Promoting Values of Religious Tolerance through Moroccan ELT Textbooks[1]

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Abstract:
This paper examines the religious content of three Moroccan second year Baccalaureate ELT textbooks: Gateway to English 2, Insights into English 2 and Ticket to English 2. It studies the representation of religion as a cultural perspective in these textbooks to investigate whether they raise Moroccan learners' awareness of other religions. It is built on the premise that the spread of religious intolerance is fueled by being insufficiently or inappropriately informed about local and foreign religions through erroneous stereotypes propagated through the media. It therefore draws the attention of English language teachers, school inspectors, educational policy makers and textbook designers to recognizing the role ELT textbooks could play in reducing illiteracy about religions and fostering positive attitudes towards other religions. The study evolved within the theoretical framework of the Standards-Based Approach which currently underlies the teaching and learning of English as foreign language in Morocco. It adopted a mixed method design and used mixed content analysis to analyze the data. The findings revealed statistical, textual and visual evidences indicating that the examined textbooks do not sensitize learners about respect for diversity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence among different religions. Ultimately, some ways in which religious antagonism could be minimized are suggested.
Keywords: ELT, evaluation, religions, textbooks, tolerance

1. Introduction

Religious intolerance is at times associated with terrorist thoughts and extremist attitudes fueled by lack of adequate knowledge of other religions. Terrorist and extremist groups rejoice of this illiteracy by combining facts, fiction and emotion with biased versions of religion to manipulate the public opinion's disapproval of local, regional and international issues. Provision of malicious interpretations of sacred texts as well as propagation of erroneous, stereotypical and mostly prejudiced realities of other religious groups are common ways of establishing and maintaining rivalry and enmity among different religious groups. Unfortunately, young people fall prey to such malicious schemes. Young people are easily impressed by distorted versions of religious discourse as they are less informed about their own and other religions (Religion in the School Task Force [RSTF], 2010). May 16th terrorist attacks in which young suicide bombers whose ages varied between 20 and 24 attacked several places in Casablanca, Morocco, in 2003 are concrete examples that support the claims above.

The problem this study addresses is that Moroccan learners suffer from a socially constructed illiteracy about other religions. Except for Jewish and Christian minorities living in Morocco, millions of Muslims know very little about other religions -namely Christianity and Judaism. Their conceptions of these religions remain typically stereotypical and prejudiced. This state of affairs often triggers antagonism and rivalry among groups of different religious backgrounds which subsequently hinders efforts aiming at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence and tolerance at local, regional and international levels. This paper is an attempt to help those involved in the practice of English language teaching and learning in Morocco to understand the role English language textbooks can play in sensitizing learners about the dangers of religious antagonism, terrorism and extremism. It also attempts to highlight the necessity of using ELT textbooks in fighting illiteracy about foreign and local religions and contribute to fostering values of respect for religious diversity, tolerance and coexistence among learners. It is imperative to note that this paper does not call for using ELT textbooks for teaching religions or religious content. It mainly stresses the importance of including activities that allow learners to compare and contrast the principles and beliefs that underlie various mainstream religions for the sake of developing a better understanding of both local and foreign religions.

This study sought to answer three main questions. They are:

- To what extent do Moroccan ELT textbooks succeeded in representing religions of both local and foreign cultures appropriately?
- To what extent do these textbooks contribute to fostering values of religious tolerance, coexistence and understanding among learners?
- How could the religious content of Moroccan ELT textbooks be improved to immunize learners against misuses of religion for malicious purposes?

2. Literature Review

The present study was informed by the theoretical framework of the Standards-Based Approach to English language teaching (American Counsel on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 1996) This choice was dictated not only by the *English Language Guidelines for Secondary Schools* (Ministry of National Education [MNE], 2007) which officially designates the Standards-Based Approach as the official framework for ELT in Morocco, but also by the opportunity this approach offers to study, juxtapose and understand the components of foreign and local cultures. The stands-based approach aims to foster foreign language education through designing a framework that targets attaining eleven content standards engulfed in five main goal areas: Communications, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections and Communities. While the goal area of communications fosters interpersonal, interpretive and presentational modes of communication, the goal area of Connections encourages learners to use English to learn new information that could only be accessed through English about other school subjects. The goal area of Communities seeks to equip learners with lifelong learning skills that enable them to face the ever-changing realities of the modern communities and prepare them for global citizenship (ACTFL, 1996; Cisar, 2001; MNE, 2007)

