TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS: EVIDENCE FROM NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

The hidden curriculum refers to the values, beliefs, norms and ideas that students may learn from educational materials in addition to the language content itself. Although the concept has been discussed in different studies, less attention has been given to teachers' awareness of these messages, particularly in the Western Balkan context. This study examined English language teachers' awareness of hidden curriculum in English language textbooks and the ways they respond to implicit messages in their classroom practice. A quantitative survey supported by qualitative comments was used. Ninety teachers completed the online questionnaire, while 89 usable responses were included in the analysis. The questionnaire consisted of 19 Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was moderate (Cronbach's $\alpha = .691$). The findings showed a moderate-to-high level of awareness overall. Critical Literacy Practices had the highest mean ($M = 4.08$), while Gender Representation had the lowest ($M = 3.17$). Teachers strongly supported critical thinking and alternative viewpoints, but gender imbalance and stereotypical roles were noticed less often. The open-ended responses showed that teachers recognize cultural values, stereotypes, social expectations and ideological messages, although some reported that they do not notice such messages in their textbooks. Limited classroom time, differences in students' abilities, lack of resources and sensitive topics were among the most common challenges.

Keywords: hidden curriculum, English language textbooks, teacher awareness, critical literacy, teacher cognition

1. Introduction

Textbooks have an important place in language teaching, particularly in contexts such as North Macedonia where they are often one of the main resources used in the classroom. However, textbooks do more than provide language knowledge. Through their texts, images, examples and activities, they may also communicate values, cultural norms, attitudes and social messages that are not directly stated. These elements can be understood as part of the hidden curriculum and may influence the way learners understand society and the people around them.

The idea of hidden curriculum is not new. Jackson (1968) argued that learners acquire more than what is included in the formal curriculum because schools also communicate social norms, values and expected ways of behaving. Later studies connected hidden curriculum with wider questions of ideology, inequality and power (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1983). From this perspective, textbooks can also be seen as one of the places where hidden messages may appear.

English language textbooks are especially relevant because they introduce learners not only to language but also to different cultures, social issues and ways of seeing the world. Their texts and visuals may carry messages about gender, relationships, behaviour, diversity and global citizenship. For this reason, the teacher has an important role between the textbook and the learner and can help students recognize, discuss and question these messages.

Despite the importance of this issue, research on teachers' awareness of hidden curriculum is still limited, particularly in North Macedonia. Therefore, this study examines how aware English language teachers are of implicit messages in textbooks, how they understand their possible influence on learners, and which aspects of hidden curriculum they identify most often.

RQ1: To what extent are English language teachers aware of the hidden curriculum embedded in English language textbooks?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive the impact of hidden curriculum messages on learners and the educational process?
RQ3: What aspects of the hidden curriculum do teachers identify most frequently in English language textbooks?

2. Literature Review

Hidden curriculum refers to values, norms and attitudes that learners may acquire even though they are not explicitly included in the formal curriculum (Jackson, 1968). It can be communicated through school routines, classroom relationships, teaching practices and educational materials. Jackson (1968) and Snyder (1971) described these unwritten expectations, while Freire (1970) emphasized that education is not neutral and can either reproduce accepted ideas or encourage learners to question them.
Different theoretical perspectives explain hidden curriculum in different ways. Structural-functionalist approaches focus on responsibility and social rules (Dreeben, 1968; Jackson, 1968), while conflict approaches emphasize dominant interests and inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Feminist and postmodern perspectives draw attention to gender, discourse, representation and power (Arnot, 2002; Foucault, 1980; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

2.1 English Textbooks and the Hidden Curriculum

In English Language Teaching, textbooks may present particular cultural and linguistic perspectives together with the language itself. Phillipson (2012) and Pennycook (2001) connect English language education with questions of culture, identity and power. Their work supports the view that textbook content should not always be considered neutral.
Recent studies have identified implicit messages in English textbooks. Huang and Liu (2024) and Jehle et al. (2024) found gender stereotypes and unequal representation, while Kubrická (2015) showed that textbooks may privilege particular cultural and linguistic identities. Sujinpram et al. (2025) also identified national, cultural and social ideologies. Together, these studies show that textbooks communicate more than language, but they mainly focus on textbook content rather than teachers' responses in classroom practice.

2.2 Teacher Cognition, Critical Literacy, and Awareness of Hidden Curriculum

Teacher cognition refers to the beliefs, knowledge and perceptions that influence the decisions teachers make in the classroom. Borg (2003) explains that teachers do not simply follow materials but interpret and adapt them according to their own knowledge and beliefs. Critical literacy adds another dimension by encouraging learners and teachers to question the social, cultural and ideological assumptions found in texts (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). Together, these perspectives can help explain why some teachers recognize and challenge hidden textbook messages while others may overlook them.

