

Realization of Culture in Iranian English Textbooks at Junior Secondary School: Should the Textbooks Foster National Identity or Cultural Awareness?

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Abstract

In today's age of communication, knowing a language is not simply mastering its vocabulary and grammar rules. Language learning has a social dimension and to be socially competent users of a target language, learners need to be aware of the target culture. The present study attempts at investigating the place of culture in Iranian English textbooks entitled *Prospect Series* studied at Iranian junior high schools. The major purpose is to see whether the cultural elements included in the books, are conducive to the creation of a rich cultural awareness among learners and an increase in their level of intercultural communicative competence.

Additionally, the paper is to review Iranian English teachers' attitudes towards culture learning in language classes. The content analysis of *Prospect* books was carried out using "L2/FL/EFL/ESL/EIL Culture Teaching/Learning Tree".

Interviews were also conducted to obtain teachers' perspectives regarding the necessity and importance of teaching culture. The findings indicated that the content of the English books taught at Iranian junior secondary schools was not rich enough to lead learners in their path towards the acquisition of suitable and sufficient cultural competence.

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Moreover, 15 teachers who taught the same books were interviewed about the books' cultural content. They supported the need for revising the books, specifying that cultural content can be improved much without endangering learners' national or religious identity.

Keywords: Culture; English textbooks; content analysis; English language teaching (ELT); Iranian junior secondary schools national (religious) identity.

Introduction

According to Kramsch (1998), language expresses cultural reality, it embodies cultural reality and it symbolizes cultural reality. In Sapir's (1921) words, language cannot exist if it is separated from culture. Jiang (2000) used three metaphors to clarify the important relationship between language and culture. From a philosophical perspective, she compared language to flesh and culture to blood which together make a living organism. From a communicative viewpoint, she compared the act of communication to swimming which requires both language as the swimming skill and culture as water. Finally, from a pragmatic aspect, she compared communication to transportation which needs a vehicle and this vehicle is language. In the last metaphor that she used, culture was compared to a traffic light as it regulated communication, sometimes facilitating it and sometimes setting obstacles on its way.

The inevitable link between language and culture poses a fundamental question: "Can languages be learned without any

reference to their related cultures?" In response to this question, some scholars' viewpoints appear to be beneficial. Kramsch (1988) stated: "One cannot learn to use a language without learning something about the culture of the people who speak that language". Stealy (1984, p. 26) asserted that "The study of language cannot be separated from the study of culture". Kramsch (1993) considered the study of language as cultural study and suggested that language teaching be intercultural.

The history of language teaching also indicates that culture has been more or less included in different language teaching approaches and methods. However, each of them treated the topic from a different perspective. We can see that in the early methods, the topic of culture seemed to be less social and more informational. Learners had to get information about cultural issues. For example, in Grammar-Translation Method, "culture was viewed as consisting of literature and the fine arts", in the Direct Method, "culture consisted of the history of the people who spoke the target language, the geography of the country or countries where the language was spoken and the information about the daily lives of the speakers" (Larsen-Freeman and Andersen, 2011). But in the most recent approaches such as communicative language teaching, culture is seen in context and it is not only the knowledge of the target language speakers' lifestyle but also the competence to communicate with them paying attention to certain socio-cultural norms. So, culture learning has gradually taken a more social than informational nature. Whatever the orientation, culture has played a major role in language teaching methods.

Despite the importance of culture in language learning and teaching, there seems to be obstacles on the way to taking culture into account. Critics of culture teaching refer to threats such as linguistic imperialism, cultural dominance, the influence of capitalistic ideology (which is associated with learning English) on native people's minds, endangering people's national or religious identity, etc. Since discussing all these topics, is out of the scope of this study, we just take the subject of national identity to be dealt with in some more depth. Preserving one's national identity is supposedly at odds with becoming culturally competent in an age of unprecedented globalization. On the one hand, there are certain national conventions of behavior one has to follow if he/she wants to be considered a member of the social group called "nation" and on the other, one needs to observe particular norms of behavior conventionalized in the target language society if he/she wishes to communicate effectively with the speakers of that language. Aliakbari (2004) refers to the paradox as the threat of linguistic imperialism against the concern for becoming a competent language user (having intercultural communicative competence).

A good and sufficiently compact definition of national identity and types of expressing it seems to be the one found on Wikipedia:

National identity is one's identity or sense of belonging to one state or to one nation. It is the sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics. National identity may refer to the subjective feeling [that] one shares

with a group of people about a nation, regardless of one's legal citizenship status. National identity is viewed in psychological terms as "an awareness of difference", a "feeling and recognition of 'we' and 'they'".