Through the goal areas of Cultures and Comparisons, this approach presents a suitable paradigm for teaching and learning foreign cultures along with their respective languages. The goal area of Cultures allows for a better understanding of the perspectives, practices and products of both local and foreign cultures by encouraging learners to gain much insight into their local culture through the study of foreign cultures. Perspectives stand for the abstract components of any given culture such as philosophy, history, attitudes, values and religious beliefs. Practices refer to the everyday activities people belonging to that culture do and how they do them such as celebrations, habits, traditions and relationships. Products, however, designate the material products produced by people of that culture such as tools, goods, clothes and foods, to name but a few. The goal area of Comparisons encourages learners to engage in such exercises aiming at juxtaposing perspectives, practices and products of both foreign and local cultures and elicit similarities and differences. While similarities eliminate distances between the cultures, differences may shock the learner if they are not appropriately presented and eloquently explained (MNE, 2007; ACTFL , 1996).

The Standards-Based Approach to ELT allows for not only evaluating and improving the religious content of ELT textbooks, but also fostering values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among various religious groups. The approach admittedly implies that perspectives shape the practices and products of any given culture. Religion as a cultural perspective, for instance, shapes to a great extent the products and practices of a group of people. It is also an axiomatic factor in reasoning for the differences among various cultures. Two cultures tend to be different in as much as their religions are different. Thus, understanding why people from other cultures are different necessitates a close understanding of their religion. In effect, increasing learners' knowledge about how religion shapes people's

practices and products will inevitably lessen misunderstandings, rivalry and antagonism among various religious groups.

2.1 Previous Studies

Research maintains that textbook evaluation is a reflective practice that has the potential of boosting the quality of ELT textbook. This practice is essential in improving the quality of the teaching learning process as it allows for refining the quality of the textbooks and materials used as teaching-learning tools in the classroom. It helps teachers, school inspectors, textbook designers and educational policy makers to unearth the strengths and weaknesses that underlie these textbooks and which could not effectively be identified, analyzed and solved otherwise. The practice of textbooks evaluation has been employed and recommended by various researchers to investigate social, cultural, linguistic and pedagogical issues within ELT textbooks. Therefore, several problems related to gender, age, social class, grammar, vocabulary, functions, gradation, recycling, appropriateness and suitability have been investigated and ways in which they could be overcome have been suggested. There is also evidence that the practice of textbook evaluation gears teachers professional development as it requires using a set of reflective thinking strategies that allow teachers to reflect upon the content of the textbooks to determine the extent to which it is authentic, appropriate and effective (see Ait Bouzid, 2016, Cisar, 2000; Cunningsworth, 1996; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Jibreel, 2015; Klein, 1985; Litz, 2005; Lu & Lin, 2014; McDonough & Shaw, 2003). Neverthless, textbook evaluation is not merely an intuitive day-to-day passive activity which individual teachers use to superficially skim over the textbook to determine which activities to use and which ones to discard; textbook evaluation benefits both teachers and textbooks if it is employed as a systematic, collaborative and reflective longitudinal practice that seeks to uncover the hidden curriculum that is often obscured by structures, texts and images.

The religious content of ELT textbook has been widely debated though insufficiently still. It has been held an indisputable belief that religion is emblematically defining the process of constructing cultural identities. Such belief is essential in the field of ELT textbook design which involves bringing two different and often times conflictive cultures with their respective religions into contact. The Religion in the Schools Task Force [RSTF] (2010) warns that religious illiteracy increases antagonism and prejudice which incessantly interrupt efforts aiming at fostering values of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity at all local, regional and global levels. Ndura (2004:148) suggests that including appropriate contents of culture in ELT textbooks will contribute to bringing about tolerance among different religious groups. RSTF's (2010) diagnosis of ELT textbooks reveals an oversimplification of religious content which, according to Jamalvandi (2013), occupies less than 2% of the cultural content included in the textbooks. In the same vein, Behman and Muzaheb (2012) complain that most ELT textbooks intentionally avoid including contents from foreign religions especially when the principles of these religions conflict with those of the local religion.

In addition, research states that some ELT textbooks present biased and unauthentic religious content. Ahmed and Shah (2013); Ait Bouzid and Tamer (2012), Basabe (2004), Jamalvandi (2013), Secretary of State for the Home Department [SSHD], (2011), Yaqoob and Zubair, (2012) claim that the ELT textbooks which they investigated reduce religion to mere celebrations and rituals of no spiritual significance. The researchers further emphasize that religious content of these textbooks reinforces stereotypes and prejudices and does not refute them. The focus is laid on the exotic aspects of religion especially when these are often shocking and strange to the learners. The researchers agree that while the ELT textbooks which they investigated fail to represent local religion appropriately, they implicitly provide learners with misconceptions about foreign religions. According to Khosravani, Motallebzadeh and Ashraf (2014), such representation shows an intense disrespect for both local and foreign religions.