2.3 English Teachers' Awareness of Hidden Curriculum

Most studies examine textbook content rather than teachers' awareness. Vu and Pham (2025) found that English teachers often focused mainly on linguistic content, with less attention to social, gender-related and ideological dimensions. Their study is relevant because it connects teachers' critical awareness with classroom practice, although it was conducted in a specific educational context. Research from the Balkan region remains limited, leaving teachers' awareness of hidden curriculum underexplored.

Overall, previous research shows that English textbooks may contain different forms of hidden curriculum. However, considerably less is known about teachers' awareness of these messages and the way they respond to them, especially in North Macedonia. This gap provides the basis for the present study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative survey supported by qualitative comments to examine teachers' awareness, perceptions and reported classroom practices related to hidden curriculum in English language textbooks.

3.2 Participants

The questionnaire received 90 responses from English teachers in primary and secondary schools in North Macedonia. One response contained no usable answers, leaving 89 responses for analysis. Convenience sampling was used because of accessibility.

3.3 Instrumentation

Data were collected through a researcher-developed questionnaire based on literature on hidden curriculum, teacher cognition and critical literacy (Borg, 2003; Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). Two university academics reviewed it for clarity and relevance. The instrument contained three sections.
Section A collected demographic information. Section B contained 19 Likert-scale items on five dimensions: general awareness, gender representation, cultural representation, power and ideology, and critical literacy practices. Responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Section C included three open-ended questions about hidden messages, classroom responses and challenges.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Forms in June 2026. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent before participation. Responses were then exported for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, t-tests, one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation. The answers to the open-ended questions were analysed thematically by grouping recurring ideas related to hidden messages, classroom responses and challenges.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, responses were anonymous and confidential, and the data were used only for research purposes.

4. Results

4.1 Participant Demographics

A total of 90 teachers completed the questionnaire. One response was blank and was removed, leaving 89 usable responses for the analysis. Most participants were female, with 80 female and 9 male teachers. The majority were between 31 and 50 years old. The sample also included many experienced teachers, as 41 participants reported more than 16 years of teaching experience. Most of the teachers worked in primary education.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Usable Responses (N = 89)

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	80	89.9
	Male	9	10.1
Age	21–30	4	4.5
	31–40	43	48.3
	41–50	39	43.8
	Above 51	3	3.4
Teaching Experience	1–5 years	12	13.5
	6–10 years	15	16.9
	11–15 years	21	23.6
	16+ years	41	46.1
Educational Level	Primary	62	69.7
	Secondary	27	30.3
Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	58	65.2
	Master's Degree	29	32.6

Note. Two participants did not report their highest qualification.

4.2 Reliability of the Questionnaire

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha. The calculation included the 83 participants who answered all 19 Likert-scale items. The result was $\alpha = .691$. This value is close to the commonly used level of .70 and indicates moderate internal consistency. Since the questionnaire was researcher-developed and the study is exploratory, the result can be considered acceptable, although it should still be interpreted with caution.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Measure	Value
Number of items	19
Complete cases	83
Cronbach's Alpha	.691

4.3 Teachers' Awareness of Hidden Curriculum

Teachers showed moderate-to-high awareness overall. Critical Literacy Practices had the highest mean (M = 4.07), while Gender Representation had the lowest (M = 3.17).

Table 3. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by Dimension

Dimension	Mean	SD
General Awareness	3.57	0.64
Gender Representation	3.17	0.64
Cultural Representation	3.52	0.65
Power and Ideology	3.45	0.64
Critical Literacy Practices	4.07	0.55

Note. Scores range from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

4.4 Item-Level Analysis

At item level, the highest mean was for "Critical thinking is an important part of my English teaching" (M = 4.36), followed by encouraging alternative viewpoints (M = 4.18) and helping students critically evaluate textbook messages (M = 4.06).
The lowest mean was for noticing gender imbalance in textbook illustrations or texts (M = 2.62), followed by stereotypical male and female roles (M = 2.98). This suggests that teachers strongly support critical thinking, while specific gender-related messages may be less easily noticed.

Table 4. Mean Scores for Individual Questionnaire Items

Item	M
Critical thinking is an important part of my English teaching.	4.36
I encourage students to express alternative viewpoints.	4.18
I help students critically evaluate textbook messages.	4.06
I design activities that encourage students to question textbook content.	3.91
English textbooks fairly represent both males and females.	3.88
The textbook provides enough opportunities for critical discussion.	3.84
Students are encouraged to question ideas in textbooks.	3.78
I consider textbook content critically before using it in class.	3.75
I can identify values embedded in English language textbooks.	3.70
Textbooks promote intercultural understanding.	3.70
I believe textbooks may contain implicit messages beyond language content.	3.60
Textbooks often present authority figures positively without critique.	3.54
English textbooks include diverse cultures fairly.	3.51
Some cultures are privileged over others in textbooks.	3.37

Item	M
I am familiar with the concept of hidden curriculum in education.	3.22
I address gender stereotypes when they appear in lessons.	3.21
Textbooks reflect dominant social or political values.	3.02
Male and female roles in textbooks are stereotyped.	2.98
I notice gender imbalance in textbook illustrations or texts.	2.62

Note. Means are based on the available responses for each item. Six participants did not answer the final Likert-scale item.

