

EXPLORING MORAL VALUES IN ENGLISH COURSEBOOKS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN CHINA

Jing Wang

Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, China

correspondence: wendycfl@nuaa.edu.cn

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of moral values in English textbooks designed for college students in China. Guiding the analysis is a view of critical pedagogy. Content analysis is employed to analyze the following questions: What moral values are embedded in the coursebooks for university EFL students? Do the coursebooks contribute to developing cultural awareness both of the target culture and the learners? Could the moral issues in the coursebooks help develop students' critical thinking? The study concludes that the studied coursebooks are imbued with moral and cultural values, which may be explored by teachers who could create opportunities to cultivate students' critical thinking.

Key words: content analysis, English coursebooks, moral education

Introduction

Recently, discussions of moral education have become more prominent in the educational discourse as the Ministry of Education of China has called for the integration of moral education into every subject. Moral education is no longer an optional extra as it is now a requirement.

Emerging from this background, there is an increasing amount of work in moral education emanating from China. Researchers have discussed the possible integration of moral values into the curriculum (He, 2022) and proposed some frameworks (e.g., Wen, 2021). Xu (2021) proposed two approaches to develop teaching materials for morality cultivation in university English courses. As we move towards developing new materials, it is important to examine existing language textbooks used by college English students in China. However, there has been little consistent effort to do so from the critical pedagogy perspective. As Gray (2013, p.2) proposes, "There is a need for more materials analysis to complement the work in the field of material development". This article is just an initial step in analyzing moral values in textbooks for adult learners of English in China.

What is moral education in the EFL context in China?

Moral education, also known as civil education, citizenship education or character education, has always been an aspect of school curricula in many countries. As stated by the Guideline (2020), the basic tasks of moral education in China are to foster ethics and character, cultivate and practice core social values, promote exceptional traditional Chinese culture and promote the development of whole person education.

Language teaching is basically and essentially moral (Johnston & Buzzelli, 2008, p.95). The EFL classroom is “a natural place for instruction in moral education as the English language education discipline lends itself rather well to the dynamics of moral values” (Shaaban, 2005). What to teach in the implementation of moral education in EFL classrooms in China? In line with the Guideline, the following three aspects are considered.

Moral values

An important issue is whose values to teach. In an English as Foreign Language classroom, the values of the immediate environment might differ from the values of Anglo-American societies (Shaaban, 2005). China upholds a set of 12 core socialist values. They are national values “prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony”, social values “freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law”, and individual values “patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness”. The socialist values are valuable as they are long-established in Chinese history and they embody the thoughts of the ancient Chinese sages. In the present paper, the term values refer to principles, fundamental beliefs, and ideals which act as general guides to behaviour, including both Chinese core values and universal values, such as honesty, responsibility, respecting others and so on.

Moral education and cultural identity

Culture is another important element in a language classroom, “as the site where young people and others imagine their relationship to the world; it produces the narratives, metaphors and images for constructing and exercising a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others.” (Giroux, 2000, p.133) In other words, culture helps construct identities and shape moral values.

Due to the inseparable relationship between language and culture, culture learning is seen as an integral part of language learning (Xiong et al., 2022, p.2). In the past years, “culture” in the English language classroom remained the cultural reality of “native English speakers.” In China, most teachers and coursebooks adopted the native English speaker model and its ideology (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The dominant English culture will give students an illusion that their own culture is inferior to the English-speaking culture.

To reinforce the learners' self-esteem and cultural confidence, Wen (2016) advocates China's English language learners should acquaint with other cultures besides the culture of the English-speaking countries. She also emphasizes learners should learn to export Chinese culture. In this process, students may realize that every culture has its uniqueness and cultural differences are appreciated.

As Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger (2015) state, "texts are not neutral transmitters of information". Bori (2022) points out "language coursebooks are not innocuous tools to learn a language but have wide-ranging political implications as they are bearers of potentially powerful messages to create meanings about the world". In other words, the cultural knowledge and values portrayed in the textbook produce ideological consequences. Hence, whether textbooks give balanced representations of different cultures is a concern of researchers (Xiong et al., 2022, p.4).

