (tacitly preserving the long withstanding, dominating cultural ethos of the society) and suppressing the critical consciousness of individuals (Freire 2000). To carry out the study, latent analysis was suitably used which, is most often defined as, a form of content analysis that helps in interpreting what is hidden deep within the text, over and above the manifest content that the text readily conveys.

2. Literature Review

Weninger (2018) analysed English textbooks to examine “curricular-cultural artefacts”. These textbooks thus aid in conveying significant cultural and contextual aspects, content, and designs meaningfully. The study further assessed how the textual content and illustrations represent places, people and languages, as well as how they direct and shape learners’ understandings. Ndura (2004) analyzed that the content of instructional material affects students’ attitudes towards themselves, and their characterization of people and society by and large. The study advocates that ESL textbooks should reflect multiple perspectives inherent to a pluralistic society in order to connect students to a process of revealing and tackling cultural biases which would further facilitate intercultural learning.

Selected ESL textbooks were found to possess cultural biases and stereotypes and it was suggested that diverse life experiences of students in pluralistic society be included to empower students to identify the missing, misconstrued and misrepresented voices.

Gonen and Saglam pointed that “teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of teaching culture as a part of language study” (Estaji and Savarabadi 2020). According to Waliyadin and Petraki (2020) extensive research on textbook evaluation revealed the limitations of EFL textbooks and along with Jakupčević and Čavar Portolan (2021), the studies recommended the need for improvement of textual materials, specifically focussing on elements of pragmatic development of the YLL. Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) state that “cultural understanding should not be disregarded but should be in the heart of second language learning”. All these reviews help in determining the gap in research on ESL textbooks in Indian settings and how integral it is to understand the process of cultural transmission that takes place through selection of content in language textbooks.

3. Research Questions

The two research questions posed in the study were:

1. What are the hidden discourses at play behind the narratives of the selected rhymes?
2. To what extent are the rhymes contextually relevant to the lived experiences of the students?

4. Methods

The qualitative method of research was adopted for this study. The text, *Butterfly English Textbook for Class III*, prescribed for Government and Government-aided/sponsored schools of the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, was selected purposively for the critical reading since it would be the intermediate stage of primary schooling in the state. All nine rhymes included in the said textbook, were analysed through an in-depth critical reading. Latent analysis, under the broader tenet of content analysis was carried out. Subsequent to an in-depth search for the possible hidden meanings within the text, a series of codes were formulated. The codes then lead to major themes that have been discussed to address the research questions. Minor codes unfitting any major themes were eliminated. Parallel coding was undertaken by both the researchers. Inter-coder reliability was established following norms of qualitative research data analysis for the purpose of avoiding subjective researcher bias in coding of content. The findings have evolved out of mutual agreement upon major themes that have matched in both the analysis. Findings emerging post latent analysis were discussed with reference to related literature.

5. Findings and Discussion

The latent analysis of the rhymes through the qualitative research procedure discussed above yielded the following major themes which have sought to address the research questions posed in the study. The findings have been divided under two categories of “Themes and Text” and “Context and Text” catering to the two research questions respectively.

5.1 Themes and Text

In order to address the first research question posed in the study, the latent analysis of the rhymes revealed discourses of hegemony. Hegemony has been discussed with respect to various aspects: cultural, social and political norms that are presented in ideological forms. Besides this, themes of hierarchy in society, homogenization of the child as a standard social product with a set of pre-defined characteristics, and gender neutrality have emerged as other predominant themes latent within the studied rhymes. These themes have been subsequently discussed with reference to reviewed scientific studies on similar areas.

5.1.1 Hegemony, Hierarchy and Text

Antonio Gramsci discussed the notion of hegemony throughout his seminal *Prison Notebooks* and stated that the fundamental starting point to this idea rested on his readings of Karl Marx (Boothman 2008; pp. 201-202). Hegemony, to Gramsci, is the moral, cultural, and ideological control imposed by a section over similar and/or other subaltern groups. It is based on the equilibrium between consent and coercion. The basic premise of hegemony is that man is ruled, not only by force, but also by a set of ideas which form the basis of a culture (Hoare and Smith, 2005). The following evidences from the textbook elucidate this hegemony of ideas in the form of socio-cultural constructs. The first rhyme in the textbook begins with the lines:

“Eight little fingers standing up tall

Two little ears to hear mummy call”.