The studies lined above evaluated locally designed textbooks in various countries: Argentina, China, England, Iran, Pakistan, USA and Morocco. The findings are generally in harmony despite some differences that account for the contextual variations of socio-cultural realities. Unfortunately, the results are quite disturbing as it appears that the way these ELT textbooks represent religion does not foster respect for religious diversity and does not promote values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among various religious groups. On the contrary, the way these textbooks present religions allegedly fuels hatred, antagonism and rivalry among different religious groups which eventually results in spreading terrorist and extremist thoughts and actions. This study is an attempt to position select Moroccan ELT textbooks in the line of these studies and examine whether they succeed in presenting religious content that is capable of eliminating religious illiteracy, exposing terrorism and extremism as well as fostering tolerance, peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity among religious groups.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a concurrent triangulation design using content analysis as a mixed method that combines both quantitative and qualitative techniques (Krippendorff, 2013). The objective is to evaluate the religious content of three Moroccan ELT textbook currently used in teaching second year Baccalaureate students in public schools, namely *Gateway to English 2* (Hassim, Blibil & Rasmy, 2007), *Insights into English 2* (Najbi & El Haddad, 2007) and *Ticket to English 2* (Hammani, Ahssen & Tansaoui, 2007). These textbooks are locally designed and are used as national textbooks that are used interchangeably to teach the final level in Moroccan public high schools. Unfortunately, teachers do not have the right to choose which textbook to use as this is the task of the local authorities which distribute textbooks among schools equally and randomly

The three textbooks were subject to an in-depth evaluation (Cunningsworth, 1995) using content analysis as a mixed data analysis method that combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The evaluation process developed in two concurrent and complementary phases. The quantitative analysis was conducted through scanning the textbooks and counting the number of texts, images, activities

that discuss, refer to or present religious content so as to measure the frequency, visibility, space and firstness of religious content relevant to mainly three mainstream religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Other religions such as Buddhism could be classified under 'other' category, whereas those occurrences of which tend to be general were classified under the category 'Indefinite'. The quantitative findings were illustrated in tables using numbers and percentages.

Additionally, the qualitative analysis aimed at providing a description of the nature of the religious references depicted throughout the three textbooks, explain how they were actually presented and explore why they were presented likewise. The description was supported by visual and textual evidence from the three textbooks.The combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques allowed for the triangulation of the findings and helped in verifying the validity and the quality of interpretations. The interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data is fused with the qualitative description that follows each table since it is impossible to separate qualitative analysis from interpretation according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007).

4. Findings and Discussion

The quantitative analysis revealed, as shown in Table 1, the scarcity of religious content in the three second year Baccalaureate ELT textbooks. In general, religion was referred to 17 times within the three textbooks. *Gateway to English* 2and *Ticket to English 2* had 8 references each while Insight into English had only one reference. Only two of the 17 occurrences were pictures showing religious content and these pictures were seen only in *Gateway to English 2*. The other 15 occurrences were exclusively textual references. In this respect, religion is only visible in *Gateway to English 2* through two pictures. The space allotted to religion in the three textbook is less than 2% of the totality of the cultural content contained in these textbooks. *Insights into English 2* is by far the textbook that devoted the least amount of space to religion with less than 1% of space being allotted to religious content. Table 1 also shows that Islam is the religion that always comes first in conversations, texts and visuals although the only reference found in *Insights to English* 2 is indefinite as it does not refer to any specific religion.

Table 1: *Religious Content in Textbooks Based on its Frequency, Visibility, Space and Firstness*

	Frequency*	Visibility**	Space***	Firstness****
Gateway 2	8	2	2 %	Islam
Insight 2	1	0	1 %	Indefinite
Ticket 2	8	0	2 %	Islam
Total	17	2	1.7 %	

* Frequency of occurrence of religious content in the textbook
** Visibility of religious content through pictures in the textbook
*** Space allotted to religious content with regard to the cultural content of the textbook
**** Religions that come first in dialogues, texts and visuals in the textbook

The 17 religious references were unevenly distributed among mainstream religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism as shown in Table 2 below. In fact, 8 of these references (47.06 %) referred to Islam while only one reference (5.88 %) referred to Christianity. Judaism and other religions were not mentioned or referred to in the three textbooks. All of the other eight references (47.06 %) did not refer to any specific religion as they were indefinite by nature. In more details, *Gateway to English 2* devoted 75 % (6 out of 8) of its religious content to Islam while *Ticket 2 English* devoted 25% (2 out of 8) of its religious content to Islam and about 12.5 % (1 out of 8) was devoted to Christianity. *Insights into English 2* did not include any reference to any particular religion since the only religious content it presented was indefinite.