Thongrin (2018) proposes textbooks should combine students' own culture with others' cultures. Thongrin (2018) believes approaching both cultural contents can help learners not only "appreciate the beauty of their cultural heritage, but also understand others in wider societies. Both local and global cultures integrated into ELT materials are greater cultural resources for morality content."

Moral education and critical thinking

The ultimate aim of moral education is to cultivate moral, well-educated and ethically reasoned citizens who can participate effectively in their society. Moral education does not mean indoctrinating or implanting moral values in learners' minds. In a foreign language classroom, learners are expected to grow with not only linguistic competence but also the capacity to exercise judgement in matters of morality and ethics and to make informed decisions about their future lives. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to integrate critical thinking into moral education.

Critical thinking for Freire was "not an object lesson in test-taking, but a tool for self-determination and civic engagement" (Giroux, 2020, p.178). Freire (1970, 2005, p.72) believed that critical pedagogy was not banking education. With banking education, he claimed, education "becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor." In his opinion, one should not accept passively certain norms just because they are prevalent in his surroundings. He should make a critical and independent judgment on his own. (Freire,1970,2005)

In the EFL context, it requires that language teaching goes beyond the simple presentation of grammar and vocabulary. In language learning, though remembering things is important, it is "not sufficient for being a truly educated person—a person who can use what he or she has learned previously to learn new things and to solve a variety of academic and non-academic problems." (Raths, 2002, p.235)

The study

Textbook materials as the major resources created to facilitate language learning, they could be informative, instructional, experiential, eliciting and exploratory (Tomlinson, 2012). However, as Gray (2013, p.3) states, “they are also cultural artefacts from which meaning emerges about the language being taught, associating it with particular ways of being, particular varieties of language and ways of using language, and particular sets of values. At the same time, they are also ideological.”

Drawing on the critical pedagogy theories on the role of textbooks, the study tries to find out answers to the following questions:

1. What moral values are embedded in the English textbooks used?
2. Do the coursebooks contribute to developing cultural awareness both of the target culture and the learners?
3. Could the moral issues in the coursebooks help develop students’ critical thinking?

The purpose of the case study is to examine the moral values in the English coursebooks designed for use in university EFL classrooms in China. The textbooks under investigation are produced by one of the two renowned foreign language publishing houses in China for university non-English majors. They were compiled by renowned professors around the country. In this study, the two books are currently used by freshman students in our university.

A theme-based approach was adopted by the editors. Each textbook consists of 8 units. Each unit in the book is made up of four parts. The first part introduces the topic through listening tasks aimed to prepare students for some background information followed by some blank-filling exercises. The second part calls for students to work with a reading text on the topic. Content questions are followed to check the comprehension of the text. In this part, the keywords and phrases selected from Text A are recycled through a variety of exercises like vocabulary, cloze and translation activities. Part three is a home reading task, consisting of a text, a multiple choice task and a translation exercise that is intended to help students understand the text. Speaking and writing activities related to the theme of the unit constitute the fourth part of each unit.

Method

Content analysis is adopted to analyze the textbooks under investigation. Content analysis is a research tool “for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18). Pingel (2010) distinguished a deductive approach from an inductive approach to start an analysis. In this research, the author adopted the inductive approach.

Content in this study refers to both the reading texts and the exercises in the coursebooks. The first step is a close reading of the texts and the learning tasks. The researcher read through the two selected textbooks to sketch out the overall

presentation of moral values in textbooks. Then, through the use of the textbooks and discussion with colleagues, a set of moral values incorporated in the textbooks were found.

The data analysis started with the content of the reading texts, the following-up questions and exercises are then examined and analyzed to find out whether they are suitable for teachers to construct the moral meaning and engage learners with the possible moral elements.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the content analysis revealed that several moral values are embedded in the reading texts. As shown in Table 1, values are present throughout the textbooks, especially in the reading texts. They could be divided into three categories, i.e. moral values about relationship with oneself, moral values about relationship with others, and moral values about relationship with nature.

