Investigating the Place of Culture in “Interchange” Textbooks in Iran

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A B S T R A C T
The idea that foreign language teaching has a cultural dimension is not a new one. Ranging from English linguistic imperialism and cultural invasion to cultural neutrality, the interpretations of the state of ELT in Iran is still controversial. On the one hand, English, as a subject, is seen as representing and introducing western culture to Iranian students. On the other hand, there are voices postulating that English as it is presently taught in Iran is nothing but a representation of the Persian or Islamic ideology. “Interchange” textbooks written by Jack C. Richards are one of the mostly used resources in English language institutes in Iran. The major purpose motivating this study was to find out the extent to which the given textbooks undergoing some changes provides Iranian EFL learners with sufficient cultural understanding and make them ready for intercultural communication. In order to do this, we applied ‘categories of cultural topics’ by Hasselgreen (2003).

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INTRODUCTION

Using a textbook is likely the most widespread way of teaching English nowadays. Therefore, it is helpful to deal with the role of textbooks in the learning/teaching process. Teachers throughout the world base approximately 50 percent of their weekly teaching time on textbook [7]. Therefore selecting a proper textbook for a class has been one of the most important tasks for teachers. Many English language institutes develop their syllabus based on a chief textbook. So, selecting these textbooks should be done based on meticulous evaluation.

The integral relationship between language and culture has led to numerous debates on the role and impact of English language teaching in general and of English language programs in Iran in particular. Aliakbari [3] stated that ranging from English linguistic imperialism and cultural invasion to cultural neutrality, the interpretation of the state of ELT in Iran is still controversial. Introducing western culture to the Iranian students or teaching a culture representing the Persian or Islamic ideology is an unresolved controversy about the cultural content of ELT in Iran.

“Interchange” textbooks written by Jack C. Richards are of mostly used resources in language institutes to teach English to Iranian EFL learners. The original versions of these books have been taught until the recent years. The available “Interchange” textbooks are the modified ones due to some religious factors. Deleting or changing some words, phrases, pictures, passages, etc. are the result of these modifications. The purpose of this article is to evaluate “Interchange” textbooks which have been prescribed for use in the syllabus of many English language institutes in Iran. The cultural merits and demerits of the textbooks are discussed in details with the reference to a model developed by Hasselgreen [2]. (see Appendix)

Dahmardeh & Wray [3] did a three-year cross sectional investigation into English language teaching in secondary schools in Iran and it aims to discuss the role of the culture of English speaking countries within English language teaching in Iran. They stated that while the issue of culture has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the English language teaching program. So, although the authors considered cultural issues as a very important factor, during the process of designing the textbooks no permission was granted to include any cultural values or factors of English speaking countries in the textbooks.

Aliakbari [4] further argued that the text included in the course books were limited not only in the depth of cultural information they contained but also in the range of the cultures they depicted. In the four books that

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were examined, information about other countries, English speaking or otherwise, averaged less than twenty percent of the total content. He continued to emphasize that it was right to worry that such biased and simplistic cultural presentation reinforce pre-existing assumptions and stereotypes because the literature indicates that shallow presentation of culture can reinforce inaccurate stereotypes. Aliakbari further concluded that “The ELT textbooks in Iran appeared too weak to provide new information or broaden students’ world view or cultural understanding”.

Rashidi & Najafi [5] investigated the cultural references in the content of the instructional materials of “Iran Language Institute” at advanced levels. This research was done on the vocabulary and reading sections as the kernel parts of these books. To achieve the objective, Ramirez and Hall’s [6] categorization (as cited in Rashidi & Najafi, [5]) was used. In this model there were eight categories to consider passages and four categories to consider vocabulary. All passages and new words of these books were evaluated based on this model. Results indicated that a) in advanced book One and Two the focus was on sentences with no reference to culture specific background. Half of the texts were general texts related to science, biographies. The rest of the passages related to the culture of English speaking countries and Islamic culture. b) Half of the texts were general texts related to science, biographies. Nineteen per cent of the texts were about English speaking countries and another nineteen per cent were passages whose identity and reference had been left out and seven per cent of the texts were about Islam and Islamic culture. c) Five out of eight mentioned categories were in advanced books, so there was a good variety in these texts.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The single variable in the present study was culture as an independent one. The design was descriptive including a quantitative; types and frequency of cultural contents were investigated and the focus on each was specified.

