

# Cultural Hegemony Portrayed in Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate Textbook

*Hegemonía cultural representada en el libro Cutting Edge de nivel  
pre-intermedio*

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## **Abstract**

The use of textbooks in the EFL classroom is a trend that shapes the way language teachers teach and how students learn. Teachers design and use a great deal of materials for teaching and developing foreign language skills, but in terms of culture, they usually prefer to trust publishing houses for the cultural content included in their textbooks. What we do not know is that most of these textbooks promote hegemony and standardization of cultures under the conscious or unconscious ideology of the colonization of being. Teachers need to learn how to analyze and unveil the hidden mechanisms of colonization that are portrayed in some textbooks, a process which can be carried out through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis.

**Key words:** Culture, hegemony, textbooks.

## **Resumen**

El uso de libros de texto en el aula de Inglés como lengua extranjera es una tendencia que moldea la forma como los maestros enseñan y la manera como aprenden los estudiantes. Los maestros diseñan y usan una gran cantidad de materiales para enseñar y desarrollar habilidades en idiomas extranjeros, pero en términos de cultura, generalmente prefieren confiar en las editoriales usando el contenido cultural incluido en sus libros. Lo que no sabemos es que la mayoría de estos libros promueven la hegemonía y la estandarización de las culturas bajo el movimiento consciente o inconsciente de la colonización del ser. Es por esto que los maestros necesitan aprender a analizar y develar los mecanismos ocultos de colonización que se presentan en algunos libros de texto, lo cual se puede realizar mediante el Análisis Crítico del Discurso.

***Palabras clave:*** cultura, hegemonía, libros de texto.

## Introduction

This study is about the description of cultural hegemonic aspects portrayed in an ELT textbook used by the School of Languages and the International Language Institute of a public university in Tunja, Colombia. The idea is to see if there are any hidden mechanisms promoting British culture as a universal culture. As Fairclough (2003) stated, “achieving hegemony entails achieving a measure of success in projecting certain particulars as universals” (p. 31)

The analysis was done on two videos in the Pre-Intermediate Level book of the Cutting Edge (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) series. These videos are part of what the Cutting Edge textbook series call “world culture lessons”. The two videos are entitled: *City of Street Style* and *The Search for Cool*. In order to carry out this research study, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method will be used following the procedure suggested by Fairclough.

## Problem

Some English teachers are aware of cultural hegemony content portrayed in some English Language Teaching

(ELT) textbooks, but other teachers are not. Most publishing houses develop their ELT textbooks so that can be used by the widest audience possible. Doing so allows publishers to get the most out of their material. Nevertheless, an issue arises when these textbooks try to standardize both language and culture. According to Reimann (2009), a debate among scholars has raised questions about “whose culture to represent and how to present cultural content without stereotypes or essentialist perspectives, while keeping information relevant and interesting” (p. 85). Clarke and Clarke (1990) reported that there exists a lot of stereotyping and bias in British EFL materials in the areas of gender, race, class, and religion, while cross-cultural perspectives in communication are limited or denied.

The main aspect in the current study is the concept of cultural hegemony, which is understood as the practice of promoting and imposing a culture, usually that of a politically powerful nation over a less powerful society (Fairclough, 2003). Although this cultural hegemony is typically spread through media and other means of

communication, ELT textbooks can also spread cultural hegemony. Due to the imposition of control, standardization, and colonization of nations, more scholars have come out to oppose textbook content. They argue that ELT textbooks can reduce cultural diversity, as well as disempower both teachers and learners by imposing syllabus and approach uniformity (Tomlinson, 2012). At times, textbooks are implemented with so much authority that it is difficult for teachers or students to challenge or adapt them (Luke, de Castell, & Luke, 1989; Dendrinos, 1992).

Based on the theoretical support above, we can conclude that the cultural content portrayed in an ELT textbook can communicate ideologies, reinforce stereotypes, exaggerate or misrepresent culture, mitigate cultural diversity, and disempower teachers and learners. Because of this, we wanted to analyze the cultural hegemonic content portrayed in the textbook *Cutting Edge Third* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition), which is used by the School of Languages and the International Institute of Languages at a public university in Tunja, Colombia.

## Rationale

There are several reasons to conduct this research study. Firstly, the use of the English language has become almost mandatory for anyone who wants to work in a professional setting in Colombia. Our students at schools and universities are required to reach a certain level of English in order to graduate. Moreover, educational institutions want to become competitive in the field of English language teaching and learning. As a result, they mandate the use of ELT textbooks in the classroom. Although this practice has become an educational trend, most of the time, teachers are unaware of the sociocultural implications that these teaching resources foster in our local communities.

