

An Analysis of Culture-Related Content in English Textbooks for Iranian Students Entitled 'Prospect' and 'Vision' Series

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Abstract

The treatment of culture in ELT textbooks has a considerable impact on students' understanding of cultures. The present study is intended to examine the cultural representation in ELT text books used in Iran. Throughout the study, this issue was put under investigation using Ramirez and Halls' modified version model. The study revealed that the textbook developers had only home culture in their minds which is inadequate in fostering intercultural communicative competence and with respect to their culture treatments, there are no considerable differences among the textbooks: That is, a similar condition was observed. Throughout the textbooks, 'pictures' with source culture references and sentences in 'conversation' sections also with home culture references covered the largest portions and only rare of the target culture appeared.

Key words: Textbook evaluation, Textbooks and culture, Language - culture relationship

1. Introduction

English language teaching/learning has many important components. One of them, especially for those learning English in Non- English speaking countries is textbooks. Text book evaluation is of important value for teachers, supervisors, administrators, and materials developers, to name a few. Textbooks have been analyzed from different perspectives by different researchers. Some surveyed their contents critically (Ellis, 1997), and some investigate the role of textbooks in language learning (Sheldon, 1988 ; Hay craft ,1978), and still some others studied meticulously the theoretical bases upon which the content of the text books rested, but one of the neglected components of the textbooks which is of paramount importance is cultural component. I mean, how the textbook writers dealt with the culture. Did they incorporate mostly home culture or target culture? Did they make an attempt to use content that has no cultural load at all? In other words, were they in favor of the elements of target or source culture solely? Or did they strive to be neutral or, to some extent, use the combination of both. This controversy prompted the current investigation into the cultural element of ELT textbooks in Iran.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Culture and intercultural communicative competence

Culture has a long history and its meaning for people and society has varied throughout the history. The word culture has different meanings to different people. Anthropologists define it as "the way people live" (Chastain, 1988). They investigate how members of a particular society are related to particular sets of behavior. Ethnography puts emphasis on how the speech system and behavior groups are related to their social structures and beliefs, and cultural studies aim to understand the way that members of a group represent themselves through their cultural products (Corbett, 2003). Finally, the National center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an 'integrated patterns of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations'.

Language teaching and learning about target culture are so tightly integrated that one cannot be fully accomplished without considering the other. Language is deeply ingrained in culture and culture is reflected by language. They are best acquired together. (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997). Englebert (2004) claims that teaching a foreign language is also teaching a foreign culture, and it is important to be sensitive to the fact that our students, our colleagues, our administrators, and, if we live abroad, our neighbors do not share all of our cultural paradigms". Concerning the integrated nature of language and culture, Brown (1994) says: 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.' When it comes to teaching and learning situation, the interdependence of language learning and culture awareness is so obvious that one can come to conclusion that language learning is culture learning, and on the part of teacher, language teaching is culture teaching (Gao, 2006). This interdependence is so significant that culture is referred to as "the fifth dimension of language teaching" (Damen, 1987).

When teaching a foreign language such as English, teachers must take different aspects into account including the role of culture in language and the role language plays in the cultural expressions we make. These elements, as McKay (2003) points out, have differing and important impacts on language acquisition. McKay (2003) contends that culture has impact on language teaching either linguistically or pedagogically: The former affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language while the latter influences the choice of the language materials because cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration when deciding upon the language materials. For example, while some materials developers provide examples from home culture, some others use target culture materials.

One of the major goals of teaching English as an international language is to make it easier for learners to communicate their ideas and cultural understandings in the medium of English. Intercultural competence, the ultimate aim of acquiring language, cannot be attained if the textbooks focus solely on the learners' native culture or the target culture. Victor (1999) and Majdzadeh (2002) propose that the textbooks should contain home, target, and global culture.

When the learners learn a language, they learn to think differently, they learn to behave differently, they actually cross linguistic border for communication. It seems that adhering to one culture does not work. Thus, it is recognized that language learning and learning about target cultures cannot be separated (Valdes, 1986; Kramsch, 1993a). It is very important to include target culture beside source culture in the textbooks in order to arise students' awareness of the target culture.

Byram (1997) contends that intercultural communicative competence requires that students learn the knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness necessary to communicate intercultural". Intercultural knowledge means having considerable amount of information about one's own culture and the culture of the second language. This means that learner needs to obtain knowledge of many countries that speak the language and their associated cultures. Along with knowledge of the culture, students need to gain knowledge and understanding of societal and cultural norms, values and interactions associated with the culture(s) of the second language.