The expression of one's national identity seen in a positive light is patriotism which is characterized by national pride and positive emotion of love for one's country. The extreme expression of national identity is chauvinism, which refers to the firm belief in the country's superiority and extreme loyalty toward one's country".

As the definition above shows, one feature of a national identity is its distinctive culture among other things. Here, we can raise another question "does the integration of foreign culture into language instruction mean that we are in support of the removal of cultural distinctiveness?" Yet, as we can see in the description about types of representing one's national culture, there is a positive manifestation of national identity (patriotism) and a negative side (Chauvinism). Are language teachers considered anti-patriotic subjects by including foreign culture in their language classrooms or chauvinists by not doing so, are matters that cannot be easily decided upon by merely posing a dichotomy. Rather, we must consider many individual, local, contextual and international factors and see the topic as a continuum where every teacher should reach a balance taking into account different criteria. Instead of seeing the issue as black and white, there seems to be better if we look at it as a colorful spectrum.

However, there are scholars who believe that it is not appropriate

to see cultures in racial or national terms since there are different social genres and subcultures within any race or nation (Guest 2002, Mabuchi 1995). Besides, according to several researchers, seeing cultures as static, rather than dynamic entities would reinforce popular stereotypes and create polarizing mentalities (Rose 1996; Kubota 1999; Littlewood 2000). In their view, culture cannot be reduced to "an abstract generalized formula" and thus, formulaic manifestations of other cultures in the textbooks used to teach foreign languages might be counter-productive and hinder intercultural communication rather than foster communicative competence.

The controversy that appears around teaching culture motivated the researcher of this study to investigate the topic of culture realization in English textbooks taught at junior high schools in Iran. This study also seeks to find out about Iranian English teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of culture through an interview. Previously, several studies have been conducted on the contents of the English textbooks in different countries.

English textbooks at Iranian junior secondary schools have gone through changes and revisions. New series of books have been prepared to be taught with the hope that the shortcomings of the previous textbooks, mainly their heavy reliance on traditional methodologies and their focus on language as system are removed. It is claimed in the introduction to the series which is written in Persian that the books have adopted a communicative approach and have taken into account different educational needs of the students. The

content of the new English language series which is entitled '*Prospect*' is thus going under investigation in this study to see whether and to what extent the new books' content can lead learners towards the acquisition of sociocultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence. As far as the researchers' knowledge serve, no previous studies have investigated the full content of the "*Prospect*" series so far except Ghaffarzadeh Hassankiadeh (2014) which has only studied the first book in the series, i.e., "*Prospect 1*".

This study makes use of Paige et al.'s (1999,2003) conceptual models for the purpose of content analysis following Lee (2009) who performed a similar study in the context of South Korea. New content of the EFL textbooks in Iran and the application of a more recent model for content analysis which is apparently conducive to more practical implications for language teachers, are the main reasons that seem to justify our effort to carry out this study. An interview is also added to the content analysis in order to hear some teachers' voices about the topic. After all, these are the teachers who have to use the content with their classes. What is more important is the teachers' experience of teaching the content that equips us with insights never to be found in the content itself. So, the purpose of the study is that of analyzing the content of the textbooks for their cultural elements and comparing the results of content analysis against the views of a sample of teachers obtained through an interview. It is wholeheartedly hoped that this investigation of cultural content and talk with teachers would contribute to the resolution of the dilemma that seems to exist

over the issue of teaching culture in language classrooms in general and English language classrooms in Iran in particular.

The close connection between language and culture and the significance of including culture teaching in language pedagogy motivated the researcher of this study to investigate whether cultural elements have been included in textbooks used at junior secondary schools in Iran, where they live. Moreover, it was the paradoxical perspectives about the integration of culture into language classes and the textbooks used in Iran that fueled this work. The problem is whether the textbook developers have taken into account the topic of culture while designing and preparing the material to be taught to adolescents in junior high school courses or they have not considered the topic for some particular reasons. Teachers' ideas in this regard are also of interest to the researcher. Thus, the following research questions could be formulated on the basis of the problem stated above:

1) Do "*Prospect*" series foster culture learning in adolescent students at junior secondary high schools in Iran? In other words, are "*Prospect*" series rich enough in cultural elements to ensure that learners gain the type of cultural competence required for today's age of communication?

2) What are teachers' attitudes towards culture learning in language classes?

The present study analyzes the content of a relatively new series of English books devised for junior secondary school students in Iran.