Secondly, there are only a handful of studies on cultural hegemony in ELT textbooks in Boyacá, the department where this study took place. When we were looking for previous studies, we only found one on this subject in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. In this study, Gomez (2015) tried to determine the type of cultural content in certain EFL textbooks. Gomez explored elements of surface and deep culture, and he found that the textbooks

contained only static and congratulatory topics of surface culture. Meanwhile, the textbook omitted complex and transformative forms of culture.

We found another research study from Argentina conducted by Basabe (2006), whose topic was “From de-Anglicization to internationalization: Cultural representations of the UK and the USA in global, adapted and local ELT textbooks in Argentina”. Apart from this study, most of the research on cultural hegemony in textbooks are from Asia and Europe. This article would present a study on cultural imperialism in ELT textbooks being used in Boyacá, Colombia.

Thirdly, this research study would be useful for the educational community and public universities since it is meant to raise cultural awareness and unveil the “intentions behind” the discourses found in ELT textbooks (Van Dijk, 2000). Furthermore, this study may help teachers become more critically constructive of the textbooks they use, as well as be more willing to personalize their teaching material for the specific needs of their students or even produce their own.

## Research question

What cultural hegemonic aspects are portrayed in the Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate textbook?

## Objectives

To unveil the presence of cultural hegemonic aspects within the Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate textbook.

To describe the cultural hegemonic content that the Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate book might have.

## Methodology

We chose the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method to conduct our research. According to Van Dijk (2000), one of the main purposes of CDA is to unveil relations of power and dominance behind discourses. This also coincides with the concepts of cultural hegemony that we are interested in studying for this research project.

According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), there are four principles of CDA: 1) Social and political issues are constructed and reflected in discourse; 2) Power relations are negotiated and performed through discourse; 3)

Discourse both reflects and reproduces social relations; 4) Ideologies are reproduced and reflected in the use of discourse. CDA explores the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which they occur. It looks at issues such as: power, ideology, identity, gender, and ethnicity and how they are constructed and reflected in texts (written, spoken, or visual). The aim of CDA is to reveal some of the hidden intentions, values, positions, and perspectives of those who are in power within society (Hyland, 2005).

Wodak and Meyer (2008) claimed that CDA has at least seven dimensions of analysis:

- An interest in the properties of “naturally occurring” language used by real language users (instead of a study of abstract language systems and invented examples).
- A focus on larger units rather than isolated words and sentences, as well as new basic units of analysis: texts, discourses, conversations, speech acts, or communicative events.
- The extension of linguistics beyond sentence grammar towards a study of action and interaction.
- The extension to non-verbal (semiotic, multimodal, visual) aspects of interaction and communication: gestures, images, film, the internet, and multimedia.
- A focus on dynamic (socio)-cognitive or interactional moves and strategies.
- The study of the functions of (social, cultural, situational, and cognitive) contexts of language use.
- An analysis of a vast number of phenomena of text grammar and language use: coherence, anaphora, topics, macrostructures, speech acts, interactions, turn-taking, signs, politeness, argumentation, rhetoric, mental models, and many other aspects of text and discourse.

We analyzed the cultural hegemonic aspects portrayed in the textbook *Cutting Edge* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). The analysis was conducted on two short videos in the pre-intermediate level of

the series. These videos are part of what the Cutting Edge textbook labeled as “World Culture Lessons”, and the videos are titled: *City of Street Style* and *The Search for Cool*. These videos will be studied using corpus analysis.

### Data Analysis and Findings

In order to better understand the assumptions made by the texts and the interpretations of the researcher, the analysis started with the context. The first part of this context is the name of the textbook itself. “Cutting Edge” is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “*the latest or most advanced stage in the development of something*”. From this definition, we can infer that the name of the textbook is meant to promote to book as a provider of the most current and advanced information on English language teaching and learning.

The previous claim has serious implications for students utilizing this learning material since they are predisposed to believe that everything within the textbook is true and based on the latest knowledge available on the English language. A further analysis of the book showed that this superficial view of culture is sustained and reinforced within the book. The book

also refers to the external features that make people different from each other rather than considering the deeper issues that make people believe and behave differently.

The current study focused on two of the world culture lessons that the Cutting Edge textbook presents. These lessons were chosen because they seemed to provide information related to our main inquiry. The two lessons were used to analyze the external relationship of texts, as well as the internal relationship within them.

The two lessons were labeled as “World Culture Lessons”, which implies social aspects of the language. Before beginning the analysis, it is worth noting that such a thing as “world culture” does exist. However, we also know that cultural diversity has been reduced due to globalization and the blurring of social boundaries, which are both features of capitalist societies (Fairclough, 2003). Due to previous, there has been a reduction in the variety of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Even in the title we noticed that the omission of a plurality of “World Cultures” suggests that not everyone’s culture has been accounted for.