The writers of the present paper have witnessed so many occasions in which lack of acquaintance with the target culture leads to misunderstanding in spite of having a good command of English. Knowing a language requires learners' awareness of the cultural contexts in which important social acts occur because it conveys warm feelings and solidarity among interlocutors (Cohen, 1996). Language learners are expected to understand what the native speakers' intention is when they use the language.

2.2 Role of textbooks in language teaching

English language teaching/learning has many important components, but the essential one for many EFL learners is the textbook. It is difficult for teachers to teach systematically without a textbook. Sheldon (1988) suggests that textbooks represent the visible heart of any EFL program and offer considerable advantages for both students and the teachers when they are being used in the ESL /EFL classrooms. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) believe that the textbook is an almost universal element of teaching. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) contend that textbooks have the role of a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, a restrictor and an ideology. Cunninghamworth (1995) claims that a textbook can be a source of activities, a syllabus for pushing the teaching/learning process toward systematization, and as a scaffold for novice teachers.

According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), three basic types of materials can be used in language textbooks: source culture materials, target culture materials, and international materials. The first one is the source culture material. This draws on the learners' own culture as content. In the case of Iran, this involves using mostly materials that are based on Iranian society and Iranian culture, and thus inherently familiar to the learners. In other words, textbooks mirror the source culture. EFL text books, mostly in Islamic countries are based on their own cultures. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) argue that a Venezuelan textbook portrays the major national heroes and the settings introduced are primarily Venezuelan cities with a little reference to places outside this country. Their study also revealed that Turkish English textbooks mirror mostly home culture not a target culture. Golam Faruk's (2015) study demonstrates that in "Saudi Arabia 68.41% of ELT textbooks consist of religious and local elements, only 5.26% consist of western elements and the rest of it is culturally non-specific." Hajjaj (1981) comments that EFL textbooks in Kuwait are produced on the basis of Kuwaiti culture. The second category is textbooks based on the target culture, using the culture of a country where foreign language is spoken as an L1. In this case, students would spend most of their time reading and learning about life in target culture, English speaking countries, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. The third category is international target culture material, which uses a wide range of materials from a variety of cultures in English and Non- English-speaking countries around the world. To this classification, Aliakbari (2004) added another one, text with little interest in culture, called neutral. Brumfit (1996, cited in Aliakbari, 2004) claims that a neutral educated variety offered the widest access to English throughout the world, while a model based on particular locality would be unpopular for learners because it was too restrictive.

2.3 ELT textbooks in Iran

The history of high school ELT text books in Iran dates back to 1938 when a committee of Iranian and American educationists and professors was formed to produce a series of English books only for Iranian students. Prior to this period, a variety of English as a foreign language (EFL) materials produced in English-speaking countries were used in the Iranian schools. The pre-Revolution materials belong to the years 1939 –79. The first official English textbooks for the Iranian context were developed by a team of Iranian and English-speaking English language teaching (ELT) specialists in 1939. The newly developed series was developed on the basis of the current trend of the time, that is, the Direct Method (DM) and Reading Method (RM). Then, there was a shift in general trend in teaching methodology. Situational Language Teaching motivated the material developers to revise the textbooks based on SLT principles (Foroozandeh, 2011).

The post-Revolution English textbooks can be divided into three periods, namely 1982 –90, 1991–2010 and the new English for School Series from 2013 to date. The first revision to the English textbooks after the Islamic Revolution occurred in 1982 and remained effective until 1990. In 1991, Grade 4 was replaced by a new level called Pre-University for students intending to go to university. The English textbook for the Pre-University level was divided into Book One and Book Two in a single volume, and was developed based on RM and SLT principles. The English for Schools Series, Prospect and Vision, based on CLT principles, include a student's book and a workbook. Prospect 1, 2, and 3 used in junior high schools since 2013, 2014, and 2015 respectively, and 'Vision' series in senior high school since the beginning of the academic year (2016). The aim of the present study is to find out whether the available English textbooks provide sufficient cultural awareness for students to have a successful interaction with those who possess target culture; or whether the 'culture' taught to familiarize students with home culture only. Furthermore, this analysis intends to find out whether the textbooks have enough variety in presenting culture and how they assist learners to build intercultural communicative competence.

The questions for which this study seeks to answer are:

1. Is there any difference in culture treatment in the newly developed ELT text books in Iran?
2. Do the textbooks promote student's intercultural communicative competence in English?

