

# Banal National Culture in Algerian EFL Textbooks: My Book of English

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## Abstract:

In this digital age, the world is turning into a monocultural one. Textbook authors and teachers are torn between the necessity of developing students' cultural literacy and protecting the Algerian national identity. This research investigates the place of banal national culture in *My Book of English* and teachers' attitudes towards banal nationalism in the classroom. Indeed, the textbook evaluation reveals that the authors seek to promote national identity by incorporating Algerian national symbols. They also incorporate elements from the British/American and the Arab/Islamic world. Teachers' attitudes correlate with the textbook's orientation reaffirming the necessity of being aware of the other without necessarily losing our identity.

**Key words:** cultural literacy; banal nationalism; attitudes; textbook evaluation.

## 1- Introduction :

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There is a well-established consensus that teaching a foreign language involves teaching both language and culture. In fact, language and culture cannot be dissociated and focusing on the linguistic aspect of EFL teaching creates what came to be known as “fluent fools” (Bennett, 1993). However, while agreeing on the necessity of incorporating culture in textbooks, a pertinent question is still left unanswered regarding to which culture should we deal with?

In fact, authority makers and textbook designers are put in a dilemma. From the one hand, students need to be confronted to foreign cultures to acquire the necessary skills and attitudes that help build competent, open-minded and culturally literate citizens. On the other hand, global culture imposes itself and threatens the national culture.

Moreover, effective language learning would never take place without introducing learners to the foreign cultures, norms, worldviews and national symbols. To be competent users of a foreign language, learners should be endowed with the necessary linguistic and cultural competences as well as a cultural literacy. Likewise, national culture is of equal importance, as textbooks are well known for their effectiveness in enabling students to know more about themselves and their cultures.

In fact, every textbook carries a certain amount of national symbols. On the one hand, it is impossible to design textbooks free from any national symbols. On the other hand, textbooks are banal national tools that reinforce national literacy and national identity, which may jeopardize tolerance and prevent developing intercultural communicative competence. There is no doubt that learners should have a certain national literacy, which is knowing about their national history, culture and symbols. Yet, interculturally Competent learners are well aware, not only

of their national culture but, of world national cultures and symbols. Hence, textbook authors try to depict banal national symbols that help promote both national identity and world banal national cultures.

This paper investigates banal national culture as depicted in the public middle schools textbook entitled *My Book of English*. It emphasizes the Algerian national symbols that may be reinforced within the textbooks. The textbook evaluation checklist we designed deals with national symbols quantitatively. It also endeavors to address teachers' perceptions towards these textbooks' nationalist orientations.

## 2- Banal Nationalism and textbooks

The concept of banal nationalism was first introduced by Michael Bellig, referring to a number of ideological habits and national representations that are part of everyday life and work to reinforce nationalist feelings. Banal nationalism, as perceived by Bellig (2002) is an ideological tool that drives citizens together, keeping some patterns of thinking unquestionable and as common sense. National identity in this light, is normal and necessary, as people are divided into nation-states, to which they are emotionally tied and are ready to die for (p. 120). In this process, citizens tend to define themselves in positive self-images and exclude others who are necessarily "alien" or "weird".

### 2-1- Banal Nationalism in Algerian Textbooks

In Algeria, textbooks are the most dominant teaching materials that are targeted to a mass population which has limited contact with people from different nations and cultures. Most Algerian pupils have never been abroad. The sole contact they may have with foreign cultures and national symbols is

through textbooks. Thus, these textbooks are the predominant apparatuses that reinforce both nationalism and cultural literacy.

This inclusion and exclusion is done in the light of cultural comparison. Indeed, this feeling of belonging to one nation, which is different from other nations, is established and reinforced in textbooks. Textbooks as teaching materials are loaded with cultural representations of “us” and “them”. This representation, following Bellig is never “innocent” (2002, p. 7).

## **2-2- the Algerian Textbooks**

Education in Algeria went through different reforms. After decolonization, the authority makers broke with the French educational system and opted for a national education that would unify the population and promote national spirit. This reform was mainly characterized by advancing textbooks that are locally produced for mass-consumption in the Algerian classrooms. The last educational reform took place in 2016 and the Ministry of Education introduced the four textbook series, *My Book of English* year one, two, three and four.

On the top of the four textbooks, we read “The People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria ” and “ The Ministry of National Education” in Arabic. *My Book of English*, year one is divided into five different sequences that are entitled; Me and My Friends, Me and My Family, Me and My Daily activities, Me and My School and Me, my Country and the World. In every sequence, we find I listen and do, I pronounce, My grammar tools, I practice, I read and do, I learn to integrate, I read and write, Now I can, I play, I enjoy, My pictiory. In sequence 1, 2 and 4, we find my first/second/third term project. It ends with My Recap and My Trilingual Glossary.