4.5 Qualitative Findings

The open-ended responses produced three main themes: recognition of hidden messages, classroom responses, and challenges.

Theme 1: Recognition of Hidden Messages

Teachers identified cultural values, gender roles, stereotypes, social expectations, political ideas and national perspectives in texts, images and character roles. Some teachers, however, reported that they did not notice such messages, showing that awareness was not equal across the sample.

Theme 2: Classroom Responses

Many teachers said they discuss questionable content, ask critical questions, compare viewpoints or add information and other sources. A smaller number reported skipping or ignoring such content.

Theme 3: Challenges

The main challenges were limited classroom time, different levels of English, lack of resources and sensitive social or political topics. Some teachers also noted that students were not always used to questioning texts or expressing opinions.

4.6 Inferential Statistical Analysis

The inferential analysis found no significant differences in overall awareness by qualification or educational level. Teachers with a Bachelor's degree ($M = 3.54$) and Master's degree ($M = 3.64$) did not differ significantly, $t(58.45) = -1.30$, $p = .199$. The difference between primary ($M = 3.55$) and secondary teachers ($M = 3.64$) was also not significant, $t(52.42) = -1.16$, $p = .253$.

Teaching experience did not produce a significant difference between groups, $F(3, 79) = 1.78$, $p = .158$, although there was a small positive correlation between experience and overall awareness, $r = .25$, $p = .022$. Critical Literacy Practices also did not differ significantly by experience, $F(3, 79) = 1.97$, $p = .125$.

5. Discussion

This study examined English teachers' awareness of hidden curriculum and their responses to implicit textbook messages. Overall awareness was moderate to high, with Critical Literacy Practices as the strongest dimension and Gender Representation as the weakest.

The findings support Borg's (2003) view that teachers are not passive users of textbooks but interpret and adapt the materials they use. They also connect with Freire's (1970) view that education should encourage learners to question information rather than simply accept it.
A clear difference appeared between teachers' general support for critical thinking and their awareness of specific gender issues. Gender imbalance and stereotypical roles were less frequently noticed. This is relevant to Huang and Liu (2024) and Jehle et al. (2024), who show that gender stereotypes may remain present in educational materials in subtle and normalized forms.
The qualitative responses show that many teachers can identify cultural values, gender roles, stereotypes, social expectations and political ideas when asked to reflect on their practice. They also reported using discussion, critical questions, alternative viewpoints and additional sources. However, some teachers did not believe hidden messages were present in their textbooks, suggesting that awareness is not always systematic.
Critical discussion also has practical limits. Teachers need to cover the curriculum, teach language skills and work with students at different levels, while sensitive topics may be difficult to address. These findings are consistent with Vu and Pham (2025), who emphasize the importance of classroom context. Although qualification, educational level and experience groups did not produce significant differences in overall awareness, the small positive correlation with experience suggests that awareness may develop gradually. More focused professional development on gender, ideology, cultural bias and textbook analysis could help teachers recognize implicit messages more consistently.

6. Conclusions

This study examined English teachers' awareness of hidden curriculum in English textbooks and their responses to implicit messages. Teachers showed moderate-to-high awareness, with the strongest results in Critical Literacy Practices and the weakest in Gender Representation. They strongly supported critical thinking but were less likely to notice gender imbalance and stereotypical roles.
The qualitative findings showed that many teachers recognize cultural values, stereotypes, gender roles, social expectations and political messages and respond through discussion, questions or alternative viewpoints. At the same time, limited time, different student abilities, lack of resources and sensitive topics can make critical discussion more difficult. No significant differences in overall awareness were found by qualification, educational level or teaching-experience groups, although awareness had a small positive relationship with experience.
Teachers therefore have an important role between the textbook and the learner. More practical professional development on gender, culture, ideology, stereotypes and critical textbook analysis may strengthen this role. The study is limited by convenience sampling, self-reported data and moderate questionnaire reliability. Future research could use larger samples, interviews and classroom observations to examine how teachers address hidden curriculum in actual lessons.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request. In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, the dataset is not publicly available.

Ethics Statement

Participation in the study was voluntary. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided consent before completing the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected. All responses were treated confidentially and were used only for research purposes.

AI Use Declaration

Artificial intelligence tools were used only for language refinement, grammar correction and stylistic editing of the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the content, interpretations, analyses and conclusions presented in the study.

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