3. Methods

3.1 Instrumentation and Material

The material for this study is the newly published series entitled "Prospect" includes three consecutive textbooks Prospect 1 to 3 designed for grades 7th to 9th of junior high school and the "Vision" series for grades 10th to 12th of senior high school (Of vision series only grade 10th is available so far). These series have been developed by the Ministry of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran since 2013 as English textbooks for Iranian students.

Ramirez and Hall's (1990) modified model was used in order to evaluate cultural representations in English textbooks taught in Iran (Prospect and Vision series).

3.2 The model of text analysis and coding schemes

The textbook analysis was conducted using a modified version of Ramirez and Hall's (1990) model. The model tried to provide an account of the amount and kind of presentation given to various target language speaking countries or groups in the textbooks (Aliakbari, 2004). The aim was to give a relatively comprehensive picture of the cultural elements incorporated in the above mentioned books. To do so, a coding scheme is employed. In this study, two different coding schemes were used, namely, coding scheme for visual representations, limited to 'pictures', and coding schemes for 'sentences' in conversation sections.

3.3 Coding scheme for 'pictures'

The authors' intention in Prospect series is to teach literacy skill and communication. This was mostly done through various pictures and introducing language functions. The pictures were classified into four categories. A large number of pictures have particular references. The pictures which have frequent references to the Iranian national or Islamic culture embody proper names such as Hossein, Zahra, Mahdi, Farhad, map of Iran, chador, mosque, and so forth. This group was labeled pictures with culture specific references (PCSR). A second category of pictures have no reference to any culture. The pictures which are general enough to be used in any culture by any one such as blackboard, desk, and eraser were classified as pictures with culture free references (PCFR). A third type of pictures which was labeled pictures with culture general references (PCGR) include certain pictures, names, and places, but they are not specific to a particular culture such as pictures of a teacher in a classroom, a pilot, a nurse, a painter, and so on. Finally, there are some pictures belonging to foreign cultures including English and Non-English speaking countries. They were referred to as pictures with target culture references (PTCR).

3.4 Coding scheme for sentences in conversation sections

Lessons in prospect series introduce language functions through conversation facilitation dialogues. In a careful examination, the sentences in dialogues were classified into three categories. Some of them are general enough to be used by people in any culture. They do not express a particular culture. They were labeled as statements with free culture reference, such as the conversation between student to student or student to teacher.

Teacher: Hi, class! Students: Hello, teacher. (Lesson 1, Prospect 1)

Teacher: Are you OK? Student: No, I'm not. I have a headache. (Lesson 4, Prospect 2)

A second type of sentences in dialogues was classified as statements with culture specific references. They include Iranian proper names, places, holy shrines that convey Iranian culture or Islamic traditions. For example:

Teacher: How about Friday mornings?

Reihaneh (name of a student): I stay at home and relax. (Lesson 4, Prospect 1)

Elham: I just love New Year holidays!

Nasrin: Oh, yes, me too. It's really great.

Elham: We normally visit our relatives in Norooz. It's fun! (Lesson 3, Prospect 3)

Another category of sentences was labeled statements with target culture references (English speaking or Non English speaking countries). They express foreign cultures such as:

Tourist: My name is Paul Kress. I'm from Germany. (Lesson 2 Prospect 3)

Diego: Excuse me, sir! I am planning for my summer vacation.

Carlos: How can I help you?

Diego: Actually I want to visit Asia, (Lesson 4, and Vision 1)

4. Results

Two kernel sections of Iranian ELT Textbooks, pictures and conversations, were investigated using Ramirez and Halls' (1990) modified version of content analysis. The number of the pictures and sentences in the given sections of the textbooks was evaluated and their respective references, directly or indirectly, to specific culture were identified.

4.1 Results of the 'picture' analysis

The book, Prospect One, includes 84 pictures of which 54 pictures belong to PCSR category; 14 pictures belong to PCGR, i.e. they are pictures that are common in all cultures; 15 pictures have no reference to any culture (PCFR), and finally 1 picture shows PTCR i.e. it signifies target culture.

Prospect 2, 3, and Vision1 follow the same procedure. The result of categorization of pictures in ELT textbooks in Iran is presented in figure 1. In sum, 53% of pictures are subcategory of PCSR, 25% of pictures belong to PCFR, and 18% of pictures to PCGR, and finally 5% to PTCR. Figure 1 represents the categorization of the pictures in the textbooks.