The series is called "*Prospect*" and consists of three textbooks that are taught at junior high school in Iran. The content has not been scrutinized before regarding its cultural content. Iranian English teachers' perspectives about culture teaching have not either been elicited or discussed yet. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the teaching of culture in English language classrooms in Iran and provide useful information to curriculum developers and syllabus designers as well as English teachers about the depth and range of cultural content in "*Prospect*" books. We also hope that the apparent dilemma over the inclusion or exclusion of a foreign culture (English here) into the language education curriculum is to some extent resolved particularly in the context of Iran.

Literature Review

There is a wide range of studies which have discussed the topic of culture and language teaching from different perspectives. One can refer to Littlewood (2001) for the effect of culture on thought and behavior; Tsou (2005) for the effects of culture instruction on foreign language learning; Baker (2008) for the importance of gaining cultural awareness for EL teachers; Gu (2005) and Jiang (2001) for cultural differences and cultural awareness; Tanaka (2006) for multiculturalism from language user's perspective; Nihalani (2008) for globalization and multicultural communication; Boxer (2002) for discourse issues in cross-cultural pragmatics; Sifakis (2004) for what teachers should know if they want to teach English as an international

and intercultural language; Braddy and Shinohara (2000) for transculturation and sociocultural identity in teaching; Kormos and Csizer (2007) for intercultural contact and its positive effect on motivation and anxiety; Jackson (2004) for areas of cultural difference; Kennedy and Kennedy (1998) for cultural networks.

In one study, we encountered an interesting opinion which held that the English language was not a property of the English-speaking nations (Harumi, 2002). Harumi (2002) proposed a framework of culture teaching for teaching English as a global language and stated that in our contemporary world, English does not belong to English-speaking people only. It is now turning into a property that all nations share. Sowden (2007) stated that we must prioritize culture over method when we step into the classroom as language teachers and be able to face the challenge that such prioritization involves. Alptekin (2002) stated that a new notion of communicative competence is needed which takes into account the realization of intercultural communicative competence in ELT.

Besides all the above studies, reference can be made to Paige et al. (1999) which wrote a relatively comprehensive review of the existing literature on culture learning in language education at the time. According to the review, textbooks cannot be free from values since they carry and instill particular perspectives and ideologies. Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet (1992) stated that before 1940s, many textbooks had been devised through the spectacles of a single cultural perspective. It was cultural artifacts and not cultural values which

were studied. However, the emergence of CLT during the 1970s brought about a new paradigm in teaching methodology. Teachers were no longer stuck to the textbooks and textbook was considered to be only one aid, besides much other authentic material, to the acquisition of a foreign language and gaining knowledge of its culture. Despite this fact, textbooks still play primary roles as sources of language and culture and thus deserve to be carefully investigated. Byram et al. (1991) reported an extensive use of textbooks and added that the range and depth of cultural information passed through textbooks are crucial factors to be considered by language teachers. Kramsch (1987) made a comparison between eight German textbooks to see the way culture was taught via the application of exercises, dialogues and pictures. Another scholar to investigate cultural content in textbooks was Moore (1991) who analyzed six Spanish textbooks for college students. Byram and Moore have emphasized the importance of learners' knowledge about cultural antecedents. A study carried out by Ueber and Grosse (1991) about business Spanish and French texts showed basic and extremely limited cultural content. According to Wieczorek (1994) both the depth and range of cultural content in some French textbooks was insufficient.

In the context of Iran, Aliakbari (2004) performed a content analysis of ELT textbooks at high school levels and found that the materials lacked adequate depth in treating culture and would not foster intercultural communication skills in learners. In another study, Hayati (2009) investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on EFL

learners' listening comprehension and concluded that being exposed to materials richer in cultural content would result in higher gains in listening proficiency. Ghaffarzadeh and Faraji (2014) analyzed the content of "prospect1" which is the textbook for first-grade Iranian students at junior secondary school to evaluate its authenticity. They concluded that the book lacked the balance needed among different aspects of authenticity. Their inference of the results they obtained is that "*Prospect 1*" is just an advertising board for Iranian culture since instances of authentic material are taken disproportionately from the learners' culture and not from the target culture.

Method

Participants

Fifteen English language teachers working at junior high schools in Iran and teaching "*Prospect*" series were interviewed about their viewpoints regarding culture teaching and ELT in Iran. All of them had studied a major related to English such as English Literature, English Translation, Linguistics or Applied Linguistics. One of them who held a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics analyzed the content of the textbook series selected and rated by the researcher in terms of cultural elements. Participants' informed consent was achieved before interviewing them or asking them to review textbooks. They were further assured that their viewpoints about ideological issues would be kept confidential. The textbook rater was also instructed about the rating process and was given the required

Materials

"*Prospect*" series were used as the content to be investigated in this study. These series consist of three English textbooks which are taught at junior secondary schools in Iran as the compulsory course books to be covered during an educational year of nine months. The books are prepared by a group of language experts under the supervision of a government department called "Ministry of Education". This is a relatively new series devised to create a change in the way language is learned in Iranian high schools and to take a step away from the old grammar-translation methodology and heavy reliance on linguistic competence to the detriment of other competences.