Moral values

Table 1. Moral values in the textbooks

Unit /Book	Excerpts from texts	Implied moral values	Category
1/1	<i>“I did my best to avoid showing pleasure, but what I was feeling was pure delight as this demonstration that my words had the power to make people laugh. In the eleventh grade, at the eleventh hour, as it were, I had discovered a calling.”</i> excerpted from “Writing for myself”	pride	Self-relationship
2/1	<i>“We hung out on the same corner when we were single. And then, when we were married, we used to go to each other’s house now and then. But for the last 20 or 30 years it’s been mostly just Christmas cards.”</i> excerpted from “All the Cabbie had was a Letter”	friendliness	Relationship with others
3/1	<i>“At the moment, the public is in two minds about science. It has come to expect the steady increase in the standard of living that new developments in science and technology have brought to continue, but it also distrusts science because it doesn’t understand it.”</i> excerpted from “Public Attitudes Toward Science”	The understanding of science	Relationship with others
4/1	<i>“Tony Trivisonno came to America seeking the American Dream. But he didn’t find it - he</i>	Dream, hard work	Self-relationship

	<i>created it for himself. All he had were 24 precious hours a day, and he wasted none of them.</i> ” excerpted from “Tony Trivisonno’s American Dream”		
5/1	<i>“He was a perfect Type A, a workaholic, a classic, they said to each other and shook their head — and thought for five or ten minutes about the way they lived.”</i> excerpted from “The Company Man”	Work-life balance	Self-relationship
6/1	<i>“It’s not difficult to understand and admire Miss Maynell’s wisdom. The true nature of a heart is seen in its response to the unattractive.”</i> <i>“Tell me whom you love,” Houssaye wrote, “and I will tell you who you are.”</i> excerpted from “A Valentine Story”	love	Relationship with others
7/1	<i>“If life is about the survival of a species — and intelligence is meant to serve that survival — then we can’t compare with pea-brained sea turtles, which were here long before us and survived the disaster that wiped out the dinosaurs. Still, it is comforting to realize that other species besides our own can stand back and assess the world around them, even if their horizons are more limited than ours.”</i> excerpted from “What Animals Really Think”	Harmony with other species on the planet	Relationship with nature
2/2	<i>“Yet I feel nothing more than a passing whim to attain the material things so many other people have. My 1999 car shows the wear and tear of 105,000 miles. But it is still dependable. My apartment is modest, but quiet and relaxing. My clothes are well suited to my work, which is primarily outdoors...In spite of what I don’t have, I don’t feel poor. Why? I’ve enjoyed exceptionally good health for 53 years...I also cherish the gift of creativity.”</i> excerpted from “A Life Full of Riches”	Money and happiness	Self-relationship
3/2	<i>“My dad’s a nice man. Nobody could possibly believe that he isn’t. Yet he’s... well, he’s always doing these stupid things that end up really embarrassing one or more of kids.”</i>	Generation gap	Relationship with others

4/2	<p>excerpted from “Father Knows Better”</p> <p><i>“On line, I find myself attacking everyone in sight. I am bad-tempered, and easily angered. I find everyone on my mailing list insensitive, believing that they’ve forgotten that there are people actually reading their wounding remarks. I don’t realize that I’m projecting until after I’ve been embarrassed by someone who politely points out that I’ve attacked her for agreeing with me.”</i> excerpted from “A Virtual Life”</p>	Netiquette	Relationship with others
5/2	<p><i>“From the age of 14, Michael did just that. He began a very careful training program. He worked out every other day with weightlifting, with some kind of running work on alternate days.”</i> excerpted from “True Height”</p>	Hard-work, dedication	Self-relationship
6/2	<p><i>“No one was ever born knowing calculus. A woman can learn anything a man can, but first, she needs to know that she can do it, and that takes a leap of faith. It also helps to have selective hearing.”</i> excerpted from “A Woman Can Learn Anything a Man Can”</p>	Gender roles	Self-relationship
7/2	<p><i>“That tolerance for change also represents deeply rooted ideas of freedom. Danish scholar Otto Jespersen wrote in 1905, “The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself.”</i> excerpted from “The Glorious Messiness of English”</p>	Tolerance for change	Relationship with others
8/2	<p><i>“The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire...No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves .”</i> excerpted from “Silent Spring”</p>	Environmental awareness	relationship with nature