[*Butterfly* pp. 15]

Latent analysis of this excerpt revealed the themes of hegemony and hierarchy. Listening to a tacitly directive order is imminent. The functional role of a child’s ears has been assigned. This dubiously suggested obedient listening to a mother’s call, perhaps even ignoring multiple opinions that might be important to weigh – perhaps from the father, other family members, or even peers. The rhyme implies an unquestioning obedience towards a singular voice of authority. The voice of the mother is figuratively the ultimate disciplinary force in culture. Such a cultural notion stands valid in India. These lines reinforce the themes of hegemony and hierarchy imposed upon a child through the primary agency of socialization - the family and, more often the mother.

The theme of hegemony is further tacit in lines such as “Ten little toes all in a row” (*Butterfly* pp. 15), “Stamp, stamp, stamp your feet” and “travelling on your feet” (*Butterfly* pp.118). Such lines elicit social expectations of a homogenous physical identity whereby, any physical disability might be treated as an anomaly to normalcy. Culturally this hegemony is imperative in most Indian school settings where an overriding sense of discipline can be observed – be it in prayer halls or on playgrounds. Little children are instructed to stand in an orderly fashion in well-defined spaces in morning school assemblies or perform drill exercises on counts in the playgrounds. In contrast, there is a counter discourse simultaneously posited in a rhyme, in the lines:

“One little nose that I can blow ...

Hands to clap and eyes to see,

What fun it is to be just me!” [*Butterfly* pp. 15]

In these lines, the child is permitted the autonomy to act as they feel and, hence, the spontaneous joy of having control over their own actions is evident. The findings that emerged within the same theme were conflicting notions of — autonomy versus hegemony, democratic child-rearing versus authoritative nurturing. These findings go in line with the observation that cultural contestation between moral regulation and democracy can be stimulated by a single text (Apple, 1993).

The themes of hierarchy and hegemony resurface again in the fourth rhyme of the textbook. In it, human beings are represented as superior and powerful organisms controlling the lives of weaker species. This sense of hierarchy is manifested through the lines:

*“Bird in the cage
Bird in the cage
I will break your bars,
And we’ll fly to the stars!”*

[Butterfly pp. 65]

The politics involved in capturing free birds and taking pseudo-pride in liberating them is also suggestive of the analogous clash of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in human society. The theme of socio-political hegemony is latently evoked through such an act of power-play. Such content could be therefore seen to be justifying the social hierarchy. This is endorsed further by Jiang (2000) who noted that language and culture are inseparable identities. Jiang (2000) used the metaphor of the iceberg to demonstrate that the visible part of the iceberg is - language with a small part of culture visible above; beneath the surface of language, the vast and invisible aspect of culture remains hidden. Further, the following lines from the fifth rhyme reflected an extension into the theme of socio-cultural hegemony:

*We must be in time, said they
First we study then we play;
That is how we learn the rule
As we froggies go to school.*

[Butterfly pp.81]

Cultural hegemony lies hidden beneath the surface of such usages of language in these rhymes if viewed in the light of Jiang’s (2000) ice-berg metaphor. The teacher-student relationship is perceived as a master-slave hierarchy wherein, teaching to strive, leap and dive is in a manner which makes all these hardships seem very ‘gentle’ and noble. This is simultaneously an instance of social-cultural hegemony which can be supported by Bourdieu’s (1991) argument that language can express power relations and reflect different positions in the social hierarchy. This linguistically hidden form of power relations is manifested strongly in the fifth rhyme called “Twenty Frogs”. The conventional hierarchical role of teachers is depicted here as the “Master bullfrog” who teaches the same routine activities to lead a disciplined life, without hinting at any encouragement for out-of-the box thinking

or activities. The rhyme echoes the well-known proverbial analogy of ‘frog in the well’ which critiques such restrictive upbringing or learning.