*My Book of English* year two is cut into four sequences entitled; Me, my Friends and my Family, Me and my Shopping, Me and my health and me and

my Travels. It has three term projects in sequence 1, 3 and 4. The book ends with My Basic Irregular Verb List and My Trilingual Glossary. Similarly, in My Book of English year three we find four sequences. The sequences are entitled; Me, My Abilities, my Interests and My Personality, Me and Lifestyles, Me and the Scientific World and finally, Me and my Environment. In sequences 1, 2 and 4 we find, term projects. Finally, the textbook targeting fourth year students is divided into three sequences: Me, universal landmarks and outstanding figures in history, literature and arts, Me, my personality and life experience and Me, my community and citizenship. Obviously, the textbook holds three term projects that are directed to students at the end of every sequence.

Textbooks need to depict both local and foreign cultures. Local culture is depicted to reinforce a sense of common belonging and uniqueness. Foreign cultures should be included in textbooks since to have a self-image, individuals need to compare themselves with the 'Other'. Moreover, depicting foreign cultures is not free from banal nationalism, for both target cultures and transnational cultures have national implications. The target culture is limited to groups of people belonging to geographically enclosed areas sharing some linguistic, cultural and historical heritage. To add more, even the transnational culture has a national dimension as its culture and symbols are depicted as universal.

### **2-3- Banal National Culture in My Book of English.**

The type of culture depicted in textbooks is a central matter. In fact, there is a controversy related to which culture should be prominent in the textbooks. This choice reveals a lot about the textbook designers and authority makers' orientations and perceptions. Risager (2007) identifies three types of culture; local culture, target culture and transnational culture. The local culture, here, is the Algerian culture, while the target culture is the culture of the native

speakers and transnational culture is the world or what we call universal culture. As put by Messakher, “there is a lot of variation as to which culture is represented, whether it is local, target, international or a combination” (2014, p. 70).

A first glance at the textbooks cover-pages reveal banal national elements and the nationalist orientation of the textbooks. In the cover page of *My Book of English* year 1, we find twelve pupils (six males and six females) holding hands around the globe, at the heart of the world map is flagged the Algerian flag. In *My Book of English* year two, we find two pictures of two Algerian well-known touristic places; Constantine and Ahaggar, in addition to the tower Bridge in London. With these pictures, an Algerian girl is featured with the Algerian flag. Then, in the third year textbook, the Algerian flag is not featured. However, the textbook cover includes four pictures that are all taken in Algeria and depict the Algerian traditional and contemporary life. Finally, textbook four, does not depict the Algerian flag just like its predecessor. It carries four pictures. In the first, we find the Algerian novelist, poet and playwright Mohamed Dib, while in the second Alhambra palace in Grenada is pictured. The third picture mirrors an Algerian charity association, Ness El Khir and finally the last picture depicts Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament.

One of the biggest challenges for textbook authors is to provide cultural elements that enrich students’ literacy for years. In fact, the cultural content of textbooks may lose its value through time. What is relevant as cultural literacy to 2020 students may no longer be interesting and relevant to 2030 students.

**Table 1. National Flagging and Symbols**

	Algerian	American British	Arab Islamic	World
<b>Textbook 1</b>	53	17	13	50

<b>Textbook 2</b>	15	3	0	2
<b>Textbook 3</b>	12	0	0	0
<b>Textbook 4</b>	3	3	1	1
<b>Total</b>	83	23	14	53

As table 1 illustrates, *My Book of English* is loaded with national symbols and flagging. The textbooks seem to have predominantly nationalist orientations, then world national symbols come in the second position followed by American and British national symbols. The textbook therefore, seeks to reinforce national identity and then promote world cultural literacy that would enable learners develop open-minded attitudes and tolerance.

**Table 2: National figures, heroes and leaders**

	<b>Algerian</b>	<b>American British</b>	<b>Arab Islamic</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Textbook 1</b>	8	2	0	1
<b>Textbook 2</b>	1	1	0	1
<b>Textbook 3</b>	3	4	5	1
<b>Textbook 4</b>	12	4	1	2
<b>Total</b>	21	11	6	5

Table 2 reinforces the above-mentioned findings. To promote nationalism, we need to provide national figures, heroes and leaders that would serve as models for youngsters and infer pride. The Algerian national symbols like

Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired, Moufdi Zakaria, Amir Abdel Kader and Youcef Ibn Tashfin are icons of national fight and sacrifice that fought for a very noble cause and that inspire both boys and girls. Other figures from all over the world are featured to inspire students for instance, Milada Horáková and Mahatma Gandhi that fought for freedom and what they believed to be fair. Then comes the well-known British national figure, Queen Elizabeth II. We cannot claim to be culturally literate if we ignore who this lady is. Figures belonging to the old Muslim world like Harun El Rashid are also depicted.