The content of the two textbooks is analyzed using the cultural content analysis model proposed by Paige et al (1999, 2003). This model was conceptualized to integrate language and culture teaching/learning. Based on Paige et al. (1993, 2003), it can be said that culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively" (Paige et al., 1999, p. 50).

According to Paige et al. (1999, 2003), the culture-general learning includes acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes which are generalizable and transferable across cultures. The culture-specific dimension of learning involves knowledge, skills and attitudes related

to a particular speech society. While culture-general learning provides learners with a starting point in culture learning by helping them understand that they are cultural beings capable of turning into intercultural beings, culture-specific learning tells them about specific facts and values about and of a given culture. The facts that are related to a target speech society's education, business, history, geography, arts, festivals and customs make up the Big "c" domain of the culture specific aspect. The socio-cultural values, beliefs, norms and assumptions which stand at a deeper level of cultural understanding form the small "c" domain of the culture specific dimension. Both culture-general and culture-specific learning are essential in acquiring intercultural competence since both contribute to learners' understanding of themselves and the people of other cultures.

There remains a problem as pointed out by Lee (2009) and that is the practicality of applying Paige et al.'s (1999, 2003) model in real ELT contexts. According to Lee (2009), the model lacks specific themes to accomplish particular culture learning aspects. Therefore, Lee (2009) suggests the application of Lee's (2004, 2005) "L2/FL/EFL/ESL/EIL Culture Teaching/Learning Tree"; a model which consists of themes to implement particular aspects of culture learning. Lee claims that the themes allow for the inclusion of various activities and exercises for L2/FL/EFL/ESL/EIL teachers.

Lee's (2004, 2005) model consists of 64 themes altogether. 16 themes cover culture-general learning, 22 themes account for the Big "C" domain of culture-specific learning and 26 themes are about the

small "c" domain of culture-specific learning. The culture-general learning themes are further divided into three categories: nine themes to refer to the cognitive dimension of cultural learning, five related to behavioral skills aspect and two about the attitudinal facet.

As stated before, The Big "C" domain of culture-specific learning consists of 22 themes and the small "c" of 26 themes which are not subdivided into smaller categories and are depicted in tables 2 and 3 in the results and discussion section, respectively. The Big "C" aspects are easily recognized and learned since they are vivid and apparent to learners while the small "c" themes are deeper in nature and more difficult to recognize.

Some questions were also prepared by the researcher to be asked of the Iranian English teachers as guidelines to keep the discussion on track during interviews. These questions were:

- 1) What is the impact of culture on human communication?
- 2) Should language teachers care about teaching culture? How important is culture teaching?
- 3) Can language teachers familiarize their learners with a new culture and raise their level of intercultural communicative competence without threatening their national or religious identity?
- 4) Should cultural elements be included in the textbooks that are used to teach language?
- 5) Are the new "*Prospect*" series rich in cultural elements?

Procedure

Careful analysis and scrutiny of the textbooks taught at junior high school in Iran was carried out by the researcher using a content-analysis model proposed by Lee (2004, 2005). A pilot study was conducted to examine the validity of Lee's (2004, 2005) in determining the rate of cultural content in language textbooks. The model was applied to part of the textbooks taught at secondary schools in Iran and its results showed consistency with the results obtained by Aliakbari (2004) which used a modified version of Ramirez and Hall's (1999) model for content analysis. The whole content of the books including all the chapters each of which takes care of a particular grammatical point in a structural syllabus, all sections and subsections, photos and pictures, etc. were analyzed and double-checked by the researcher with special attention to cultural content. Double-checking was performed at a later time by the researcher in order to ensure intra-rater reliability. A teacher of the courses at junior high school who held an MA in applied linguistics was instructed how to use the model to rate the cultural content in the same series of textbooks and was later asked to analyze the books regarding their cultural elements. Thus, inter-rater reliability was guaranteed. In addition, a total of fifteen teachers who taught the same textbooks at junior high school were interviewed to know what their perspectives were about the new series of textbooks, the books' richness in cultural elements and whether English teachers in Iran should care about raising their students' cultural awareness or be concerned about the learners' religious and national identity. All the interviews were

recorded and transcribed for further analysis by the researcher. The teachers' responses were later meticulously reviewed and parts of their talks which were most relevant to our discussion were extracted and included in the present article.