*“Master bullfrog brave and stern
Taught us each all in our turn,
Taught us how to leap and drive
Also how to nobly strive.”*

[*Butterfly* pp. 81]

The instilling of hegemony through repetitive actions was found again in another rhyme of the textbook. Codes such as ‘mechanical existence’ and ‘monotonous movements’ were deciphered in lines such as –

*“The wheels of the bus
Go round and round
All day long.”*

[*Butterfly* pp. 105]

Such forms of linguistic drills or reiterations have the power to instill hegemonic ideas about set systemic functions, without the involvement of critical thoughts. Studies have suggested the importance of language education for developing critical consciousness stressing upon the students’ active role in the learning process as well as in culture formation. Raquitico harps on the idea that if students are aware of the “power to construct and reconstruct words and meanings, they would not fear learning, expressing their voice, and sharing it with others” (2014, pp.12). It is observed here that the rhymes set forth guidance towards a set of conforming attitudes which inevitably proves detrimental to the development of critical questioning skills among the YLL. The ideas conveyed through this strict regimental training or set repetitive, normative actions, as portrayed in the rhymes, are outright contradictory to Raquitico’s (2014) idea of textual content that instills learning without fear, and promotes expression and sharing of individual opinion. The finding also goes in line with Weninger (2018) who discussed how content of language instruction are, in fact, cultural artifacts that determine how students will be positioning themselves in society, in terms of social identity. In this case, the YLL are therefore, instructed to become law-abiding unquestioning citizens of future who always perceive the monotonous social systems as a way of life. The sustenance of social hierarchy and cultural hegemony are further manifested in these lines:

*“Twenty froggies grew up fast
Big frogs they became at last.
Polished to a high degree
As each froggie ought to be,
Now they sit on other logs*

Teaching other little frogs.”

[*Butterfly* pp. 81]

The hierarchy suggested through these lines also reflect that the culture of knowledge transmission goes on as a mechanical process through generations, sustaining the status quo. Challenging or critically questioning the existing norms is not encouraged in this dilapidated education system. Probing further into the fifth rhyme, another counter discourse within the same rhyme is perceived. The rhyme promotes an interesting idea simultaneously: any anti-establishment threat to the existing socio-cultural order is perceived as a more powerful entity. Hence, the ones who follow the rule are merely represented as frogs, but the ones who break the rules are portrayed as humans. This counter theme is substantiated with the help of the following lines from the rhyme “Twenty Frogs”:

“Taught them how to dodge a blow

From the stick that bad boys throw.”

[*Butterfly* pp. 81]

The “bad boys” (*Butterfly* pp. 81) can be figuratively the anti-socials –protesting voices against establishment; hence, ‘bad’. They are pitted against those, who blindly follow the cultural hegemony and social hierarchy: the so called good, unquestioning “froggies”. Thus the rhyme is at once laden with latent references to social conformation and unquestioning obeisance to hierarchical establishments and at the same time, demonstrating anti-establishment ideas. This again reiterates Apple’s (1993) notion of a single text representing conflicting claims of moral regulations alongside democratization of thoughts.

5.1.2 Homogenization and Text

The notion that every child should fit into its role as a standardized human product of the society, to the extent of neglecting any possible unique characteristic is evident in the first rhyme of the selection. This broader theme of homogenization of the child’s physical characteristics is explicit in the lines:

“Two short thumbs that wriggle up and down,

Two little feet to stand on the ground.

Hands to clap and eyes to see”.

[*Butterfly* pp. 15]

Any aberration or disability is seemingly unacceptable to the society. This nurtures a potentially damaging idea of intolerance towards the differently-abled in society. With inclusive education becoming a policy level priority for the Government of India since 1974 with formal schemes like the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) coupled with addition of similar philosophy in the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) in 1997 onwards, the integration of children with mild to moderate physical disabilities into mainstream education systems, has been a national agenda. Instances of homogenization of physical experiences, latent in an ESL textbook, is crippling

towards such agendas of national importance at the primary level of education. Another instance of suggestive physical homogenization, latent within the eighth rhyme from the text can also be cited in this regard:

*“Stamp, stamp, stamp your feet,
Stamp them on the ground.
Travelling, travelling on your feet,
Walk to get around!”*

[*Butterfly* pp. 118]