As mentioned before, we carried out a corpus analysis in order to avoid bias and ensure validity in our study. We counted the frequency of words in each of the videos. Then, we made a table of the most frequently used words used in each video. Afterwards, we concentrated on finding the clusters of the most frequent words in order to interpret the data. Performing frequency counts are important, as Stubbs (1996) writes “No terms are neutral. Choice of words expresses an ideological position” (p. 107).

Table 1  
*City of Street Style*

Total number of words: 282

WORD	FREQUENCY
London	7
Street	6
Fashion	5
Way	5
Culture	4
Style	3
Photograph	2
Designers	2

As seen in the table above, the most frequent word used in the video is “London”.

The clusters of this word are as follows:

“More and More the international fashion industry is looking to London”

“We do look to London”

“the way kids in London always have dressed”

“they all want to learn from London’s unique street style”

“London is, one, a centre for fashion and style”

“London is able to mix different aspects from different global cultures”

“very London, very scruffy but cool. A great look”

**Promotion of the British culture as the “world culture”.** In these clusters, we see that the British culture is portrayed as the most important culture in terms of fashion and style. We also noticed that when the word *London* appears in the video, and it is accompanied by adjectives and phrases, such as unique, center, able, people look to it, and everyone wants to learn from it.

The video also focused on two people on the street in London. The interviewer in the video commented on the two people’s style. For the first person, one of the comments provided was “her blazer doesn’t really match her bag” (line 15). It is unclear where the person is from because their city or country of origin is never mentioned. For the second person, the comments were “great look” (line 20) and “very London”



(line 19) (see Annex 1). From the video, London is portrayed as “unique” and “great”, and that this notion is increasing around the world “more and more”.

Other common words included “street”, “fashion”, and “style”. These words appeared in the text primarily because of the context of the video. The word “street” refers to the place where the video was filmed, and the words “fashion and style” appeared frequently because that was the topic of the video.

**Reinforcement of a superficial view of culture.** Another important word which appeared four times in the video was the word “culture”. In the video script, we read “street culture”, “night club culture”, and music culture” (lines 3-4) (see Annex 1). This type of discourse is implicitly stating that culture is not something belonging to people but to things. Furthermore, it maintains a superficial view of culture, which refers to the outer characteristics that separate one nation from another like holidays, food, clothes, sports, etc. These characteristics ignore people’s beliefs, values, and attitudes towards different aspects of social life.

Table 2

*The search for cool.*

Total number of words: 508

WORD	FREQUENCY
Cool	12
People	7
Things	7
Brand	6
Trainers	4
Companies	3
Everyone	3
Clothes	2

The most frequently used word in this video was the word “cool”. The clusters of this word are as follows:

“they want their product to be cool”

“this search for cool seems to be everywhere”

“everyone thinks they know what cool is”

“when people start talking about cool”

“Martin is travelling across Britain in search of cool”

“he wants to know what is cool”

“why is being cool important to so many people”

“An easy way to show how cool you are is through your clothes”

“There is one item of clothing more than another that has become the definition of cool”

“Is that a cool shoe”

“people love cool brands”

“it seems we are all in this search for cool”

Through these clusters, we can see that the video implies that being cool is “so important to many people” and that “an easy way to show how cool you are is through your clothes”. These ideas, in a way, direct people’s minds to become consumers in order to be “cool”.

**Shaping learners’ identities as shoppers.** The video utilized consumer-like vocabulary. For example, the video stated “This search for cool seems to be everywhere. In shops, music, and in adverts. Everyone seems to want it” (lines 3-4) (see Annex 2). The previous implies that a particularity of one culture (in this case the British culture) is a universal truth for all cultures, such as in using the word “everyone”. However, students may infer that the materialistic view of life occurs all over the world, and that is why it is now part of the world culture.

In addition, the video showed a man being interviewed just after buying a pair of limited-edition trainers (line 16). He was asked whether the shoe he bought was cool, and he replied “yeah, probably the coolest pair I’ve bought this

year, until the next pair come out”. The man’s reply demonstrated that you are only cool if you buy the latest product. Furthermore, it implies a culture of consumerism, in which the next coolest product will be available for purchase in the following year. This representation of world culture could foster students’ identity as consumers. Fairclough (2003) claimed that “prolonged experience of advertising and other commercial texts contributes to shaping people’s identities as ‘consumers’” (p. 8).