**Table 3: National and Religious Days**

	<b>Algerian</b>	<b>American British</b>	<b>Arab Islamic</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Textbook 1</b>	3	4	0	0
<b>Textbook 2</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Textbook 3</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Textbook 4</b>	1	0	3	0
<b>Total</b>	4	4	3	0

Table 3 reveals the textbooks depict four Algerian national days and six religious occasions, in addition to four national/religious celebrations in either Britain or USA. As advanced by Michael Bellig (2002), national and religious days are well known and common ways of flagging nationalism. Every nation-state strives to remind its citizens of the nation and what binds them together in days like independent days. Indeed, textbooks are effective ways to keep reminding citizens that they got united, or independent in special days. This

reinforces the feelings of self-image as belonging to a particular nation-state that fought to be a nation and established its own flag.

**Table 4: National Currency**

	<b>Algerian</b>	<b>American British</b>	<b>Arab Islamic</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Textbook 1</b>	1	5	2	7
<b>Textbook 2</b>	0	5	0	0
<b>Textbook 3</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Textbook 4</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	1	10	2	5

Of course, every nation-state has its currency. Currency is one of the symbols reflecting nationalism. As nationalists, generally seek to distinguish themselves from other nations, they tend to do so by advancing and emphasizing their currency. The British nationalists, for instance, voted for the Brexit to keep the Pound, which represents the British national currency.

### 3- Teachers' Perceptions towards Banal national culture

Teachers' attitude is a very important variable that may affect students' attitudes and the learning process. Indeed, teachers are the products of their own societies and are much influenced by the nationalist orientations of their country. Teachers in Algerian schools start their working days by greeting the Algerian flag and signing/listening to the national anthem with the students.

In this study, we investigate whether teachers' perception correlate with the textbook designers and authority makers' orientations regarding banal national culture. Therefore, we designed a questionnaire addressed to seventeen middle school teachers. The participants teach full-time in different parts of the country and are Master students at Ecole Normale Superieur Bouzareah.

### 3-1-teachers' attitudes towards Algerian banal national culture

**Table 5: attitudes towards national cultures**

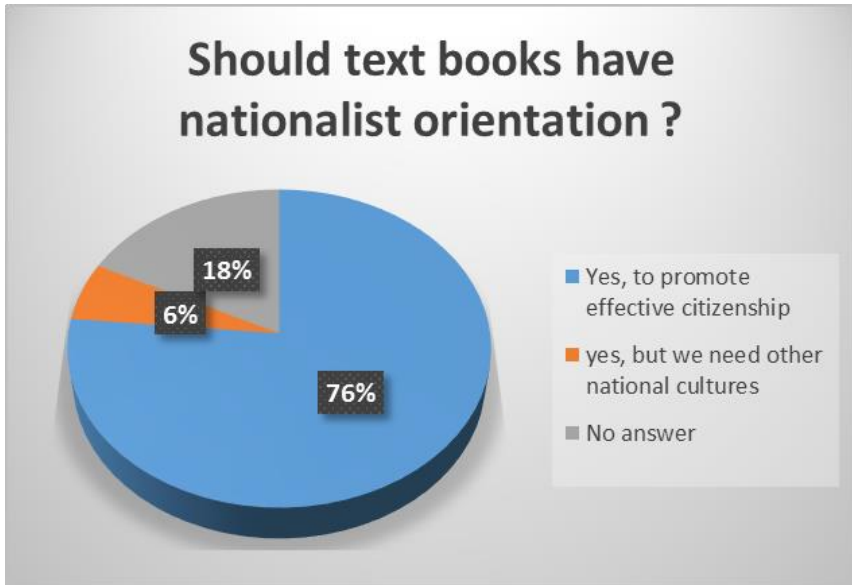
Question	yes	no
Algerian culture should be predominant in textbooks	17	0
National flags should be exclusively Algerian in the textbooks	6	11
Algerian national figures, heroes and leaders should be portrayed in textbooks	16	1

Table 5 illustrates teachers' perceptions towards the flagging of national culture. 100% of the participants see the necessity of incorporating local culture more than foreign ones. The rationale for this is found in the participants' answers to the open-ended questions, they explain, "Unfortunately, the new generation is lost in social media they are being westernized smoothly, we need to remind them of their roots in order to not lose the Algerian identity in the future".