The evocative meanings of the above two excerpts from two rhymes in the textbook of primary level, in West Bengal tends to undermine the parallel existence of YLL who have some physical deformity by birth or accident. It is stereotypically suggested through rhythmic language and action verbs, that movements of the limbs are ‘normal’ for mankind to “get around!” (*Butterfly* pp. 118). This goes in line with Ndura’s (2004) finding that instructional materials do possess cultural biases and stereotypes. The suggestions put forward by Ndura (2004) to include diverse life experiences of students in a pluralistic society and to empower students to identify the missing and misrepresented voices within texts holds utmost relevance in this regard as well. The theme is reiterated further in the next rhyme. Each animal or bird is associated with a specific symbolic utterance as follows:

*“Bow, Wow, says the dog,
Mew, mew, says the cat,”*

[*Butterfly* pp. 27]

In the Bengali language, the contextual word used for the same symbolic utterance is ‘gheu-gheu’ (dog) and ‘myao-myao’ (cat). The YLL could naturally encounter confusion regarding identification of animal sounds especially when they differ in forms of linguistic utterance. It may be said that homogenization of standard linguistic utterances in English is latent within such rhymes. The fifth rhyme in the series by George Cooper is very evocative and loaded with meanings:

*“Twenty froggies went to school
Down beside a rushing pool
Twenty little coats of green,
Twenty vests all white and clean.”*

[*Butterfly* pp.81]

Animal substitutes replicate the image of kids going to school wearing the same set of uniform, reinforcing the theme of homogenization of children as standard societal products. The uniform metaphor is borrowed from the military field which in its own ways signify a homogeneous unity of different individuals motivated into a common cause —for serving an authoritative command. The reality of children in various schools in rural India is somewhat contrary to this portrayal. Rural

Indian children sometimes still cannot afford to go to school each day with clean and well-maintained uniforms. The present textbook is officially taught in such rural government and government-aided/sponsored schools in West Bengal. The impact of such content on any child belonging to low socio-economic background should be concern enough for teachers and curriculum-makers alike. The rhyme unequivocally portrays that white and clean vests, uniformed children must go to schools and what can be tacitly inferred is that the ones who cannot afford to do it on a regular basis are perhaps social misfits. This is not only homogenization of expectations from a school going population in a developing country, but also, a matter of grave concern in terms of the probable effect upon child psychology at this primary stage of schooling where issues like drop-outs have been stated as a grave concern in Indian educational policies since Independence.

The last rhyme of the textbook depicts another instance of homogenization whereby the phenomenon of travelling on a boat and its related enjoyment, were presented in a manner that evoke a sense of entitlement– to “enjoy” boat rides which can be afforded by a certain privileged section of society alone. There remains a silence on the understandings of children who would not be privileged enough to travel on a boat or any kind of joy ride. In some cases, rural transport through the river on boats is even a daily challenge for children and villagers hence, enjoyment is far from the reality of such lived experiences. The lines that denote such a perspective are:

“Most of the people
Crowd to the side,
Just to enjoy
Their boat ride.”

[*Butterfly* pp. 126]

Dyson (1999) suggested how instruction of content needs to be transformed in accordance with the needs of children, who are situated in local cultures. The above findings are instances of textual homogenization which can be critiqued by Dyson’s (1999) study which censured existing textual content and pedagogy as being contrary to expectations of children, which are innately and socially constructed, from outside the official discourse prevailing in schools. The act of homogenization of children through official knowledge is therefore a latent phenomenon and needs to be contested through further studies.

5.1.3 Gender Neutrality and Text

Another tacit theme that surfaced on latent textual analysis is the question of gender neutrality. Gender neutral content in schooling is crucial for attaining global goals of gender equality. De Castell et.al. (1989) advocate the identification of sexist, racial and social class bias in textbooks. Going in line with this advocacy, the fifth rhyme in the selection was found laden with tacit insinuation of gender bias. The following line from the text is deeply evocative and suggestive of gender sensitive content— “From the stick that bad boys throw” (*Butterfly* pp. 81). The inference might be a biased perception of the female gender towards the males, as essentially “bad”.