Results

Content Analysis

The textbooks were analyzed twice by the same researcher and once by another rater in order to ensure intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities. The results of the analyses at different times and by different raters were highly consistent (there was more than 85% similarity between the researcher' analysis and that of the second rater, and there was approximately 98% similarity between the researcher' analyses at different times). The model used in this study for content analysis considers three dimensions for culture learning: 1) the culture-general aspect of culture learning (which takes general cultural elements into account such as cultural identity, culture shock, etc.), 2) the culture-specific aspect of culture learning (the Big "C" domain: elements that are somewhere between very general and very specific cultural information categories. These elements include historical sites, holidays, family, etc.), 3) the culture-specific aspect of culture-learning (the small "c" domain: elements that demonstrate a deep and probably detailed discussion about issues such as freedom, hard work, self-reliance). Each dimension of culture learning in the model consists of themes (e.g. cultural identity) that can be classified into

three categories: cognitive themes, attitudinal themes and behavioral themes. Cognitive themes mostly affect learners' thinking processes when it comes to culture learning, attitudinal themes affect learners' perspectives and behavioral themes can have an effect on learners' cultural behavior.

The Culture-General Facet of Culture Learning

"Cultural identity" is the most recurrent theme in all three books with 112 instances of occurrence. This figure shows that the textbook designers have been really preoccupied with the topic of cultural identity. Thus, they have tried as much as possible to depict elements of national and religious identity in the textbooks, mostly in the photos, conversations, role plays and productive skills' (speaking/writing) sections. It is almost only the learners' native "cultural identity" that is demonstrated in the textbooks and not that of the English-speakers. The next theme which is repeated in most sections of the books is "the self as a cultural being". This theme occurs 34 times in the books and the highest numbers of its occurrence are in photos and role plays. The photos in the books show men and boys who wear clothes that many Iranians do. Women and girls in the pictures observe Islamic code of dressing and wear Chadors and scarves. Names of the characters are mostly common Iranian names like Ali, Reza, Mina, etc. This fact is also in line with the designers' concern about learners' native identity. After that come the themes of "cultural learning", "Positive attitudes towards foreign cultures",

"Intercultural perspective-taking skills", "intercultural attitude toward cultural differences" and "Intercultural communicative competence" with 14, 5, 2, 2 and 1 instances, respectively. "Culture-learning" seems to be a point that has been paid attention to by textbook developers. It has been included in the skills-development section of the books.

There were not any instances of the other themes in the textbooks. This shows that altogether the general aspect of cultural learning is not fostered through these three secondary school textbooks. Moreover, there is an imbalance among the culture general themes, i.e. themes related to national and native identity of the learners are recurrent while themes which have a more intercultural nature or are related to target culture identity are rare. It can be easily noticed that all the photos depict contexts which are typical of Iranian people's life in different situations. The conversations and other sections also take place in the context of Iran.

As stated above, there are three facets to the themes used to analyze cultural content. The cognitive facet of general cultural learning is given the highest importance and is encouraged through high emphasis on the three themes of "the self as a cultural being", "cultural identity" and "culture learning". The attitudinal aspect is the second and shows itself in the themes of "Positive attitudes towards foreign cultures", "intercultural attitude toward cultural differences" though its instances are few. The behavioral side of culture-general learning has the lowest significance with just three occurrences of the themes "Intercultural communicative competence" and "intercultural

perspective-taking skills". All the materials including photos, conversations, practices, etc. seem to be prepared or fabricated for pedagogical purposes without much consideration of materials' authenticity. The activities' main goal is perhaps to facilitate learners' cognition about English language and ease their mental development.

The three textbooks of the series are different regarding the number of general cultural themes they contain. From a total number of 151 occurrences, 70 belong to "*Prospect 3*", 45 to "*Prospect 2*" and 36 to "*Prospect 1*". "*Prospect 3*" is apparently the richest book of the series in cultural content and authenticity. The number of sections in each book is also different. *Prospect 1*, 2 and 3, have 6, 7 and 9 sections, respectively. The numbers indicate that the higher the learners' language level and the older their age, the richer the cultural content in their books. Perhaps, the textbook designers' attention to the mental development of adolescents and the students' gradual move towards puberty and adulthood is a justification for the inclusion of the least cultural elements in the lowest level, more of them in the middle and the most in the highest.