Table 2: *Distribution of Religious References among Mainstream Religions in Textbooks*

	Islam		Christianity		Judaism		Other		Indefinite	
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%
Gateway 2	6	35.3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	11.76%
Insight 2	0	0	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	5.88%
Ticket 2	2	11.76%	1	5.88%	0	0%	0	0%	5	29.42%
TOTAL	8	47.06%	1	5.88%	0	0%	0	0%	8	47.06%

The qualitative analysis investigated the nature of the religious content and manner in which it is presented throughout the three textbooks. The qualitative findings generally consolidate the quantitative results. The representation of religion through pictures is insufficient and exclusive to Islam. While *Insights into English 2* and *Ticket 2 English* obviously made religions invisible, the two pictures found in *Gateway to English 2* were not enough to make religion plainly visible through the textbook. Furthermore, the pictures projected a limited view of religion as they emphasized merely prayers and celebrations of the Anniversary of Birth of the Prophet (Hassim, Blibil and Rasmy, 2007:23). The two pictures identified in this textbook showed religion as a male-governed practice as they presented only men involved in religious practices.

The textual representations of religious content found in the three textbooks did not differ much from the visual ones. The textual references to religion focused on exotic aspects of Islamic religion, ones that obviously appear strange to the non-Muslim interlocutor. Concrete examples are discussions of 'burping' in *Gateway to English 2* and 'Inshallah' in *Ticket to English 2* in which were emptied from any religious and spiritual significance .Furthermore, the majority of textual references which used the term 'religion' or 'religious' actually used them broadly and indefinitely as in the examples bellow (my emphasis):

1. 'Our beliefs and **religious** practices seem natural and familiar in our context which gives us a sense of belonging and security'(Hassim, Blibil and Rasmy. 2007:23)
2. 'Be sure to include celebrations from different cultures, ethnics and **religions'** (Hammani, Ahssen and Tansaoui, 2007: 94)
3. Non-material culture, on the other hand, is made up of things you cannot see or touch such as language, music, stories, science, customs and **religious** beliefs' (Najbi and El Haddad, 2007: 23)

Such examples that treated religions indifferently were frequently identified in the three textbooks. They do not refer to any specific religion which makes the learner unable to decide on their exact meaning.

Throughout the textbooks, only Islam is explicitly and directly mentioned in textual references. Surprisingly, the explicit reference to Islam is closely associated to introducing women with great achievements as the examples bellow demonstrate:

1. Nawal EL Moutawakel […] the first **Muslim** and African female Olympic Champion' (Hammani, Ahssen and Tansaoui, 2007:72)
2. [Shirin Ebadi] is the first Iranian and the first **Muslim** woman to receive the prize' (Hammani, Ahssen and Tansaoui, 2007:72)

It is also worth noting that the only reference to Christianity was done through a female figure when it noted that 'A women association in India has recently honored **mother Teresa'** (Hammani, Ahssen and Tansaoui, 2007:75).

The findings of this study were to a great extent congruent with the literature. In line with Khosravani et al. (2014), both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the three textbooks reveal that they fail to present religious content that is capable of promoting values of tolerance, respect for diversity and peaceful coexistent among different religions. On a first notice, the amount of space attributed to the religious content in these textbooks was largely insufficient and hardly visible to the learner as it occupied at best only 2% of the cultural content of the textbook (as in Jamalvandi, 2013). Such little space allotted to religion in Moroccan ELT textbooks does not allow for providing sufficient information about local and foreign religions so as to ultimately fight or at least reduce religious illiteracy among learners. Moreover, the limited space allotted to religion in ELT textbooks is a barrier on the way of promoting values of respect for diversity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence since there is not enough room for raising questions about religious difference and discussing stereotypes, biased misconceptions and prejudices related to other religions that are not only salient in the learners' society but also propagated by the media. Consequently, the three textbooks provide no room where to discuss how misunderstandings that result from false readings and falsified interpretations of religious texts are the backbone of religious terrorism and extremism.