As revealed in the above findings, quite a few moral values are incorporated in the reading texts, though not explicitly stated. These values are mostly universal values such as friendliness, hard work, and environmental awareness, which are also an integral part of China’s core social values. For example, in Book 1, Unit 1,

Text A is taken from Russell Baker's autobiography *Growing Up*. In this text, Russell Baker was faced up with what at first sight seems like a dull piece of homework. However, much to his surprise, it leads him to discover a hidden talent and what he would become in his future life. He found something that makes him feel proud. Growing up is a journey of self-discovery and self-worth. After reading the text, students are encouraged to write a short piece of writing "How I came to be good at...". The task is intended to help the students to find out their strengths, be happy with who they are and to understand who they are.

Culture content

It is generally accepted that EFL textbooks contain elements of the target culture. The examined textbooks encompass a range of English-speaking cultures with two exceptions. *The art of eating spaghetti* is a non-English speaking country's cultural content but expressed in English. And *the ten inventions that have changed the world* addressed the inventions all around the world, including China's Four Great Inventions.

As Table 2 indicates, prime attention is given to the target culture. Regarding source culture, there is a limited resource of learners' own culture in these two books. It is mainly because the selected text materials are extracts from written works of English-speaking writers. Obviously, a textbook is unlikely to cover everything. As Cortazzi & Jin (2001, p.210) point out, "The learning of culture and the development of intercultural skills depend in large part on how the textbooks are used in the classroom". There is a resolution. Supplementary materials could be brought in by the teacher or even the learners themselves. The teacher could invite students to tell China's story with some scaffolding. We can find a counterpart of almost all the cultural elements in Table 2 in Chinese culture. It is a chance for students to introduce Chinese culture in English, "describing and reviving the traditions of such cultures is necessary to help the cultural members to strengthen their local identities". (Zheng & Gao, 2019)

Canagarajah (1999, p.188) observed teachers could develop appropriate methods to encourage students to explore intercultural differences. There is one text in Book 2 which could help raise learners' awareness of intercultural issues. In the text, the writer reflects on a visit to China and gives his thoughts on different approaches to learning in China and the West. This text could serve as a good departure for teachers and students to compare and reflect on similarities and differences with that of another cultural group.

Table 2. Cultural content in the textbook

Unit/Book	Culture content	Culture type
1/1	The art of eating Spaghetti	International culture
2/1	Halloween	Target culture
3/1	The top 10 inventions that have changed the world	International culture
4/1	American dream	Target culture
6/1	The origin of Valentine's Day	Target culture
1/2	Learning, Chinese style vs. western style	Intercultural
2/2	Salvation Army, bell ringer	Target culture
4/2	English accents and dialects;	Target culture
6/2	The stereotype of women in American society	Target culture
7/2	The history of English	Target culture

Above are the cultural elements in the background information or the texts, while in exercise, it is noteworthy that *Language Sense Enhancement* in Part Two of each unit entails an English Poem and some quotes from philosophers and writers which are theme-related. e.g. Unit 2, Book 1 cites Cicero's "A friend is as it were, a second self." and Shakespeare's "A faithful friend is a medicine of life" and so on. In some sense, poems and quotations are cultural products which are richly embedded with cultural values. These poems and quotations can often give strength and insights to students.

Critical thinking

To enhance students' critical reflection on the world, Abednia & Crookes (2019) believe the most common way is "through classroom discussions based on critical questions."