The data collected to meet the objectives of the study was the cultural contents of the following modified books in addition to the audio versions:

The study set out to analyze the cultural contents of the modified version of “Interchange” textbooks in Iran. The mentioned textbooks are the most widely used ones to teach English to Iranian EFL learners. In order to do this, categories of cultural topics by Hasselgreen (2003, 48-52) has been applied (see Appendix). The cultural contents were analyzed in the light of this taxonomy with an inter-rater reliability (r= 0.83). Since the data was categorical and frequency type, chi-square was employed to test the hypotheses.

Results:

The results of content analysis are indicated in the following tables and figures. As the frequencies and percentages show the largest cultural topics of the textbooks were related to daily life activity, traditions, and living conditions (41.48%). After that, values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users (24.88%), ability to deal with social conventions (16.88%), ability to use verbal communication means (15.71%), and ability to use non-verbal language (2.04%) were in the next ranks respectively. Therefore, research questions are treated in this way:

Q1. Which cultural topics are mostly emphasized in the modified version of Interchange textbooks in Iran?

As the percentage of activities shows, in Interchange textbooks, 41.48% of cultural contents involves daily life activity, traditions, and living conditions and 24.88% involves values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users. The results of chi square test indicated that there is a significant difference among the cultural topics in all main categories (p<.05).

Q2. Which aspects of cultural contents need to be included in these textbooks or mentioned in classroom?
As shown in tables and figures, cultural categories which are related to religion, sense of humor (Figure 3), and saying and proverbs (Figure 4) are not able to make students familiar with these aspects of English native speakers' culture.

### Table 1: Frequency of the cultural topics related to ability of coping with daily life activities, traditions, and living conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability of coping with daily life activities, traditions, and living conditions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyday family life</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>423.898</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure time</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festivities</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country generally-living conditions</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1484</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Graph of Table 1](image)

**Fig. 1:** Percentage of the cultural topics related to ability of coping with daily life activities, traditions, and living conditions.

The rank of everyday family life (Figure 1) as the highest in the first main category was un-expectable as Iranian people usually think that family life in English-speaking countries is not as important as it is in Iran. There is not much about educational (public/private/home school or grades) and scoring system (Figure 1) in these books.

### Table 2: Frequency of the cultural topics related to ability to deal with social conventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to deal with social conventions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles and relationships</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>367.901</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting-hospitality</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social conditions</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing emotions</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going out</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Graph of Table 2](image)

**Fig. 2:** Percentage of the cultural topics related to ability to deal with social conventions.
Roles and relationship among people, except the friendly ones among males and females, are mentioned to the extent that can help students learn them (Figure 2). In addition, some clothes that are not accepted by Iranian social and religious norms have been changed (Figure 2). There is not a lot about the current social conditions dominant on the English-speaking countries nowadays (Figure 2), for example employment in the USA.

### Table 3: Frequency of the cultural topics related to confidence with the values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confidence with the values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>1099.982</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural heritage</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National stereotypes and reality</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fig. 3: Percentage of the cultural topics related to confidence with the values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users.

The topics in the third category have not been covered abundantly. Religion, national stereotypes, and sense of humor are not well dealt with (Figure 3).

### Table 4: Percentage of the cultural topics related to ability to use verbal communication means.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to use verbal communication means</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>16.466</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body contact</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fig. 4: Percentage of the cultural topics related to ability to use verbal communication means.

The learners can learn how to address people when speaking English, how to initiate, continue, and terminate a conversation as well as the way of interruption (Figure 4). In contrast, they will not be familiar with sayings and proverbs in these textbooks (Figure 4).
Table 5: Percentage of the cultural topics related to ability to use non-verbal language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to use verbal communication means</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>16.466</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body contact</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5: Percentage of the cultural topics related to ability to use non-verbal language.

The last category is the less frequent one and, most importantly, the students are not provided with ample chances to learn how body language works in English communication (Figure 5).

Discussions:

The culture, which focuses on the products and contributions of a society and its outstanding individuals, is often referred to as capital ‘C’ culture [1]. National stereotypes, cultural heritage, saying and proverbs are examples of this formal culture. The writer has mostly focus on small ‘c’ culture such as way of life, beliefs, and perception. As mentioned above, some parts of these textbooks have been modified due to religious reasons and social norms; for instance, the topics related to singing, dancing, boy/girl friend, alcoholic drinks, and the photographs of singers, actors, and actresses. However, there is not a consistency in the act of changing and deleting the original contents as the learners are not exposed to these materials in the textbooks while they can hear them in the audio version. It can be concluded that the modifiers have not achieved their goals.