In the same token, the three textbooks present a biased version of religion. The religion of the target English language culture is invisible as it has not been allocated any space within two of three textbooks. The representation of the foreign culture is thus practically unauthentic because it is emptied from its religion which is a

decisive element in understanding cultural practices and products of the English speaking community. In fact, the exclusion of the religion of foreign cultures does more harm than good to the learners. It is understood that the intention is to protect the spiritual and religious integrity of the Moroccan Muslim learners so that they do not become affected by other religions and ultimately abandon Islam but it is built on erroneous assumptions. The students at the second year baccalaureate level are capable of making their own choices based on logical synthesis of different religions based on making informed comparisons and contrasts. Students at this level are supposed to be independent learners who are able to make informed decision about issues of intercultural contact with open minds and enlightened hearts. The exclusion of foreign religious content for fear from learners' conversion to other religions in the second year Baccalaureate level questions the efficiency of the whole process of constructing our religious identity through education and schooling.

Islam is the dominant religion in two of the three textbooks that were investigated. Behman and Muzaheb (2012) had previously claimed that ELT textbooks tend to include only content relevant to the local religion. However, the way in which it is presented raises question of authenticity and realism. Most of references to Islam in these textbooks focus on religious ceremonies, celebrations and rituals. Islam has been reduced to a scattered number of occasional festivities that people engage in to commemorate their forefathers or to maintain some traditions. It is not presented as a way of life, as a religion that recognizes differences, accepts diversity and calls for peaceful coexistence and tolerance between people who hold different views and religions. Furthermore, as Basabe (2004) claims, the three textbooks highlight some exotic aspects of Islam which clearly shows, that Western people see Islamic practices as strange and abnormal. Such content increases antagonism and hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims. Contrary to the principles of the standards-based approach advocated by ACTFL (1996) and MNE (2007), the textbooks did not present any activity that encourages learners to compare and contrast Islam and other foreign religions. The lack of similar activities maintains the predominance of religious illiteracy and feeds the growth of pre-existing stereotypes, misconceptions, negative attitudes and prejudice all of which potentially increase antagonism and rivalry among Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Supposedly, ELT textbooks should be a third space of enunciation where local and foreign religions meet, dialogue and accept differences.

The textbooks hold a passive attitude toward issues of terrorism and religious extremism which have become a major global concern nowadays. The textbooks avoid discussing these topics despite the pivotal role they could play in enlightening learners and informing them about the relationship between religious intolerance and terrorism. They do not present any content that sensitizes learners against extremist and terrorist religious groups and how they misuse religion to manipulate people's emotions and actions. In line with the claims of SSHD (2011), the three textbooks did not include any materials that would correct the false understandings and readings of Islam as a religion that promulgates terrorism and extremism. Moreover,

these textbooks fail to present critical thinking skills that would enable learners to independently face all forms of extremism and terrorism which abide by all corners of media frequently used by ill-informed teenagers. In addition, these textbooks do not provide learners with tools that would assist them in identifying, analyzing and evaluating the credibility of the religious content found in the media.

5. Conclusion

This study tried to evaluate the religious content of three ELT textbooks currently used in Moroccan public high schools to teach second year Baccalaureate level. It tried to examine whether these textbooks presented different religions that belong to the cultural perspective of both foreign and local cultures in a way that fosters respect for diversity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence among these religions. The study evolved within the theoretical framework of the standards-based approach and adopted content analysis as a mixed method that combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The findings were in line with the literature and revealed that there was a noticeable shortage in the religious content of these textbooks which undoubtedly failed to contribute to promoting values of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and respect for religious diversity among learners. To improve the religious content of these textbooks this paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Moroccan ELT textbooks should include a unit that represents and discusses religions of both local and foreign cultures
2. The objective of this unit should be fostering values of tolerance, understanding and coexistence among different religions as well as working as a preventive strategy against terrorist and extremist religious thought
3. It should include materials that correct the false understandings and readings of Islam especially the wrong association between Islam and terrorism
4. It should present reading or listening activities that inform learners about other mainstream religions, namely Christianity and Judaism
5. It should present reading or listening activities that discuss the dangers of extremism, terrorism and religious antagonism
6. It should present speaking activities encourage learners to talk about their attitudes towards other religions
7. It should present writing or speaking activities that encourage learners to compare and contrast local and foreign religious concepts and rituals
8. It should present activities that teach learners about strategies of dialogue that respect the right for difference and diversity
9. It should present visual content that show both men and women engaged in religious activities

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