Another student claims, "the Algerian textbooks are full of values in order to make students to be aware of their culture and to be proud of their history and Algerian heroes by providing them with effective texts, passages and pictures and that help them to be good citizens". Indeed teachers' answers can be divided into two parts. Part of the participant see that banal national cultural elements help develop good and proud citizens, with unshakable

national identity. The other part, however, believes that this is a way to resist assimilation to foreign cultures and safeguard the Algerian heritage.

**Pie Chart 1:** nationalist orientations in textbooks



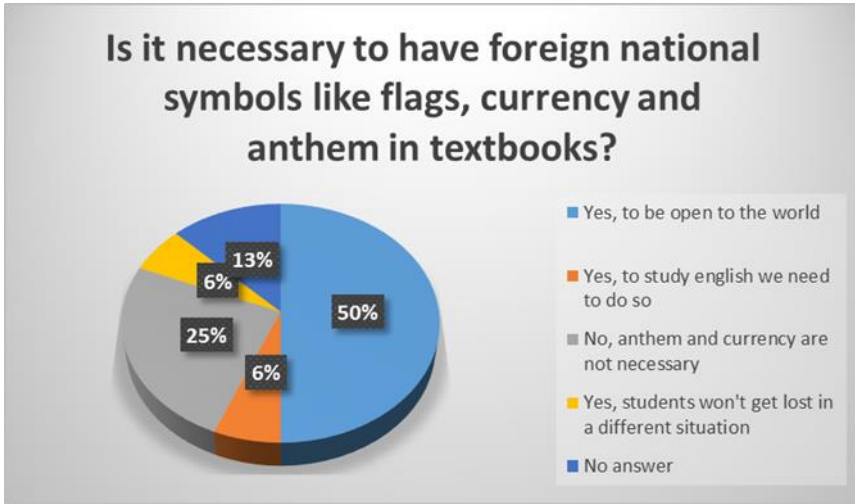
The pie chart illustrates teachers' perceptions towards nationalist orientations in textbooks. The survey reveals that all the answers are positive (except two participants who did not respond to this question). Yet, students disagree on which national culture to include. One of the participants explains

textbooks should reflect our national identity to promote effective citizens. However, radical nationalist orientations may lead to racism and hatred towards foreign orientations. Thus, textbooks should balance between both nationalist orientations that must be "focused on" and others' to reach "openness to the world."

### **3-2- Teachers' attitudes towards foreign banal national cultures**

The survey reveals that the participant hold similar attitudes that the textbook authors hold. Indeed, 100% of the participants consented on the necessity of predominantly depicting Algerian culture in the classroom. However, our participant's views differ when it comes to foreign national cultural elements. As the pie chart 2 illustrates, teachers' attitudes can be divided into two main positions. Some teachers agree on the necessity of teaching foreign national cultures, while others disagree. Teachers' positive attitudes fall in three categories, utilitarian, instrumental and future anticipating motives. 50% of the respondents agree explaining that foreign national symbols are necessary for effective and language learning. It is not possible to use a foreign language and undertake social or economic transaction with foreigners if we are not culturally literate about our interlocutor's culture and national symbols.

**Pie chart 2:** Foreign national symbols



Moreover, 6 % agree on the necessity of a certain understanding and background for an effective language learning, while 6 % believe that these symbols prevent radical nationalist feelings and intolerance among pupils. However, 15% seem to agree on depicting foreign cultures without necessarily needing foreign flags and currency in our textbooks. They explain this saying that the textbooks are Algerian and they should look Algerian.

Varying cultures in textbooks is of paramount importance. Otherwise, learners will fail to accept other perspectives and world-views. They would face culture shock and resist any culture that differs their own. Therefore, both teachers and course book authors need to prepare students to understand and accept world cultures by developing their students' cultural literacies.

**Table6: perceptions towards foreign culture**

Question	yes	no

Foreign cultures and Algerian culture should be equally represented in textbooks	6	11
The culture of the countries that are not English-speaking should be depicted in textbooks	8	9
Foreign flags should be depicted in textbooks	13	4
Foreign national figures, heroes and leaders should be portrayed	15	2

Table 6 confirms what we previously advanced. It is clear that perceptions towards foreign national culture diverge. Only 35% of the teachers agree on having equal representation between local and foreign national cultures. One of the participant teachers comments as follows,

Textbooks should reflect our national identity to promote effective citizens. However, radical nationalist orientations may lead to racism and hatred towards foreign orientations. Thus, textbooks should balance between both nationalist orientations that must be "focused on" and others' to reach "openness to the world.