The tasks in the second and third books take into account the integration of language skills (listening/writing, reading/ speaking/ writing, reading/ speaking/ listening/ writing) more than the tasks in "*Prospect 1*" (listening/reading (as receptive skills) and speaking/ writing (as productive skills)). Moreover, there is a section at the end of each chapter in "*Prospect 2*" and "*Prospect 3*" called "Role play" which does not exist in "*Prospect 1*". "Role plays" play an important

role in adding to the culture general learning aspect of "*Prospect 2*" and "*Prospect 3*". This section also creates interaction among learners and helps them acquire communicative competence though it does not still count as an adequate book section to foster general cultural learning. There are two sections in "*Prospect 3*", namely "Language Melody (LM in the table)" and "Find it (FI in the table)" that do not exist in the other two books. The first one aims at teaching students the intonation of English sentences and the second is a kind of grammar exercise where learners try to recognize instances of the newly learned grammatical rule in a paragraph or a conversation. This part usually contains some cultural information. Thus, this section adds to the cultural content of "*Prospect 3*". However, this content as well as information in other parts of the book consists of cultural elements related to Islamic or Iranian culture such as reference to Fitr Eid, which is an Islamic holiday, Yalda night (the longest night of the Iranian year) which is an Iranian occasion celebrated every year and Haft Seen table which is set at the beginning of every new year.

The Culture-Specific Facet of Culture Learning

As stated before, culture-specific aspect of culture learning has two domains: the Big "C" domain and the small "c" domain. In the Big "C" domain, none of the first two textbooks in the series under study, i.e. "*Prospect 1*" and "*Prospect 2*" seem to have been designed to contribute to the learners' acquisition of specific cultural knowledge, skills and behavior, or attitudes since there are not any examples of

the cultural themes in this domain in the two books. However, "*Prospect 3*" contains 11 instances of the Big "C" domain themes. "Festivals/party/ceremonies/celebrations" theme has the highest frequency in the third book with 5 instances. After that come the themes of "various social customs", "holidays", "regions" and "family" which occur 3, 2, 1, 1 times, respectively. This shows that "*Prospect 3*" is richer in cultural content compared to the other two books. Yet again, this content reflects Iranian national and religious culture and not that of the target language culture. In fact, all the social life situations depicted in different sections of all the books have an Iranian context and scarcely if at all try to show a piece of life as it goes on for the people of the target culture. Instances of the themes in the small "c" domain of the culture-specific aspect are 7 altogether: 4 instances appeared in "*Prospect 3*" and 3 examples showed up in "*Prospect 2*". No instances of the themes were observed in "*Prospect 1*". Most instances were personal cultural issues either related to the "self" ("Self-interest"=3 instances, "Self-improvement"=1 instance) or to the individual ("weak-face consciousness"=1 instance, "hard-work"=1 instance, "rules/regulations oriented"=1 instance). These themes are also reflective of Iranian culture which values personal characteristics such as hard work and self-improvement. The instances of the small "c" themes are so few that can hardly lead to culture-specific awareness. Table 1 shows the frequency of cultural themes in PROSPECT English books.

Table 1 Frequency of cultural themes in *Prospect* English series

	Prospect 1	Prospect 2	Prospect 3	total
Culture-general domain	70	45	36	151
The Big "C" domain	0	0	11	11
The small "C" domain	0	3	4	7

Interviews

The first question of the interview asked about teachers' ideas regarding the impact of culture on human communication. All the participants believed that the impact is a strong one. Since they came from different ethnic groups within the country, they had all experienced communication breakdowns due to culture-related misunderstandings.

One interviewee's comment is worth mentioning as it somehow contains the gist of what the others pointed out in their talks:

"... Culture is definitely and absolutely important in communication. It is easy for you to communicate with a friend of another culture or ethnic group if you are quite familiar with their ways of thinking, behaving, speaking, their values, their norms and so on. And, communication can become very difficult or even impossible when that cultural awareness is not present... It can be a bitter experience."

Responses to the second question indicated that all teachers

believed culture teaching is undoubtedly very important but it involves some challenges. Most Iranian teachers do not possess cultural awareness since they have not received any education related to the culture of the people whose language they teach. Two of the interviewees thought adolescents are an age group who would like to follow ideas with no good reasons and exposing them to the Western culture (esp. culture of the Anglo-Saxons) without creating a kind of critical thinking in them, would result in their rejection of their own cultural values. All interviewees referred to the necessity of providing English teachers with the means and facilities to have cultural encounters with English speakers and pre-service (or in-service) courses to gain cultural awareness.

