



American Perceptions of Italian Youth: A Study of Photographs in Foreign Language Textbooks

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have revealed that textbooks often contain unfavorable and inaccurate depictions of individuals while also eliminating or scarcely representing certain groups. In the foreign language classroom, the textbook is central to the process of learning both the target language and culture. The text and especially photographs are often the student's primary source of cultural exposure, particularly since many foreign language teachers have not lived in the country of the language being taught. Although textbook photographs may have a longer lasting impact than written textual materials, researchers and educators claim that about 71 percent of such photos are simply ornaments which publishers hope will enhance the book appeal. When texts realistically fail to present languages, people, and cultures, students are often left with a false perception of identity.

The current study examines photographs from a popular Italian foreign language textbook series used in American high schools. Through a content analysis of photographs along with written comments gathered from teachers and student teachers, the study investigates the representation of Italian youth in the selected texts. The results demonstrate that although the series present Italian youth quite realistically, certain elements from the Italian society are eliminated.

Keywords: Textbook photographs; bias in textbooks; multiculturalism in textbooks; culturally responsive didactic material; Italian textbooks; Depictions of Italian youth.

1. Introduction

Within recent years, there has been a growing emphasis to promote culturally responsive awareness within the classroom as student populations become more diverse. Teachers are encouraged to employ a culturally responsive curriculum that connects to the students' real world along with instructional materials that are non-racist, non-sexist, and non-biased. While there has been much improvement within the past twenty years, empirical studies continue to reveal that many books still contain stereotypical representations, unfavorable, and inaccurate depictions of individuals while also omitting certain groups entirely (Balodimas-Bartolomei, 2003; Banks & McGee Banks, 2001; LaBelle, 2010). Ariew (1982) explains that because textbooks are created by specific groups, the official knowledge and cultural picture is often distorted leaving individuals, minorities, and/or ethnic groups with little control over how they are illustrated in print. As a result, these "others" are often eliminated, scarcely represented, or completely misrepresented in school textbooks (Apple, 1992; Balodimas-Bartolomei, 2003; McCarthy, 1990; Otto, 1992). Therefore because textbooks mirror official ideas, methods and orientations, they also constitute "a proxy for the ills of the education system that they serve" (Altbach, 1991, p. 238).

In the foreign language classroom, the textbook is central to the process of learning both the target language and culture. The textbook is often the student's primary source of cultural exposure, particularly since many foreign language teachers have not lived in the country of the language being taught. Because instructors often lack information regarding the appropriateness of ethnic depiction in illustrations and written text, people are often wrongly presented, giving students skewed perceptions of these individuals (LaBelle, 2010). When studying a foreign language, students often come to a greater understanding of a new culture and people by viewing attractive textbook photographs. Although textbook photographs may have a longer lasting impact than written textual materials, researchers and educators claim that about 71 percent of such photos are simply ornaments which publishers hope will enhance the book's appeal (Pinnex, 1990). When they fail to realistically present languages, people, and cultures, students are often left with a false perception of identity.

The current study examines textbook photographs from a popular high school Italian textbook series entitled *Ecco*. While Italian language instruction has been on the rise in American high schools, very few studies have been performed on the cultural representation and identity of Italians in Italian foreign language textbooks. Therefore, little is known about whether textbook photographs are realistically portraying Italian youth. Such research is needed in the areas of Italian studies, language teaching,

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and curriculum development. The current study aims at demonstrating the significance of culturally relevant photographs in foreign language textbooks.

Through an analysis of both textbook photographs and written comments gathered from twenty one teachers and student teachers, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How are Italian youth depicted in textbooks?
2. What are some of the characteristics of Italian youth?
3. Are they presented as being part of a homogeneous or multicultural society?
4. Are there many similarities and/or differences with American youth?
5. Are youth from all over Italy represented?

2. Forms of Textbook Bias

Among countless textbook critics, Patrikis (1988) and Zittleman and Sadker (2002) have identified different forms of cultural bias in textbooks. Patrikis, refers to the following “four sins of commission” (as cited in Balodimas-Bartolomei, 2003).

1. Trivialization – silly out of date or quaint tokens depicting culture solely in terms of customs and cuisines.
2. Stereotyping – an oversimplified aspect or characteristic of a culture or its people.
3. Political bias – some elements of a culture are featured but others are ignored.
4. Dangerous incompleteness – an entire subculture or other crucial part of a culture is not represented.

Zittleman and Sadker established a framework consisting of the following seven forms of bias, found not only in K-12 textbooks, but also in college texts, the media, and in everything around us.