Cortazzi and Jin (1999) stress that textbooks need to portray both local and target culture, yet analyzing different textbooks they found out that, a target culture is not always represented; some books include, appropriately, a range of English speaking cultures; others include non-English speaking cultures, stressing more international uses of the language. The representation of culture is more complex than the kind of portrayal implied by many evaluation checklists (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p.196). Our checklist and survey reveal that the textbook authors tried to

cover all the aspects sharing Cortazzi and Jin's view. However, our designers and teachers put an emphasis on national aspects.

A minority of teachers hold negative attitudes towards foreign national cultural elements. One of the reasons that stimulates this perception is their disbelief in students' readiness for this. As explained by a participant, "the pupils are not yet mature enough to handle international orientations". Some teachers are afraid that students would get "lost" when confronted to foreign elements because they are not "mature" enough.

### **Implications:**

It seems that students are expected to use their national cultural framework to communicate with foreigners that would come to Algeria, which explains the choice of national culture over the foreign cultures. There is actually, an instance in My Book of English year 4 in which an Algeria girl went abroad and visited Spain, Italy and Turkey. Yet, the two texts that described this journey limited transnational culture to factual aspects of place, tourism, and art. The cultural framework as way of life, attitudes and beliefs or communication norms shaping the life of citizens of these countries are overlooked. In fact, as shared by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) textbook authors emphasize national culture to prevent "the mismatches" (197) between the culture of learners and the textbook culture. These mismatches would result in negative attitudes, culture shock or resistance to any foreign or cultural symbols. Therefore, to make the process of language and culture learning smooth, textbook authors depict different cultures but give much more attention to students' national culture.

However, It is clear that a textbook which excessively focusses on national culture may fail to enrich students' cultural literacy. Moreover, this may promote and taking for granted everything Algerian. This is why, teachers need to be very cautious when dealing with cultural contents, regardless to

whether local or foreign. Teachers need to push students to compare their own national cultural aspects with foreign ones in order to avoid what Bellig calls “radical nationalism”.

### **Conclusion :**

We come to the conclusion sharing Bellig’s view that every textbook carries at least some banal nationalist elements (Bellig, p. 175). However, the remaining part of the work lies on the shoulders of the teachers who need to teach students linguistic, cultural and national literacy. These literacies involves *savoirs*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-etre*, (Byram, p. 2002) i.e., they encompass background knowledge, skills and attitudes.

A textbook that ignores foreign banal national elements would fail to produce culturally literate and open-minded students. As the national symbols, histories and geography are known by most Algerian students and are thoroughly covered by civic education. Moreover, this may give the impression that the Algerian norms and values are universal and that Algerian national symbols and history should be taken for granted and that there is nothing much more important than “us” or “our” world and culture.

The reason behind favoring C1 over the other Cs in textbooks is to enable learners to know more about their culture, as well as enabling them to tell foreigners about their culture (Risager, 2007, p. 205). This kind of content reinforces students’ self-image and nationalism. Students need to face alternatives of their own national culture in order to develop cultural literacy and intercultural competence

The fact that teachers’ attitudes correlate with the textbook authors’ is significant, as dissonance would make students feel lost between the orientation dominating textbooks they have in hands and the teachers’

perceptions. Middle school pupils are not mature enough to handle such issues and the psychological discomfort that goes with. Therefore, students find themselves in two possibilities, they either passively assimilate or resist everything foreign. This resistance may be even extended to resist English as a form of linguistic imperialism.

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5- Appendix

**Teachers’ Attitudes Towards Banal National Culture in Textbooks**

The present questionnaire is part of a scientific research which endeavors to investigate teachers' attitudes towards textbooks' content. The information you provide is a very useful contribution to the study. We would like you to answer by ticking the answer that best indicates your attitude and by giving the full answer when necessary. Thank you for your cooperation.

Question	agree	disagree
Algerian culture should be predominant in textbooks		
Foreign cultures and Algerian culture should be equally represented in textbooks		
The culture of the countries that are not part of the English speaking countries should be depicted in textbooks		
National flags should be exclusively Algerian in the textbooks		
Foreign flags should be depicted in textbooks		
Algerian national figures, heroes and leaders should be portrayed in the textbooks		
Foreign national figures, heroes and leaders should be portrayed in textbooks		

Should textbooks have nationalist orientations? Justify

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Is it necessary to have foreign national symbols like flags, currency and anthem in textbooks? Justify

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Do we need to reinforce Algerian national culture, national symbols and history in textbooks? Justify

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Is there any threat to national unity and identity when we teach foreign national symbols?

Justify

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What are the foreign national symbols to include and exclude in the classroom? Justify

*Thank you!*