In the same video, Neil Boorman, a man obsessed with buying cool brands, mentions some of the causes and effects of this materialistic and commercial view of life: “if I wanted to be popular, successful, cool ... I had to have the right trainers, the right football, the right sportbag, all these things” (lines 27-29). He also mentions that he bought things to “gain acceptance” and “create the person that I wanted to be”. This implies that you are what you have and what you wear. If you do not have all these things, you are not going to be popular, successful, and accepted in society.

## Conclusions

During the analysis of the data from the two videos in the Cutting Edge

Pre-Intermediate textbook, we found that British culture is promoted as the world culture through the use of positive expressions and adjectives. We also noticed that the title of these lessons, “world culture”, try to unify every culture into one. This is an example of cultural hegemony because they did not highlight any culture other than their own.

On the other hand, we discovered that the second video had a commercial tendency, and it highlighted a materialistic view of culture as one of the main characteristics of world culture. We saw this as a clear example of the colonization of being, where becoming a consumer is a convenience for companies and brand names around the world.

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## Pre-intermediate Video script Unit 5

### Unit 5 Fashion

**VO** = voice over   **FD** = fashion designer   **RMJ** = Ruth Marshall-Johnson

**VO:** Fashion and designers around the world are always looking for ideas. More and more, the international fashion industry is looking to London for the latest street styles.

**FD:** We do look to London for the street scene and street culture and night club culture and music culture and again it's a ... it's a fearless way of dressing. They don't worry about rules the way we do in the States or indeed Paris or Milan. It's so anti-establishment. There is a rebel quality to the way kids in London always have dressed.

**VO:** Ruth Marshall-Johnson works for a fashion company. Her job is to find the latest trends on the street. Her clients include both expensive designer brands and high street stores and they all want to learn from London's unique street style.

**RMJ:** I am looking for fashion innovators. London is, one, a centre for fashion and style and experimentation and also, two, a sponge for those things. So in one way they have a very strong message. And in another way London is able to mix different aspects from different global cultures in one place.

Excuse me, can I take your photograph? OK, she's good because she err has Granny chic – hat's woollen, her blazer doesn't really match her bag. But she's pulled it all together with an edge that looks err playful, fun.

Hi, can I take your photograph? Thank you. Perfect pose! He looks a bit rock, a bit punk, mixture of all those influences. He's different, he looks different. It's not just skinny jeans and plimsolls. Very urban, very London, very erm scruffy but cool. Erm a great look.

## Pre-intermediate Video script Unit 13

### Unit 13 The search for cool

**VO** = voice over **VO1** = voice over 1 **M** = man **I** = interviewer

**MC** = Martin Cole **NB** = Neil Boorman

**VO:** This is Martin Cole. For some people he has a dream job. He travels all over the world helping large companies to make adverts. More and more, he finds they're looking for one thing – they want their products to be cool. This search for cool seems to be everywhere. In shops, music, and in adverts. Everyone seems to want it. And everyone thinks they know what cool is. But when people start talking about cool, it's very difficult to know exactly what it is.

So Martin is travelling across Britain in search of cool. He wants to know what is cool.

Where does it come from? And why is being cool important to so many people?

**VO1:** An easy way to show how cool you are is through your clothes. And there's one item of clothing more than any other that has become the definition of cool. The trainer. Some people go mad for special limited edition trainers, available in small numbers to only a small group of people. These people are at the launch of a new limited edition trainer. And some of them have been waiting for up to eight hours.

**M:** Good feature, white clean toe, patent, very nice, very nice.

**I:** Is that a cool shoe?

**M:** Yeah, probably the coolest pair I've bought this year, until the next pair come out.

**VO1:** People love cool brands. And it seems we are all in this search for cool. But not everyone agrees with it. And Martin is going to meet someone who wants his life to be completely brand free.

## Pre-intermediate Video script Unit 13

**MC:** So I've heard about this guy who's got some interesting things to say it seems about brands. He's got a plan to destroy or get rid of some of the stuff he owns and err, it seems like we should go and check out what he's up to.

**VO1:** This is Neil Boorman, by his own admission he's obsessed with buying cool brands. And he thinks it's getting out of hand. So later this year, Neil is going to burn every branded thing that he owns.

**NB:** I can actually chart this whole thing back to like one of the first days at primary school. And if I wanted to be popular, successful, cool, if I wanted to be liked you know, I had to have the right trainers, the right football, the right sports bag, all these things.

I had to have these branded things, you know, to gain acceptance. I bought Adidas, I bought Ralph Lauren, I bought these things because they would create, help me to create the person that I wanted to be. And you know, the more I spent my money on these things, I realise now that the less I actually understand who I am.

And I'm just of the conclusion now is like well, surely I must be able to feel happy and confident in myself without um, having to buy my own self esteem back from these companies time and time again.