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Culture, National Identity, and Globalization between the Lines of Reading Comprehension Texts in Iran

Maryam Sharif and Lotfollah Yarmohammadi

Department of Foreign Languages, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran.

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ABSTRACT

This study was an attempt to investigate the extent to which culture, national identity, and globalization are represented in reading comprehension materials currently taught for General English Courses at tertiary level in Iran. To fulfill this purpose, five General English textbooks were randomly selected from among the total number of twenty books published by Iranian writers throughout the country. Drawing on Byram's (1993) model of content analysis, the reading passages of the books were analyzed as the kernel sections of the books. The results of the content analysis revealed that the majority of the reading texts were culturally neutral focusing, for the most part, on scientific issues; and only a small number of texts addressed home culture and national identity; also, texts representing target culture and international culture were not numerous. Thus, conclusions can be drawn that materials prepared for General English Courses in Iran are not adequate for addressing national identity and raising cultural awareness, nor are they sufficient for informing learners of the target and international culture in the era of globalization and cross-cultural communication.

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1. Introduction

Today, English is well established as a global lingua franca. In essence, Kachru (1986, p. 1), as cited in McKay [1], contends that "knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science and travel. In short, English provides linguistic power" (p. 4). English owes its worldwide reputation and unrivalled impetus to the increasing number of people in the world whose familiarity with English allows this language "to act as a language of wider communication for a great variety of purposes..." in the era of global economy and globalization (McKay [1], p. 2).

According to Acar [2], there are different ways of conceptualization of the term globalization, a notion that emerged out of global economics. In one view, globalization is tantamount to westernization or Americanization since the West or America is the world's superpower, "with a dominant economic, cultural and military position in the global order..." (p.1). Still, there is another view of globalization, which considers globalization as a multi-way process. In its multi-way perspective, globalization "is not supposed to make all nations homogenous rather to make them familiar with greater variety as well as the pervasive variety of native cultures" (Khajavi & Abbasian [3], p. 181).

According to Tomlinson [4], globalization "has been perhaps the most significant force in *creating and proliferating* cultural identity" and its particular subset called national identity (p. 270). "...virtually all of the world's six billion population today either enjoy or claim a national identity..." (Tomlinson [4], p. 274), and it is through the construction of a common national identity that culture and language are linked together.

Indeed, the very fact that language and culture are closely interconnected cannot be questioned. "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" (Brown [5], p. 189).

As culture has proved highly significant in language programs, attempts have been made on the part of scholars to integrate culture into language syllabi to the extent that "Damen (1986) calls culture 'the fifth dimension of language teaching' ", (Hall & Hewings [6], p. 186).

However, prior to the injection of culture into the language classroom, sound decisions must be made regarding the cultural content of language materials and the manner culture is going to be presented. Cortazzi & Jin (1999), as cited in McKay [1], draw a distinction between three types of culture content that can be used in language textbooks and materials:

Source culture materials that are based upon the learners' home-culture; target culture materials that draw on the culture of English speaking countries; and international culture materials that rely on a great variety of cultures around the world. Aliakbari [7] has added another category to this list of cultural content, which has to do with neutral materials that show little, if any, interest in culture. Culturally neutral materials either discuss school or university subjects like science, history, geography, or general knowledge through the medium of the target language, or they draw on aspects of the target language such as its history, morphology, etymology, grammatical features and the like which stand as topics of study in themselves and are taught in the English language (Ur [8]).

There are different modes of presenting culture within the classroom, ranging from lectures and interviews to reading texts. Among them, Byrnes (1991), as mentioned in Hadley [9], advocates the use of text as a vehicle for gaining cross-cultural understanding. Without reading texts, "she finds it difficult to stimulate the appropriate second culture framework in a

classroom where students are surrounded by their native culture..." (Hadley [9], p. 383).

Thus, the present study is an attempt to scrutinize the cultural representations as they appear in reading passages of English textbooks prepared for university students in Iran.

2. ELT in Iran

Presently, English is taught as a required course at secondary level in Iran, with textbooks published by the Ministry of Education. Yet, there are numerous non-profit and bilingual schools, run by private sector of education, which teach English even at elementary or pre-school levels. Also, language institutes abound throughout the country attracting a large population of learners from children to adults and teaching textbook series often published by the Inner Circle countries.

