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Book Review: Widodo, H.P., M.R. Perfecto, L.V. Canh and A. Buripakdi. 2018. *Situating moral and cultural values in ELT materials: The Southeast Asian Context*. Springer.

The volume features critical studies on and around ELT materials situated in eight Southeast Asian countries including, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. The ten-chapter volume comprises an introductory piece by the four editors, seven small-scale empirical investigations by contributors based in the Asian-Pacific region, an opinion piece for material designers and teachers, and a concluding chapter also by the editors.

Chapters follow a roughly similar structure where contextual background of the research setting is first provided, and the relevant literature reviewed. These are followed by analyses of the textbooks/materials or data from participants. Many chapters end with implications for materials design, some are marked explicitly by the “Practical Directions for ELT Materials Developments” section.

Widodo, Perfecto, Canh, and Buripakdi set the tone for the volume in the introductory chapter by outlining their understanding of morality and culture and how they can be considered one entity. Drawing on Johnstone (2003) among others, they see teachers as moral agents. Thus, they view ELT as entailing not only the development of linguistic competence, but also capacity building to prepare learners to become critical beings.

They then provided contextual information about the linguistic and cultural diversity in Southeast Asia (SEA), which are often complicated by colonial history, resulting in the co-existence of conflicting and competing value systems. They stressed that, against this backdrop, SEA “values should be understood as a discursive construct, relational, and subject to constant negotiation and change as multilingual and multicultural mobility continues to evolve” (p.7). They furthered that in the current century, it is crucial to equip learners with the competence to become responsible citizens in a globalized civil society. Summaries of the individual chapters are then provided, followed by brief concluding remarks.

Chapter 2 by Appleby highlighted how sensitive matters such as sexuality and sexual behaviour are always absent from imported textbooks. But these topics can be of crucial importance in some contexts where stakeholders from vastly different economic, social and cultural backgrounds come into contact. Using a case study approach, Appleby referenced her own experience and focused on another female teacher’s experience in Timor-Leste to illustrate the challenges operating and teaching in an international-aid context. She discussed efforts by the teacher to empower students to challenge and interrogate the working of institutions in operation in their communities through collaboratively designing learning materials. However, she also pointed out that this delicate act requires teachers “to be mindful of their own cultural values and biases, and sensitive to the diverse values brought into the classroom by students” (p.28).

Chapter 3 offered a critical analysis of two textbooks for Grade 5 & 7 learners in the Philippines. In a context where the explicit inclusion and discussion of value education is posited, Perfecto and Paterno found that though materials represent and highlight issues about moral values, the

potential to engage readers critically were left underutilised. They found that some values covered might be at odds with the local culture. Moreover, values originally targeting older audience are assumed to be easily transferrable to younger learners. Crucially, they highlighted that it is not only the presence or absence of values in texts that matters, but whether accompanying exercises allow learners to critically engage with those issues is equally important. Analyses revealed that processing questions that require critical thinking and engagement are often lacking. They urged material designers to capitalise on the potential of the texts and include activities that engage learners in thinking through multiple perspectives.

In Chapter 4, Wu and Navera analysed an extract from a fiction and a news report included in a Singaporean secondary school textbook. The textual analysis was accompanied by interview data from 2 textbook writers. Analyses demonstrated that the texts evoke values that are highly regarded in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies like Singapore, e.g. social harmony, inclusiveness, etc. However, textbook writers do not see English language teachers as “value education teachers”. This is partly because of the pre-1997 division in curriculum between cultural and non-cultural subjects including English. But this is also partly due to teachers’ “unpreparedness” to explicitly discuss values and potentially divisive topics. This chapter again underscores the importance of not only the nature of the text, but teachers’ willingness and readiness to critically engage with the text to draw learners’ attention to moral and cultural issues.

In Chapter 5, Sidhu, Kaur, and Fook investigated teachers’ integration of moral and cultural values in Malaysian English classrooms. Questionnaire data came from 35 teachers from 6 different secondary schools in 3 states. Furthermore, observation data were obtained from 6 classrooms alongside interview data from the 6 respective teachers. Results showed that although teachers have some success in incorporating moral values in their sessions, they were only moderately confident or successful in their ability to clarify cultural nuances. Teachers are also confronted with challenges such as exam washback effect and students’ limited linguistic proficiency which restricted the time allocated to discussing cultural and moral values. Observations suggested that opportunities to engage in critical discussions are often missed when texts depicted values in conflict with local beliefs and practices, e.g. the consumption of alcohol. This chapter resonates with the previous two in underscoring the importance of not only value-laden materials, but paying attention to how teachers and students work with them.