Primary school children possess transparent minds. Gender sensitive imprints entail potential threats to the vision of a nation aiming towards a gender neutrality society. It is important to note that females are not the only victims of gender discrimination as mainstream gender neutral discourses often perceive. The male gender, represented in curricular content should not be imposed with stereotypical gender identity as well. Gender neutrality in the present study, emerges as a challenge that needs to be addressed with care by the teachers, while transacting such content. Such an implication is supported by Vendramin (2004) who states that there may exist “subtle points of discrimination” in education coupled with the “beliefs, attitudes and assumptions of teachers” which, “together with a biased curriculum” can prove detrimental to gender equality goals through education. The study stressed upon the importance of teachers in interpreting curriculum and, interacting with students to convey the right meanings of gender sensitive content. Hence, to the above cited textual example, teachers need to address that some boys may be bad, while all boys are not necessarily bad, to clear any ambiguity in thoughts.

5.2 Context and Text

The second part of this paper dealt with the second research question of analyzing the contextual relevance of the rhymes, pitting them against the lived experiences of the local students. Cazden (1989) presented a view of textbooks as explicit and autonomous statements of how some slice of the world actually is and, emphasized that the context within which language is taught determines meanings for texts. Using this as a support for contextual relevance of textual content the ensuing analysis was performed.

On critical reading using latent analysis, the following major findings emerged. In the second rhyme of this selection “Bow, Wow, says the dog” (*Butterfly* pp. 27), the last line of the rhyme in other available versions from a digital source read: “And what the peacock says, you know!” (“Bow, Wow, says the dog: Nursery Rhymes: LKG: UKG.”). However, the version of the rhyme in the studied textbook read: “And what the sparrow says, you know!” (*Butterfly* pp. 27). The replacement of the national bird with a local and commonly spotted bird in West Bengal (the sparrow or ‘chawrai’ as it is commonly called in Bengali) was a viable finding. This might provide a connection to commonly lived experiences of the YLL and thereby was seen promoting contextual language learning. The fourth rhyme of the selection contained lines that raised questions on contextuality of learner experiences. The lines read:

“Bird in the cage

Bird in the cage

Will you fly away

On a warm sunny day?”

[*Butterfly* pp.65]

Latent analysis raised critical questions like – Do birds conventionally exist in cages or freely in nature? Are not birds culturally regarded as emblems of free flight? Such textual content leads to ambiguity in understanding of natural phenomena. The imprisonment of birds is supposedly established as a norm, and releasing them is perceived as an exception to the norm. Another instance

from the last rhyme denotes a similar de-contextual idea as it mentions an act of – “Watching the sea-gulls” (*Butterfly* pp. 126). The sea-gull is commonly an unfamiliar bird in the context of West Bengal unlike the sparrow in the previous rhyme. YLL of primary schools would be unfamiliar to a sea-gull — a bird, not native to the Indian sub-continent and, rarely spotted, seasonal, and migratory. Such instances devoid of contextuality would be typically confusing for the YLL. Advocating the importance of preserving contextual and culturally congruous content, Bhawuk (2008) stated the necessity to equally sustain differences of indigenous cultures through pedagogic models in an era of globalization. This is to ensure that the global village does not end up manufacturing a culturally homogenized human society, promoting further loss of unique cultural edifices. The de-contextual experiences from the above mentioned rhymes are contrary to this assertion by Bhawuk (2008).

The threatening separation of learning from play is portrayed in the fifth rhyme through the lines- “First we study, then we play” [*Butterfly* pp. 81]. The concept – study before play – is against the popular educational concept of student-centred learning. However, it might be held contextual to the local Bengali culture in question which, is laden with colonial influences. A familiar Bengali proverb like ‘*Porashona kore je, gari-ghora chawrey shey*’ (researcher translation: whoever studies, rides cars and horses) was bashed in this context, by the famous director Satyajit Ray, in his classic film on hegemony and hierarchy- *Hirok Rajar Deshe*. This proverb was mocked through the dialogue “*Lekha-pora kore je* (researcher translation: whoever writes and reads), *awnahare mawre shey* (researcher translation: dies of starvation)”. This complex display of contextual experiences is intriguing but at the same time valid since it has basis in the culture which gives rise to such conceptions.