The analysis of the current coursebooks reveals that the comprehensive language practice in Part Four of each unit in the textbooks is a potential resource for cultivating students' critical thinking. In this part, 2 or 3 theme-related questions are raised to prompt critical thinking. For example, in Unit 3, Book 1, the first task in Part Four is a group discussion, students are required to discuss the following: 1. *In what way has science changed the world we live in? Give examples.* 2. *In what way is science a good or bad thing? Give examples.* Based on the discussion, learners are encouraged to write an essay on "How Science Changes Our Lives?" There are obvious moral issues involved in the development of some scientific techniques. By involving students in sharing their views and understandings, the teacher encourages learners to consider diverse perspectives on the given topic.

While the post-reading activities in Part Four create some chances for developing criticality, the content questions after each text seem to be questionable from the critical pedagogical perspective. They are mainly comprehension

questions testing understanding of the text, such as *What was he doing at...? How do they come to know each other?* Students are required to get some details from the texts. It seems to be not sufficient for developing critical thinking skills. Wu & Navera (2018) notice there is “complexity in the characters and the way they act, and this is a pedagogical opportunity to discuss values in the classroom” Therefore, discussion on the behaviours of the characters might encourage students to explore moral values.

For purpose of illustration, we take our analysis of Unit 5, book 1 as an example. In this unit text, John Blanchard happened to see the notes pencilled in the margin of the book he borrowed from a Florida library. He was so attracted to them that he tried hard to locate Miss Maynell’s address and finally succeed in corresponding with her. A romance was budding through the mail. They scheduled to meet at Central Station. Miss Maynell would wear a red rose on her lapel and John Blanchard would hold a book that was to identify him to Miss Maynell. To put a test to their love, Miss Maynell begged a plain woman to wear the rose while she (a beautiful young lady) walked past John Blanchard asking him “Will you go my way?” John Blanchard was in a difficult situation and he had to make a choice. Such a scenario was provocative, the teacher could pose questions like: *What would you do if you were Mr Blanchard? To follow the young beautiful lady or the middle-aged woman?* At the end of the story, such questions could be raised, e.g. *Would you feel offended if you were put on such a test? Would you like to test your love? Why or why not?* Such questions could serve as opportunities for value education as they could engage students emotionally and they could generate a discussion on the characters’ behaviour in the text. Through discussions with group members, students could make their judgments and hence develop critical thinking simultaneously.

The findings of this study suggest that the texts themselves could be explored for cultivating learners’ critical thinking through challenging dialogues that the teacher may stimulate. These questions could be evocative but do not directly impose certain views on students.

Conclusion

In this increasingly value-laden world, classrooms are not value-free zones. Neither is English language classrooms. As highly consistent with the targets of moral education, the English language classroom is a potential platform where values can be effectively communicated. We identified universal values - pride, kindness, responsibility, and honesty as well as Chinese core social values such as “harmony, freedom, equality” in the examined textbooks. These values are mostly transmitted through written representations. They are not directly taught but are embedded in the texts. In this case study, moral values correspond to the values upheld in Chinese society. This suggests that textbooks can serve as potential materials for moral education. It should not necessarily be about completely new

content in the textbooks. The values may be stated implicitly in the teaching materials, but they can be elicited and tackled with students in the classroom. As for the cultural content, though little importance is attached to Chinese culture due to the sources of the teaching material, it could be supplemented by the teacher or even the learners themselves. Regarding the development of critical thinking skills, it could be found in certain learning activities. However, there is not sufficient discourse analysis of the reading materials. The study suggests we could go beyond the basic content questions and guide students to understand values embedded in the texts and critically analyze them. It is up to the teachers to find out what values are ingrained in texts and how they are constructed. In brief, we can conclude the examined coursebooks can serve as a springboard, with teachers as the moral agents, learners can dig into issues that interest them. Further research could focus on methodologies and classroom strategies that assist students to explore, discuss and act on values relevant to what they are learning.

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