About the third question, most participants held that familiarizing learners with a second culture does not threaten their national or religious identity. They also believed that such exposure would even give more depth to learners' understanding of their own culture and identity. One of them stated:

"... becoming familiar with one ideology, lifestyle or manner of behavior does not necessarily mean that you have to or will follow the same ideology, lifestyle or behavior. Actually, it is our knowledge of different cultures as well as our awareness of cultural differences that helps us better understand and respect our own culture."

Inclusion of cultural elements in textbooks was the fourth topic to be discussed with the interviewees. Again, they unanimously believed that cultural contents of EFL textbooks must be as rich as possible. However, they thought selection or development of the

content must be conducted based on scientific criteria and care must be taken to avoid stereotypes. According to them, the content must first create awareness and then foster critical thinking in learners. One participant said:

"... Some people in Iran think that Western culture is evil. They suppose that if for example some words like wine, alcohol, girlfriend, date, etc. are used in textbooks, our young people's minds will become corrupted, they go astray and distance themselves from their religion which is the true way of life. That is why they are against teaching foreign cultures to our students. Cultural assault is also a concern for many parents as well as religious authorities and government officials."

According to all the interviewees, these concerns could be overcome if for example we could assure parents that seeing the word "wine" in a textbook does not necessarily mean that your son or daughter must drink wine, something which is forbidden in Islam. However, they stated that care must be taken not to advertise the foreign culture and adorn it with unreal fantasy. Rather, learners must approach a foreign culture with care, respect and an open critical mind. The task is hard to perform but it would be worth conducting since it could lead to the improvement of students' cultural competence which is an essential part of communicative competence in today's world of globalization and intercultural communication.

"Are the new "Prospect" series rich in cultural elements?" was the last question. All participants were of the opinion that English speaking people's culture was not included in the textbook series and

the books only reflected Iranian Islamic culture to a large extent. A teacher asserted:

"We do not need to familiarize our students with the culture that they see around them in their everyday life through our foreign language textbooks. There are many other means to make students more acquainted with Iranian Islamic culture. English language textbooks, in my view, must reflect the culture of native English speakers and at the same time respect and recognize our own cultural values ..."

Table 2 shows the gist of every participant's response to the questions asked during the interviews. Almost all the interviewees (who were all English teachers and taught "Prospect" course books) believed that the books did not contain rich cultural content. Rather unanimously, they said that target culture was not paid sufficient attention in foreign language instruction at Iranian junior high schools.

Table 2 Teacher participants' responses to the interview questions

Questions	The gist of participants' responses
1. What do you think about the impact of culture on human communication?	Communication can become difficult without being aware of your interlocutors' culture(s)
2. Should language teachers care about teaching culture? How important is culture teaching?	Yes. It is absolutely important but teachers themselves need to gain cultural awareness first through courses and encounters with target culture members

3. Can language teachers familiarize their learners with a new culture and raise their level of intercultural communicative competence without threatening their national or religious identity?	Definitely. Familiarizing them with a new culture can even help them know the values of their own culture better
4. Should cultural elements be included in the textbooks that are used to teach language?	They should be included according to scientific criteria, raise awareness and foster critical thinking
5. Are the new "Prospect" series rich in cultural elements?	The books only reflect native culture at the expense of ignoring target language culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate cultural content in "Prospect" English books which are currently being taught at Iranian junior high schools. The analysis revealed that the textbooks are desperately poor in cultural content. However, we found that culture-general aspect of cultural learning seemed to have been encouraged through reinforcement of a national and religious identity. In fact, the curriculum developers and syllabus designers have tried to manifest Iranian Islamic culture in the English textbooks (as we can see in the photos and texts in different parts of the books) rather than that of the English speaking people(s). There were not many instances of culture-specific aspect of cultural learning in the big "C" domain. A few instances that the researcher found were in the third book: "Prospect

3". The small "c" domain had very few themes in the three books in this series. Therefore, it can be concluded that the textbooks do not provide Iranian adolescents with the opportunity to improve their "intercultural communicative competence".

It can be stated that everything considered, "*Prospect*" series are more fruitful in creating general cultural learning in learners.

However, they do not nurture specific cultural learning at all and that is a serious shortcoming for the books which are claimed to have applied expert knowledge of teaching methodology in their design.

Simply put, the series are superficial and shallow with regard to cultural learning though they can be quite satisfactory in improving learners' linguistic competence. According to the results of the study, it can be said that the aim of these books is apparently to reinforce religious values in learners through the medium of English and give them courage in manifesting a national identity when they find a chance to express themselves in English.