Chapter 6 explored 7 Cambodian teachers’ conceptualisation of the English language and their treatment of moral and cultural values represented in 2 international imported textbook series. Lim and Keuk found that though teachers viewed textbooks as a platform for exploring cultural and value differences, they are not necessarily comfortable teaching cultural values of the target culture because of unfamiliarity. Similar to previous chapters, test-oriented teaching acted as a barrier to teaching cultural values. Some teachers saw helping learners acquire linguistic competence and perform well in tests as their prime goal. The authors argued that “[c]ultural instruction was not what their students wanted, and it would not be ‘right’ either if they embody it.” (p.104). The chapter, therefore, raises interesting questions about whose cultural and moral values should be included, discussed and why.

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Chapter 7 provided a content analysis of 3 locally produced coursebooks for grade 10-12 Vietnamese students. This is supplemented by interviews with 4 secondary school teachers. Canh demonstrated that some moral values are represented in reading materials, but once again activities provided around the texts fell short of encouraging the development of critical awareness, therefore depriving students of the opportunity to actively transform the society. Analyses also uncovered that the text content depicts life that are largely problem-/care-free, omitting darker experiences such as inequalities, terrorism, etc. Canh also found that though participants agreed that developing students' moral values is part of their responsibility, they "find it hard to change their mindset of teaching the book rather than the students" (p.124).

In Chapter 8, Widodo analysed a government approved secondary school English textbook in Indonesia through the critical discourse analytic lens. The analysis of visual and textual elements of the book revealed that although values are evidently present, they are merely listed and not discussed in depth. Parallel to previous chapters, "learning tasks or activities emphasizing the integration of values into ELT remain under-practiced" (p.148). Widodo argued that the disconnect between the character education policy's stipulation and the actual realisation of curriculum artifacts such as textbooks requires further attention. The author recommended that both teachers and students be trained to enable critical interrogation and assessment of ideological, political, social, and cultural forces depicted textually as well as semiotically.

In Chapter 9, Thongrin provided possible guidelines for ELT teachers and materials writers to integrate moral education into teaching materials and class activities so that students' needs can be met more effectively.

In the concluding chapter, the editors foregrounded the importance of contextual factors which may affect how moral and cultural values can be introduced. They reiterated the need for incorporating cultural and moral content into ELT materials. They ended by encouraging designers to consider "(1) guiding theory, (2) authenticity, (3) topics, (4) knowledge and language, (5) texts and contexts, (6) tasks or activities, and (7) pedagogical prompts" (p.183) when designing value-based ELT materials.

The volume provides an illustrative snapshot of how neighbouring SEA countries, despite sharing aspects of the historic and cultural fabric, represent diverging socio-political-economic-educational realities. Teachers and material designers face unique challenges and obstacles in realising moral and cultural education in the respective countries. But the recurring themes that emerged are also noteworthy, e.g. the importance of supporting activities/exercise in advancing critical thinking and moral/value discussions, teachers' hesitance in discussing such topics, exam washback as a hurdle, and the indispensability of context.

The book also sheds light on the difficulty in pinning down moral and cultural issues in ELT. It is perhaps not surprising that an array of terminologies was employed by contributors including,

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moral-, cultural-, value-, character- education. That said, the editors have done a decent job in putting together a coherent volume that extends previous work on moral and cultural issues in language teaching (e.g. Buzzelli and Johnston 2002; Kramsch and Zhu 2016; Menard-Warwick et al. 2018) from a SEA perspective. The strong moral conviction anchored on critical pedagogy/critical applied linguistics (see Pennycook 2010) that underpins the volume is clearly shared among the contributors despite their slightly different foci. In such a paradigm, language learning and teaching “has to go beyond the acquisition of language skills and communicative competence to the critical examination of the cultural and sociopolitical context in which it occurs.” (Widodo et al. 2019:181). In the present era where mis-/dis-information is rife and anti-science thinking runs wild, the call for attention to critical thinking, moral and values, and whole person development finds resonance in parallel discipline of instructed SLA where researchers are challenged to adopt an “ethical transformative lens” and assume the social responsibility to embed and articulate moral-political purposes in their research (Ortega 2005). These sentiments also strike a chord with conscientious readers, teachers, and material designers who see ELT as “profoundly a moral undertaking” (Johnston 2003:18).

Yet, as some chapters noted, “teacher as moral/cultural agents”, is not a belief universally shared. Teachers’ reservations and unpreparedness in tackling these topics ring true in other contexts, for example, multilingual teachers in Kramsch and Zhang (2018) reported self-censorship around cultural discussions. Willing teachers also struggled as they often lack agency and have little autonomy over the content and activities in class (Leung and Yip 2020). Moreover, addressing sensitive moral and cultural issues may lead to dire consequences where freedom of speech is not guaranteed.

That said, the volume never pretended to have all the solutions for tackling moral and cultural issues in ELT materials. Nor should readers treat the guidelines provided as prescriptions. The merit of this volume lies in the fact that it challenges readers to critically reflect on their context in light of issues discussed, and where appropriate help develop “learners’ global cultural consciousness and intercultural citizenship” (p.183). A book worth picking up in my opinion.

Word count: 1998 (including references)

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