Figure 1



Direction:

PCSR= Pictures with Culture Specific References (Iranian & Islamic culture)

PCFR= Picture with Culture Free References

PCGR= Picture with Culture General References

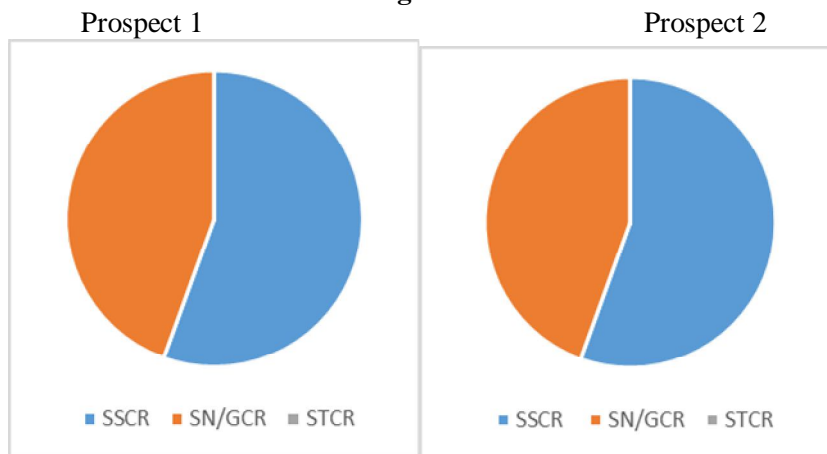
PTCR= Picture with Target Culture References (English and Non English Speaking Countries)

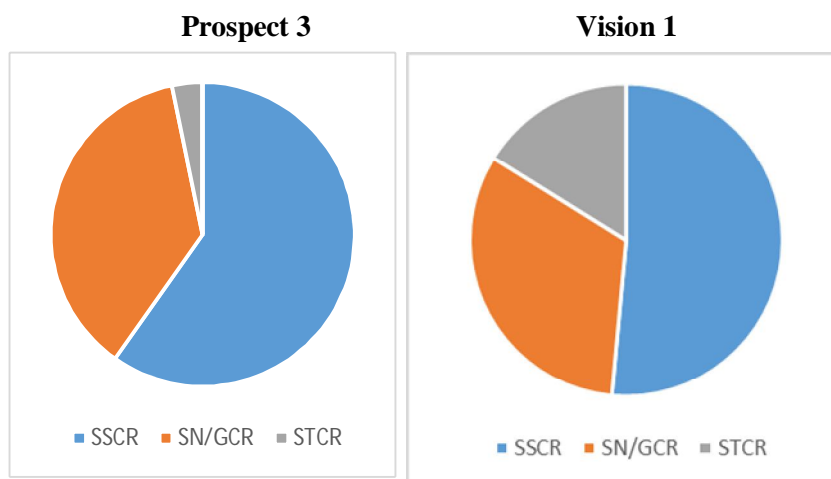
4.2 Result of conversation analysis

There are 25 conversations in the textbooks. Based on the mentioned coding schemes, the sentences used by the interlocutors were classified into three categories. The data collected for the categorization of conversation were presented through the figures 2 and 3.

The categorization revealed that the textbooks follow, with a slight difference, the same procedures. They are similar in their extent of treatment of culture to the three categories. There are no significant differences among textbooks in dealing with the cultural elements. Throughout the textbooks, sentences with source culture references covered the largest section and only rare of the target culture appeared, in Prospect 3 and Vision 1 3% and 16% respectively.

Figure 2





In sum, 50% of the sentences belong to Iranian and Islamic cultures, 46% of the statements do not belong to any culture or they are common in all cultures, and solely 4% signify cultural elements in English and Non-English speaking countries. Figure 3 represents the categorization of the sentences in the textbooks.

Figure 3



Direction:

SSCR= *Statements with Culture Specific References (Iranian & Islamic culture)*

SN/GCR= *Statements with Culture Free or General References*

STCR= *Statements with Target Culture References (English and Non English Speaking Countries)*

Conclusion

The aim of this study was an investigation of the ELT textbook contribution to the development of students' intercultural communicative competence. The findings of the present study did not confirm such a quality due to the following explanations. Although this is an important step taken in producing CLT oriented- textbooks in Iran, the result of this study revealed that ELT textbooks are mostly based on the source culture, which does not seem to be helpful in promoting intercultural competence and cultural understanding. The data showed that the cultural elements in both 'pictures' and 'conversations' sections were, to a large extent, exclusive to home culture. A small part was devoted to target culture. Therefore, they cannot provide students with the underlying essentials of intercultural communication. Learners will not be prepared to communicate in multicultural world using the textbooks. A similar orientation was observed in regard to the first research question in ELT textbooks.

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