Other lines from the same rhyme: “Taught them how to dodge a blow/ From the stick that bad boys throw” (*Butterfly* pp. 81) might express a sense of escapism to the YLL. This rhyme directly conveys a meaning that is contrary to the concept of overcoming challenges communicated through the rhyme “Incy Wincey Spider” in the same textbook. In comparison, the rhyme is also contradictory to Rabindranath Tagore’s contextual philosophy reflected in a song from his cult creation *Geetanjali*:

*“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge is free;
...there waken up my country...”*

[Tagore 2012, pp. 72]

Tagore’s other Bengali song reiterating the same philosophy of courage also stands testimony to the de-contextual content presented in the rhyme. The song “*Bipade more rokkha kawro, e nawhe mor praarthana/ Bipade aami naa jyano kori bhoy*” (Thakur 1404¹) advocates that one must be fearless and poised in the face of problems and challenges. The song is literally translated as ‘I do not pray so that you save me from danger/ Instead, I entreat you to make me grow unafraid of challenges’ (researcher translation). The rhyme therefore evokes decontextualization in the prima facie of the Bengali cultural context.

¹ The corresponding edition of the book was published in the month of ‘Poush’ 1404 as per the Bengali calendar which corresponds to the Gregorian years 1997 – 1998 (December/January)

Contextualizing of learning experiences in primary classrooms have been found beneficial in studies. Au (1980) showed Hawaiian children participated more in reading classes which demonstrated techniques of instruction from local culture. De Castell et. al. argued with respect to context and the text stating, school textbooks hold a unique social function—to represent “an officially sanctioned, authorized version of human knowledge and culture”(1989, p. vii). However, the study also mentioned that in post-industrial settings, “textbooks form shared cultural experiences”- sometimes “memorable and edifying” while at other times, “eminently forgettable and uneducational” (De Castell et. al. 1989). This supports the findings post latent analysis of the rhymes with regards to contextual relevance. While some of the textual selections provide a fairly contextual learning experience for YLL in ESL settings, some others were found to provide de-contextual learning experiences which are suggested to be avoided at the primary levels of schooling.

The theme mentioned in the Foreword to the textbook analyzed is ‘Life around us’ and the objective stated is to “cater to various types of learners” and to be “appreciated by all sections of the society”. It has also been mentioned that the book is guided by the vision of Rabindranath Tagore, who himself rejected uninspiring and preaching content. However, these objectives and the contextually guiding principle of Tagore were found to be challenged through certain implications emerging out of the critical reading of the textbook.

6. Conclusion

The use of de-contextual content could be considerably seen as a means of sustaining a colonial mindset: that of the superiority of the English culture over the local cultural connotations. Indian English literature has evolved since independence and finds place in higher education curricula in India. The same however, is not sufficiently included in school curriculum, especially considering the contextual relevance of such content which can help the YLL in gauging the language better in ESL settings. This paper therefore recommends the inclusion of more indigenous and contextual forms of literary content in ESL curricula, especially at primary stages of education. This would result in debunking the notion of a cultural hegemony hideously propagated through the English textbooks in ESL settings.

The study not only posed several contesting themes on these aspects but also supported textual instances providing contextual experiences to learners. The contesting themes that emerged out of the study were: social hierarchy, hegemony, gender neutrality and homogenization of children into standard socio-cultural products. The study implied that through the ESL textbook, the YLL are subjected to comply with hegemonic socio-cultural discourses. Such textual experiences are endowed with the potential risk to transform primary school children into unquestioning and abiding mechanical products of a society with suppressed critical consciousness. Thus, curriculum makers should lay greater emphasis upon the selection of context-based content for primary schooling, avoiding content which even latently promote ideas of hegemony, hierarchy, homogenization and gender bias in ESL textbooks.

The importance of such a critical reading of textual content is not only to enable a deeper understanding of the dialectics involved in the choice of content to be taught at the crucial primary level of education, but also to inform educators and experts engaged in textbook preparation, the need “to know the author's intent, to understand the socio-cultural influences, and... to comprehend

with a critical edge” (McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004). Such an understanding can contribute significantly, in enhancing the critical consciousness of the primary school students, whose thoughts are potentially shaped by content and associated meanings (overt or latent) in language textbooks.

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“I, as the Corresponding Author, declare and undertake that in the study titled as “A Critical Reading of English Rhymes Taught at Primary Schools in West Bengal”, scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed; Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry Journal Editorial Board has no responsibility for all ethical violations to be encountered, that all responsibility belongs to the author/s and that this study has not been sent to any other academic publication platform for evaluation.”