As for the tertiary level, students have to study Pre-university English and General English courses along with ESP courses pertinent to their own field of study. English textbooks taught at the tertiary level range from textbooks published in the inner circle countries to those edited in Iran either by SAMT Publications (an organization in charge of preparing and editing textbooks for humanities) or by Iranian authors. In addition, English newspapers, periodicals, even EFL journals are published within the country.

Finally, as far as foreign affairs and relation with the outer world are concerned, "Iran's relation with the world is mainly through English" (Aliakbari [7], p. 2).

3. Objectives of the Study

As the study of related literature reveals, so far, there have been a number of studies investigating either the cultural content of ELT textbooks at high school level in Iran (see Aliakbari [7], Khajavi & Abbasian [3]) or examining the representation of culture in different textbook series used for teaching English at language institutes in Iran (see Rashidi & Najafi [10], Ziaei [11]).

Yet, there have been no published studies investigating the cultural content of ELT materials taught at the tertiary level in Iran. As a result, this study strives to put under scrutiny the culture content of General English textbooks edited by Iranian writers and taught at different universities throughout the country in order to find out the extent to which home culture and national identity, target culture, international culture and globalization are represented in these materials. In order to obtain these objectives, the current study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Whose cultures are represented in ELT textbooks edited by Iranian writers?
2. What elements of the culture content are represented and to what extent?
3. Do the textbooks provide learners with sufficient information regarding their home culture and the target and international cultures? (Do the texts promote a sense of national identity within learners, and do they prepare learners for cross-cultural communication in the era of globalization?)

4. Method

The materials used for this study, the model of content analysis and the procedure for analyzing and presenting the data are going to be discussed below:

4.1. Materials

For the sake of content analysis, five textbooks designed to be taught for the General English course at the tertiary level in Iran were randomly selected from among the total number of twenty books edited by Iranian authors throughout the country

for this course. The selected books are as follows: (Alimohammadi & Khalili [12], Jalali & Alviri [13], Karimnia & Moghtada [14], Keshavarz & Porkar [15], Salimi & Nowroozzade [16]). For the ease of discussion, the books are simply called Book 1, Book 2, Book 3, Book 4, and Book 5 respectively.

The selected books consist of 10, 20, 15, 14, and 13 units respectively. To provide balance between the number of the units of the selected books, only the first 10 units of each book are going to be analyzed.

The books, without exception, are composed of various sections for every single unit including vocabulary, vocabulary exercises, a reading passage, and comprehension questions. Except for Book 5, others contain a grammar section and grammar exercises. Book 1 and Book 3 include a word formation section too.

This study analyzed the reading sections of the textbooks as the "kernel sections of the books" (Rashidi & Najafi [10], p. 629).

4.2. Model of Analysis

A content analysis was conducted on the selected reading passages based on Byram's [17] criteria of cultural content, which include the following categories:

- "a) Social identity and social group (social class, regional identity, ethnic minorities)
- b) Social interaction (differing levels of formality; as outsider and insider)
- c) Belief and behavior (moral, religious beliefs; daily routines)
- d) Social and political institutions (state institutions, health care, law and order, social security, local government)
- e) Socialization and the life cycle (families, schools, employment, rites of passage)
- f) National history (historical and contemporary events seen as markers of national identity)
- g) National geography (geographical factors seen as being significant by members)
- h) Stereotypes and national identity (what is typical symbol of national stereotypes)" (Byram [17], pp. 5-10, as cited in Juan [18], p. 138).

In order to incorporate items related to globalization, two other categories dealing with target culture and international culture were added to the categories. In addition, a third category was devoted to culturally neutral texts.

4.3. Procedure

As part of the procedure of content analysis, first, an appropriate unit of analysis, ranging from a word to a theme, had to be selected. For this study, theme was selected as the unit of analysis of the passages due to the fact that "qualitative content analysis usually uses individual themes as the unit for analysis, rather than the physical linguistic units (e.g., word, sentence, or paragraph) most often used in quantitative content analysis" (Zhang & Wildemuth [19], p. 3). When we use theme as the coding unit, we are primarily looking for the expressions of an idea (Minichiello et al., 1990; as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth [19]).