According to Khajavi and Abbasian [8] some textbook content can be allocated to activities that require students to compare and contrast customs and cultures of the two nations. To present an intercultural point of view and a better trend to acculturate learning is pointing out the differences and similarities that exist between the two cultures. The learners can understand phenomenon in their own culture by juxtaposing it with others in different cultures rather than by disregarding the foreign language culture. In this way, they are not conscious even about their own culture. Moreover, the learners should be helped to tolerate cultural differences and understand that every culture is respectable.

The present study revealed that the modified Interchange textbooks which are being taught in Iranian English language institutes provide the learners with almost enough opportunities to be familiar with daily life activity, traditions, living condition, values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users. They are not fully introduced the ability to deal with social conventions, and the ability to use verbal communication means. Making the students aware of non-verbal language is one of the most prominent lacks evident in the textbooks in this regard. The findings identify some specific directions for further research. It would be worthwhile to set up more articulated analysis that determines to what extent these shortcomings are due to the modifications and to what extent related to the original version.

REFERENCES

Appendix:

Categories of cultural topics by hasselgreen (2003, 48-52):

1. Ability of coping with daily life activities, traditions, and living conditions (e.g., in home, school, at festivals etc.):

   Everyday family life:
   - Meals, variety of food
   - Daily routine, housing, family size, house work
   - Pets and other animals
   - TV, internet

   School:
   - System, class size, grades
   - Routines, meals, breaks, uniforms
   - Social needs

   Leisure time:
   - Going out with friends
   - Sport, keeping fit
   - Holidays

   Festivities (focus on food and rituals, occasionally costumes):
   - Christmas, birthdays
   - National festivals and feast days
   - Other international feast days
   - Youth festivals

   Country generally-living conditions:
   - Location, demography, occupations, farming activities
   - Nature, geography, climate, language
   - Urban-rural communities, regional differences
   - Social classes

2. Ability to deal with social conventions (e.g., ‘good manners’, dressing and meeting people):

   Roles and relationships:
   - Boys-girls, men-women
   - Younger-old generation
   - Family-society
   - Family circles and cohesion
   - Women’s working situation
   - Helping each other

   Visiting-hospitality
   - Punctuality, introduction
   - Sharing, gifts
   - Washing hands, taking off shoes
   - Sitting down
   - Leaving early

   Social conditions:
   - Funerals
   - Weddings
Expressing emotions:
- Degree of noise, excitability, flamboyance

Going out:
- Smoking and drinking etiquette and habits
- Restaurant culture
- Table manners

Clothes:
- Dress code - general - formal for going out

3. Confidence with the values, beliefs, and attitudes of foreign language users (e.g., what they are proud of, worry about and find funny):

Concerned with:
- Family life, friends, school success
- Economy, prices, unemployment
- Sport, keeping fit, diseases
- Pollution, housing problems, gossip

Consideration:
- Friendly, simple, polite
- Sincere, caring, open-minded, tolerant
- Rude, bad-tempered, hypocritical
- Conservative

Religion:
- Church-going

Beliefs:
- Superstitions
- Physical appearance, skin-hair color

Cultural heritage:
- National history and independence
- Country, nature, population
- National heroes, athletes, sportsmen, singers

National stereotypes and reality:
- Ethnic identities and conflicts
- War, terrorism, emigration

Sense of humor:
- Direct humor, irony
- Telling jokes about other people and nations
- Own and others’ misfortune

4. Ability to use verbal communication means (e.g., greeting, apologizing, expressing gratitude, embarrassment and love):

Addressing people:
- Degrees of politeness and distance
- Greeting
- Apologizing

Striking up conversation:
- Talking to friends and strangers
- Being noisy, quiet, turn-taking, interrupting
- Talking to small children - adults
- Using thank you, please
Saying and proverbs:
- Animal references (i.e. as stupid as)

Emotions-feelings:
- Expressing love, impulsiveness, shyness, embarrassment, taboos

5. Ability to use non-verbal language (e.g., body language and facial expressions):

Body language:
- Shaking hands
- Kissing
- Hugging
- Nodding
- Gesticulating-hand signals

Body contact:
- Touching
- Standing too close, too far

Facial expression:
- Eye contact
- Winking
- Smiling
- Crying
- Showing anger

Biodata:
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References should be cited in the text as References: Bibliographic references in the text appear like [1, 2 ...], using square brace. References should be numbered consecutively in the text. Authors are responsible for ensuring that the information in each reference is complete and accurate. All references must be numbered consecutively and citations of references in text should be identified using numbers in square brackets (e.g., “as discussed by Smith [9]”; “as discussed elsewhere [9, 10]”). All references should be cited within the text; otherwise, these references will be automatically removed.

No information writes in the paper without reference for authorization the information.

The list of references at the end of manuscript must be arranged consecutively and each reference in the list should appear in the following form: