

# Inclusion of intercultural Education Criteria in Iranian Official English Textbooks

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## Abstract

The present study, with the concern for inclusion of the intercultural dimensions in the process of language learning and teaching, looked at the content of the some official English textbooks designed and authored by Ministry of Education in Iran to find out whether the cultural dimensions of English speaking world have been included in official high school English textbooks. The study is a qualitative study in nature, based on content analysis. It examined the subject of each lesson and the content of different parts included in each units to find the representation of intercultural studies. The results of the study revealed the lack of intercultural perspective inclusion within official English textbooks in Iran.

**Keywords:** Intercultural education, National curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran. Official English textbooks

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Multiculturalism in educational systems

The essentiality of the acquisition of knowledge of one's own culture and the foreign cultures in the current era is transparently obvious as the world experiences the diversities represented via ever-expanding physical and virtual interactions of individuals and cultures. Tomlinson (2001) holds that cultural awareness involves a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ (cited in Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). Tomlinson and Masuhara, (2004) claim that an increased cultural awareness helps learners broaden the mind, increase tolerance and achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity. According to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993), cultural awareness encompasses three qualities:

- awareness of one's own culturally-induced behavior
- awareness of the culturally-induced behavior of others
- ability to explain one's own cultural standpoint (p.5)

Robinson (1985) discusses, what she calls 'cultural versatility,' which implies "expanding one's repertoire of experiences and behaviors, not subtracting anything" (p. 101). When people expand their cultural repertoire, they "would become a little bit of 'other,' and would have a degree of psychological match with more people" (p. 101). Investigating the issue of "self" and "other" and the change of identity through exposure to other cultures, Bahramy et al. (2013) point out:

"Although via learning a new language and as a result learning a new culture the identity goes under great changes, the changes do not necessarily entail the learners alienation of "self". By learning English the learner, looking for growth and improvement of self, learns how to face the diversity of cultures, how to get the wisdom existing in other cultures, how to represent understanding and tolerance for contrasting perspectives and how to cooperate with worlds of "others". And this phenomenon can be referred to as "identity reconstruction."

The advocates of multicultural education suggest "encouraging students to recognize differences within groups of people, and encouraging students to judge people on the bases of internal rather than external qualities while accepting different ways of living as equally valid" (Aboud,1988). Intercultural education also puts stress upon "providing information about other cultures which follow the criteria of teaching about similarities, the nature of everyday life and positive achievements" (Kehoe, 1984). It may be the scope of foreign language learning and teaching into which the approach of intercultural education could be incorporated mostly. According to Corbett (2003, p.3) the teaching of culture is considered to be an important part of modern foreign language learning and teaching since one major aim of language teaching is to increase the understanding and tolerance between cultures. The contemporary models of communicative competence show that there is much more to learning a language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness (Bachman 1990; Council of Europe 2001). According to Kramsch (1993, 1), culture "is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them." Strateim (1981) argues there is no question that the successful integration of culture and language teaching can contribute significantly to general human knowledge, that language ability and cultural sensitivity can play a vital role in the security, defense and economic well-being of the country and that global

understanding ought to be a mandatory component of basic education (Stratiem 1981, cited in Hadley, 1993).

According to Corbett (2003) learners may not want to either adopt the practices or beliefs of the target culture, but they should be able to understand them if they want to achieve a high proficiency in the target language. In order to understand how a community uses language it is necessary to also understand the community.

### **1.2. English Foreign language Education in Iran's Educational System**

English language in Iran is taught 2 hours per week in high schools. The textbooks are designed and authored under supervision of the Ministry of Education. It is explicitly, though not sufficiently in some critics' point of view, the national curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Iran mentions the pursuit of a multicultural approach. In Islamic Republic of Iran National Education Curriculum, in the section related to the introduction of various fields and subjects of the study, included in the curriculum, the scope of foreign language teaching and learning has been brought up as an independent and important subject of the education. It reads: "Education of foreign languages provides the diverse audience with appropriate grounds for cultural interactions to be understood and perceived and for human knowledge achievements to be transferred through various linguistic frames-oral, visual and written- based upon the foundation of Islamic system criteria"(2010 AD;1389 HD).

Over the domain of the field, it continues: "the language education puts emphasis upon acquisition of communicative and problem -solving qualifications so the students would be capable of communicating by the means of 4 linguistic skills- listening, reading, speaking and writing by the end of high school studies. The language education schedule is supposed to acquaint the students with language corpora, lexicon, and constructive structures essential to create communication on global scope" (ibid).

The major concern throughout the line of the national curriculum is upon the recognition of national identity (Iranian and Islamic identity), yet the recognition of lands, nations and other cultures is of concern as well.

It is noteworthy to stress out that multicultural education does not equal the exclusion of national identity.

According to the national curriculum, the content of language education in school starts with subjects on local issues and individual necessities such as health, daily life, surrounding area, values and culture of the society and moves toward cultural, scientific, economic, political and ... which conform to the content of the other educational fields and intend to deepen students' reflection over the other fields as well.(ibid).

As it is noticed in National Education Curriculum Document, the concept of multicultural approach in Iran Educational System has been emphasized and recognition of other lands, cultures and nations is of great concern.

There are plenty of research studies related to the official English textbooks in Iran: some of them are brought up as examples in the following:

"Textbook Selection and Evaluation in EFL Context " by Rahimpour & Hashemi: 2011, " A Comparative Study of English Textbooks Used in Iranian Institutes" by Parviz Alavinia & Mansoor Siyadat : 2006, "Authenticity of Iranian English Textbooks for Schools" by Abdollahi Guilani et. al, 2011; and " Socio-cultural Patterns in Iranian High School Textbooks from the View point of Motivation for Research" by

Behnama & Mozahebb: 2013. These studies include different aspects of English language teaching such as subjects of texts authenticity, gender, focus on linguistic systems, pragmatic and communicative aspects of language teaching, material development, efficiency of instructions and syllabuses as well as cultural issues. The present study, however, has adopted the criteria introduced by Byram et al. (1994) and Risager(1991) as a reference to follow intercultural education principles, an approach of language teaching and learning mingled with intercultural dimensions, viewing language teaching beyond alphabetical symbols. Byram et al. (1994:51-52) suggest the following nine criteria for analyzing and evaluating the content of cultural learning. These criteria are thought to be a minimum content of cultural knowledge, which textbooks should also include.

1. Social identity and social groups: groups within the nation-state, including social class, regional identity, ethnic minority and professional identity. These criteria are the basis for other than national identity and they illustrate the complexity of individual's social identities.
2. Social interaction: conventions of verbal and non-verbal behavior in social interaction.
3. Belief and behavior: routine and taken-for-granted actions within a social group (either national or sub-national). The moral and religious beliefs as well as the routines from daily life belong to this section.
4. Socio-political institutions: institutions of the state (e.g. health-care) and their meanings and values. How do they characterize the state and its citizens?
5. Socialization and the life-cycle: Institutions of socialization, e.g. families, schools, employment offices, religion and military service. What are the expectations and shared interpretations in these cases?
6. National history: periods and events, both historical and contemporary. What is their significance in the material and for the learning process?
7. National geography: geographic factors. Which of them are significant for the members of the culture and

which are important for outsiders in intercultural communication?

8. National cultural heritage: the cultural artefacts, which are known to the members of the nation, such as Shakespeare in Britain.

9. Stereotypes and national identity: what is typical for the target culture (both historical and contemporary) symbols of national identities, e.g. famous monuments and people.

Risager (1991: 182-183, 188) has also created criteria, or categories, for evaluating cultural content in textbooks. Her four criteria are as follows:

1. The micro level – phenomena of social and cultural anthropology: the social and geographical characters, situations of interaction, interaction and the subjectivity of characters: feelings, attitudes, values and perceived problems.

2. The macro level – social, political and historical matters: broad social facts about contemporary society, sociopolitical problems, e.g. unemployment and pollution.

3. International and intercultural issues: comparisons between the target culture and the pupil's own country, mutual representations, images, stereotypes, relations, cultural power and dominance, co-operation and conflict.

4. Point of view and style of the textbook author(s): expressions of attitudes (positive, negative, critical) towards the country and the people.

Risager (1991: 183) criteria are rather similar to the criteria proposed by Byram et al. but the category of "*point of view and style of the textbook author(s)*" is an interesting addition, which Byram et al. fail to mention in their proposal.

That said, drawing on the criteria established by Byram et al. (1994) and Risager (1991), the present study made an attempt to investigate the subjects and also content of high school English textbooks to discover the degree to which intercultural components have been incorporated in official **English** textbooks in Iran.

Given the purpose of the study, the research questions formulated are:

RQ#1 Do cultural contents of English textbooks in Iran support intercultural principals of teaching and learning introduced by Byram, et. el. and Risager? And if the answer is "Yes", then

RQ#2 Which components of intercultural teaching and learning have received more emphasis?

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The present study is a qualitative study in nature, or rather is based on content analysis. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009: 91, 103), content analysis is one of the basic methods for qualitative research by which various kinds of research can be carried out. Content analysis provides the systematic and objective analysis of a textual data. The study, thus, went through examination of subjects of reading passages and their contents in Iranian high school textbooks in order to find out how intercultural materials have been included in textbooks in Iran and which components, if any at all, are brought up in official English textbooks in Iran.

### **2.2 General Procedures**

The study first looks at subjects of lessons which main English official textbooks of high school contain. It starts with the high school first grade book/ 7th grade of school education in Iran. The book was published last year. The authors claim to have adopted an interactive and communicative approach; however, they reject to follow the theories suggested by western scholars in the scope of interaction and communication. The other books for the study to collect the required data are English textbooks of higher levels, namely book 2, book 3, and book 4 (see Appendix).

## **3. Results**

The analysis concentrates on finding out how the aspects of culture found in the data support the eleven criteria by Byram et al. (1994: 51-52) and Risager (1991: 182-183, 188) for evaluating inter/cultural as well as international contents in textbooks. The analysis is divided into eleven subsections, according to the eleven criteria extracted from Byram et al. (1994) and Risager (1991):

1. Social identity and social groups (social classes, regional identity, ethnic identity, professional identity)
2. Social interaction (verbal and non-verbal)
3. Belief and behavior (morals, religious, daily life routines)
4. Socio-political institutions and problems (eg. health care, unemployment issues, pollution)
5. Socialization and the life-cycle (families, schools, employment offices, religion, military service)
6. National history (historical and contemporary events and periods)
7. National geography
8. National cultural heritage
9. Stereotypes and national identity
10. International and intercultural issues (comparison between target culture and that of pupil's, mutual images, stereotypes, relations, co-operations, conflicts)

#### 11. Point of view and style of the textbook author/s(positive, negative, and critical toward country and people)

The study was supposed to examine each inter/cultural category one by one and determine their inclusion within the texts and further to distinguish the focal inter/cultural subjects of the textbooks. By looking at the subjects, contents and images of the books, it could be inferred that in spite of the authors' claim, the books rarely cover either an interactive or a cultural approach. The trend in the textbooks is to follow a one-directional mode through which some taken-for-granted and general facts are transferred to the students. No special community has been presented, whereas the authors have made statements over the text emphasis over national identity.

The subjects and content examination of book 1 illustrates that the book lacks the inter/cultural representations. Although, the objectives of lessons and language functions are to teach the basic topics required to practice communication and interaction, there is no direction toward an introduction of multicultural or international communications and interactions. The people involved in communications are all Iranian and supposedly from Tehran (the capital city in Iran). The names used are especially common in this part of the country- there is no mention of English or other nationalities' names or even names related to the other regions of the country. The meals and dishes named in the book are also Iranian ones not related to a specific region. The pictures in the book are mainly drawings, not real-like photos. The clothing is the formal clothing type-chador and special covering for women in particular. In parts concerned with teaching of giving address and telephone numbers, all places and phones are related to Iran, mainly to Tehran- no point to relate the students toward English or international interactions and communications.

The examination of book 2 reveals that the English structure instruction is the focal point of the lessons and subjects. There are rarely English names included in the book, even the only currency mentioned is Toman (Iranian currency). Everything mentioned in the book follows a general concept. There is no specialization of people- referring to people from different ethnic background, living in different parts of the country or throughout the world, sociopolitical institutions (such as Health care organization) or regional features (climatic diversities). A very short comparison of life styles in a big city and small town has been made in the book. Tehran appears as the center of the story and the audience addressed in the book is someone from Tehran; for instance, when the writer points out going to a stadium to watch a football match as a social event and an entertainment, Azadi Stadium in Tehran is the place in which the match is held. Through book 2, some religious places such as mosques and the Holy Shrine in Mashhad city have been named. Buses have been introduced as financially- affordable means of transportation in comparison with taxies. It could be inferred that the author, at least, has had the average middle or working classes of the society in the mind as the reader. Going to cinema, zoo, and restaurant and watching movies are mentioned as common entertainments. Schools, libraries, mosques, families are among culturally-established institutions within the society.

As it was mentioned the book centers over instruction of English linguistic structures, meanwhile, some cultural aspects are mentioned. The cultural representations, the same as book 1, again, are limited to common and general aspects of culture and do not go beyond the borders to enter into an intercultural and international discourse.

Book 3, however; differs in many aspects with book 1 and book 2. The subjects cross the national borders and to some extent add an international and English flavor to book 3. Book 3 follows the principles of book 1 and book 2; however, some changes are noticeable. The topics are not only related to Iran. The world and other nationalities have been mentioned too. The founder of kindergarten, the story of Newton, farmhands in other parts of the world- the monkeys helping the farmers, probably in India or African countries- the story of a snowy day and Tom- perhaps an English student, and James Watt and steam engine invention are all, positively, narrated. Even more frequency of English names use can be detected in a quick look. Traveling to foreign countries and the necessity of knowing other languages are explicitly emphasized. Some social attitudes such as helping the poor, respecting the old people and ... have been indirectly valued. The book ends with a passage about the Prophet of Muslims while recognizing other prophets and religions as well. From the present researchers' perspectives, despite being insufficient, book 3 is an important step, toward foundation of intercultural and international interactions and understanding which may be realized and accelerated by the means of an international language (English as a lingua Franca).

The results of the analysis on the contents of book 4 and book 5 are brought up together since their contents approximately follow similar trends in regard with inter/cultural categories considered in the present paper. The reading passages in books 4 and five have been presented over general scientific topics, including experimental and social science and they look like lectures for the transfer of scientific information. The introduction of Charlz Dickens, in book 4, is a reference to English literature and also a reference to humanitarian issues like child labor which are viewed positively by the authors. Following the changes in book 3, a regression is witnessed in concern with the extension of intercultural and international communications and interactions.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

English textbooks in Iran, to a great extent, lack the aspects of multicultural and intercultural education. Rarely is there any evidence of diversity noticed. The majority of cultural aspects of life (such as food, music, clothing, cultural heritage, region-specific traditions, costumes, monuments, values, and religion) have been overlooked. The textbooks, indeed, look like science books which provide the students with some scientific data via each reading section. No life-style comparison, no real-life image, no cooperation and no conflict of views are introduced or discussed.

It seems as if English textbooks instruct a machine language. A language one learns and practices in isolation from the world around. The texts are just one- directionally informative and the major parts of other sections have been allocated to language structure and grammar. Therefore, if language is looked upon as a means of communication within a community, and if language is considered as a tool of expression and interaction among peoples of different lands and diverse cultures, The textbooks seem to fail the fulfillment of the main purpose of English/any other foreign language teaching and learning. This drawback of the textbooks, exclusion of intercultural aspects of language, might be justified by the authors as to avoid other cultures transfer and learning via language learning. Their excuse, however, could be argued that learning a culture does not necessarily equal its acceptance. In fact, what could protect a culture is not ignorance of the others; being aware of cultural differences helps one to protect their own culture consciously while it establishes tolerance, flexibility, respect for cultural differences as well.

#### 5. limitations of the Study and Further Suggestions

The study, merely, has its focus upon textbooks which are considered as a significant element, however, one among so many of other variables; in the field of education. For an exhaustive investigation of intercultural education inclusion in education system to conduct, it requires the combination and organizing of plenty of research on students, teachers, parents plus the regional, cultural, linguistic- related variables.

Through the provision of a panoramic image of the related variables involved in this issue, the problem of intercultural/multicultural education could thoroughly be addressed and studied. To conduct such an exhaustive study, definitely, a team of scholars from various-related fields is necessary. Moreover, the support of executive officials and education policy-makers who are aware of the significance of the problem and practical implications of the research on this subject is the essential tool to produce fitting and appropriate textbooks.

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## Appendix

### 2.1. A Brief Account of High School Official English Textbooks in Iran

The subjects included in the books are as the following:

#### Book 1:

Lesson 1: My Name/ language Function: Introducing yourself, greeting

Lesson 2: My Classmates/ language Function: Introducing Others, Asking Someone's name

Lesson 3: My Age/ language Function: Talking about your age, Talking about dates

Lesson 4: My Family/ language Function: Talking about your family

Lesson 5: My Appearance/ language Function: Talking about appearance

Lesson 6: My House/ language Function: Talking about where people are, Talking about what people are doing

Lesson 7: My Address/ language Function: Talking about your address/phone number, Telling the time

Lesson 8: My Favorite Food/ language Function: Talking about your favorite food, Making suggestions

#### Book 2:

Lesson 1: Ahmad's Wallet

Lesson 2: Our English Teacher

Lesson 3: How Much or How Many?

Lesson 4: I enjoyed the cartoons.

Lesson 5: I saw him this morning.

Lesson 6: I was helping my mother.

Lesson 7: May I leave the classroom?

Lesson 8: He usually drives carefully.

Lesson 9: We'll go next week.

#### Book 3:

Lesson One: The Kindergarten Man

Lesson Two: The Funny Farmhand

Lesson Three: A Story about Newton

Lesson Four: The School Bus

Lesson Five: Learn a Foreign Language!

Lesson Six: The Boy Who Made Steam Work

Lesson Seven: Highways in the Sky

Lesson Eight: Eat, Clothes, Eat

Lesson Nine: "The Holy Prophet"

#### Book 4:

Lesson One: Washoe and the Puzzles 1, Lesson Two: The Other Side of the Moon

Lesson Three: Holland's Toy Town

Lesson Four: Charles Dickens and the Little Children

Lesson Five: The Little Old Man Who Could not Read

Lesson Six: Hic, Hic, Hic

Lesson Seven: How Are You?

#### Book 5:

Lesson One: TV or no TV

Lesson Two: The Value of Education

Lesson Three: Memory

Lesson Four: The Olympic Games

Lesson Five: Every Word Is a Puzzle

Lesson Six: What is a Computer

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