1. Invisibility – certain groups are underrepresented.
2. Stereotyping or bigotry – a rigid set of characteristics to all members of a group.
3. Imbalance and selectivity or referred to as a half-told tale – only one interpretation of an issue, situation, or group of people.
4. Unreality or what the author’s call rose colored glasses – textbooks frequently present an unrealistic portrayal of our history and contemporary life experiences.
5. Fragmentation and Isolation – racial and ethnic group members are depicted as interacting only with persons like themselves, isolated from other cultural communities.
6. Linguistic Bias – using words, e.g. masculine terms and pronouns, for all individuals reflecting the discriminatory nature of our language.
7. Cosmetic Bias – attractive, shiny book covers, photos, or posters that present an unrealistic view of individuals and culture in society.

3. Textbook Study

Published in 2010, the *Ecco* textbook series consists of three textbooks, workbooks, CD’s, Teacher’s Resources & Assessment kits. The publisher states that the textbook series contains up-to date and exciting photography; fun cartoon stories; and authentic language. The textbooks aim at making learning Italian an engaging and rewarding experience while enabling students to embark on the road to life-long Italian fluency while also falling in love with a modern and exciting Italy. Through an abundance of cultural notes and intercultural experiences, students can learn about Italians.

The current study used the content analysis model along with the above frameworks to examine textbook photographs from the *Ecco* series. For clarity, cartoons were eliminated from the study. The photographs were divided into two categories: people and objects.

4. Textbook Findings

A total of 775 photographs were examined. A total of 907 individuals were included in 428 photos. 347 photos contained objects. The textbook photographs revealed:

- A higher percentage of females (8%)
- More than half of the youth wearing jeans (60%).
- Few youth using cellphones (4%).
- A small number shopping (5%).
- Frequent socialization especially in one’s home (34%).
- Education and especially English instruction are strongly valued (12%)
- Many Italian youth enjoy sports – Gym; Basketball, Soccer, Cycling. (7%)
- Italians are family oriented (5%)



- Traditional food is still highly regarded. Food Items (8%) which included Italian products, Fast Food Fries including Ice cream, Pizza and Hamburgers (3%), Slow Food including traditional Italian Cuisine (9%).
- Popular eatery places: Paninoteca, Gelateria, Pizzeria, Nutelleria (12%)
- Italian youth like playing guitars (4%).
- Italian youth have pets (2%)
- A high percentage of blonde haired youth (19%)
- Popular photo location/number of photos: Rome (54); Sicily (45); Bologna (31); Venice (25); Florence (23)

Summary & Additional Comments: Italian and American youth share many similarities – sports, fashion, technology, socializing. Italian youth are connected to family. They appear to be depicted realistically in this textbook. Although the book includes different geographical areas, southern Italy is not mentioned until book 3. The Italian society does not appear to be a multicultural society. There are no handicapped students in book. While there are only a handful of pictures, environmental issues, volunteering and the annual Carnevale play a role in the students' lives.

5. Teacher/Student Comments

The portrayal of Italian teenagers varies in the textbooks. Many teens are smiling and they seem very happy and healthy however one reviewer wrote that the smiles seem forced making some of the photos look fake. She added that it makes sense, because textbook photos need to match the textbook dialogues and content. Italian youth appear to be adventurous and full of life. Many teenagers are on scooters and this is perhaps the biggest difference because Americans don't ride scooters. Some reviewers felt that Italian youth look like a lot like Americans especially in the way that they are dressed however, others noted differences.

The Italian mode of communication appears to be different. People talk a lot with their hands and use different facial expressions. Italy appears to be a very romantic country and student interactions also appear to be very welcoming. The most significant differences are the settings, landscapes, and history. There are lots of mountains in Italy. One reviewer especially enjoying seeing the photos of The Bridge of Love, where young lovers write their love messages on padlocks, attach them to the bridge, and throw the key in the river. This, she wrote was a really, cute concept.

Italian youth enjoy spending time in their homes, at school and at the gym. They live in a very beautiful country and evidently, they enjoy exploring it. They like to be in groups. They love their ice cream and enjoy music and going shopping. They like to use different modes of transportation: biking, scooter, bus, taxi, walking, etc. Their technology seems like ours. They value holidays, music, traditions, animals, and social interaction. Some photographs however appear to be stereotypes or trivialization of "Italian" things, e.g. eating gelato and hanging out by the colosseum.

The reviewers also noted a few negative features of the book including outdated cellphones, clothing, and hairstyles for both men and women. Some photos looked as if they were from the 90s or early 2000s. Although the photos portrayed Italians varying in skin color, they were basically all homogenously white, with no diversity shown. Thus, the book contained dangerous incompleteness.

Overall, the reviewers found the books very interesting and similar to high school French and Spanish textbooks. They would enjoy using these textbooks to learn Italian.

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