Second, a coding scheme was designed for the aforementioned categories. The categories were labeled from letter A to letter K. The labeling was arbitrary with no symbolic relationship between the letters and the categories.

After analyzing the texts, the frequency and percentage for each of the abovementioned categories were tabulated as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of culture content categories

Category	Book 1		Book 2		Book 3		Book 4		Book 5		Total	
	Fre.	Percentage	Fre.	Percentage	Fre.	Percentage	Fre.	Percentage	Fre.	Percentage	Fre.	Percentage
A	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	10%	1	2%
B	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
C	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
D	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
E	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
F	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
G	0	0%	0	0%	3	30%	0	0%	1	10%	4	8%
H	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
I	2	20%	1	10%	1	10%	2	20%	1	10%	7	14%
J	0	0%	2	20%	1	10%	3	30%	1	10%	7	14%
K	8	80%	7	70%	5	50%	5	50%	6	6%	31	62%

Direction:

- A) Social identity and social group
- B) Social interaction
- C) Belief and behavior
- D) Social and political institutions
- E) Socialization and the life cycle
- F) National history
- G) National geography
- H) Stereotypes and national identity
- I) Target culture
- J) International culture
- K) Neutral content

5. Results and Discussion

As it is illustrated in Table 1, within Byram's taxonomy, only national geography (8%) and social identity and social group (2%) were represented in the analyzed texts. References to social interaction, belief and behavior, social and political institutions, socialization and the life cycle, national history, and stereotypes and national identity were remarkably absent in the analyzed textbooks. Target culture and international culture made up (14%) of the texts each, and (62%) of the texts dealt with culturally neutral materials.

The purpose of this study, was to examine the extent to which national identity and globalization would be represented in ELT materials and textbooks. Therefore, based upon the results of the study, our first research question (i.e. whose cultures are represented in ELT textbooks edited by Iranian writers?) can be answered in the following way:

As Table 1 delineates, culture of Inner Circle countries (14%) and cultures of other countries (14%) are represented. However, Iran's culture has been minimally covered (10%), so it can be concluded that national identity is underrepresented in the analyzed texts, and there is, still, room for the incorporation of more target culture and international culture contents into language materials. This is while (62%) of the texts were culturally neutral. The authors of these texts, intentionally or unconsciously, have avoided cultural issues. "This can be attributed to the fact that some authors believe that cultural matters should not be transferred through the textbooks"(Ketabi & Talebinejad, 2009, as cited in Khajavi & Abbasian [3], p. 184).

To answer the second research question (i.e. what elements of the culture content are represented and to what extent?), we can conclude that, based on the results of the analysis, the authors have sufficed to national geography in passages entitled *Iran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Persepolis* and social identity and social groups in a passage under the rubric of *Hafez*, the world renowned Persian poet.

To our dismay, other elements of cultural content in Byram's checklist have not been addressed at all. Neither are there any references to Islamic culture and values. This heedless stance Iranian authors have adopted on home culture is probably due to the fact that traditionally "the teaching of English has often involved learning about the concerns and cultures of ...Inner Circle countries" (McKay [1], p. 2), which has led to the exclusion of home culture content at the expense of the inclusion of target culture content. However, in the modern world of today, "English no longer belongs to any one culture, and ... in terms of materials this suggests that the traditional use of Western culture content in ELT texts need to be examined"(McKay [1], p. 19).

In response to the third question, (i.e. do the textbooks provide learners with sufficient information regarding their home culture and the target and international cultures?) it must be pointed out that owing to the fact that references to national identity and target culture jointly constitute 38% of the textbooks under scrutiny, these textbooks are inadequate in promoting a sense of national identity within learners and educating them at the age of globalization. Hence, Iranian authors need to reexamine the present materials and make the necessary alteration to promote the content of Iranian and Islamic culture.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this study revealed that Iranian authors have a general inclination towards selecting culturally neutral texts, and that national identity and globalization have not received their due attention in Iranian ELT materials even at the tertiary level as they do not adequately familiarize learners with the source, target, and international cultures. This is in line with what "Layaette (1988) maintains that culture is still the weakest component of our curricula, partly because cultural materials receive uneven treatment in textbooks and partly because many teachers lack significant first hand knowledge of the culture and /or appropriate techniques for teaching it" (Hadley [9], p. 366).

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