In addition to content analysis, some interviews with the teachers who taught the textbooks showed that they all believed culture teaching had not been taken into consideration while developing the instructional materials to be taught in Iranian English classrooms. The teachers also emphasized that foreign culture is not perilous per se, but following it slavishly and ignorantly is the root of the evil. Based on these commonly held beliefs among English teachers in Iran, we might come to the conclusion that it is possible to include cultural elements in our teaching of foreign languages. To do so, curriculum

developers can devise models that are appropriate to the Iranian socio-cultural conditions and at the same time take into account the global needs of the learners to become transculturally competent. Thus, paying attention to the previously proposed models such as those of Ramirez and Hall (1990), Paige et al. (1990, 2003) and the works of the scholars in the field of language and culture such as Byram (1988) and Kramsch (1993, 1998) would help curriculum developers, syllabus designers and teachers in nurturing cultural competence in the students. Neither trying to stay aloof by rejecting anything that runs counter to our religious beliefs as evil nor accepting everything that comes to us through globalization as the best way of life would help us live a balanced and informed life in our global village. This is consistent with the finding of Lee Ha (2004) which stated that teachers can take into account global as well as local needs of their learners. It seems that there should be a trade-off between elements of national culture and those of the target language culture so that both are recognized and respected by learners. Learners need to develop a cultural awareness that helps them distinguish similarities and differences between their own culture and that of the English speakers around the world. Based on that awareness, they would be able to make informed decisions about how to communicate in English in the most culturally appropriate way. Also, the findings of Baker (2008), Gu (2005) and Jiang (2001) have all emphasized the importance of cultural awareness for language teachers and learners.

The findings of this study are in line with Ghaffarzadeh and

Faraji (2014) which claimed that formal linguistic aspect of language learning is paid most attention to and cultural or intercultural aspects of learning English as a foreign language have not been sufficiently taken into consideration in Iran. The findings also confirm the conclusion of Aliakbari's (2004, p. 1) analysis of secondary school textbooks that stated the materials were "shallow and superficial in their treatment of culture and inadequate to the task of teaching culture specifics in the deeper sense (values, norms, beliefs, etc.) or culture-general skills such as intercultural communication and understanding." Besides, this study is consistent with Lee Ha (2004) to stress that English teachers everywhere can legitimately play different roles appropriate to their socio-cultural context (e.g. as 'moral guides' in the context of Vietnam and probably in Iran). Teachers can both satisfy global needs and meet local requirements. They can improve their students' intercultural communicative competence through culture teaching and at the same time observe the norms of the society they live in such as 'politeness'. Moreover, not only does teaching culture not interfere with gaining a good command of English grammar and vocabulary (some teachers and students in Iran think it does) but also it can help learners get a better grasp of grammar rules and activate their vocabulary through the situations provided by culture. This is again in line with Le Ha (2004) which asserted that language teachers could be versatile and perform different tasks which are in fact complementary in a simultaneous manner.

The conclusions we have drawn here implicate that the English

department of designing textbooks in Iran and its experts are required to pay much more attention to the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence both in the general realm and in the specific domain. It is good and justified to be proud of national and native religious values and try to express them in English but the learners also need to acquire knowledge, skills and behaviors, and attitudes that help them communicate with English speakers in a better manner. This way they show understanding towards other cultures as well as expecting to be understood by people of other cultures.

It goes without saying that it is not only the textbooks that need to be revised and reconsidered. Textbooks are only one element of the language learning matrix. Teachers, learners, instructional materials (besides textbooks) and learning contexts are some other significant criteria that must be taken into account. Teachers need to become culturally wise and get prepared through in-service training sessions or workshops in order to be able to help learners gain socio-cultural competence as well as linguistic knowledge and skills. We would suggest that programs be thought about and carried out by the ministry of education or any other responsible authorities in Iran to raise language teachers' cultural awareness and train them how to treat culture in their classes.

It should be noted that while this study shows negligence about the important topic of cultural learning in ELT classrooms in Iran, further studies are required to confirm the results of this investigation,

since the analysis conducted is based on only one model of cultural content analysis. More studies and analyses of these series can help enrich their cultural content as well as their interactivity and authenticity.

The interviewees in this study were 15 English teachers in Iran. So, it gives our study a qualitative nature. Future quantitative studies can adopt other research methods such as surveys in order to gather data from a larger population of teachers and conduct statistical analyses on a nation-wide sample. Ministry of education officials, curriculum developers, syllabus designers, students, parents and even a random sample of the Iranian population can fill out questionnaires or take part in interviews so that we would be able to know their ideas about, interests in, needs to and rights to culture teaching and learning in language classes.

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