The Representation of Culture in Iran Language Institute Advanced Level Textbooks

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Abstract—This study was interested in screening 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 (1990) categorization 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 culture specific references and in Three and Four 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) According to Ramirez and Hall (1990), there are eight categories to consider passages and five out of eight categories were in advanced books, so there was a good variety in these texts.

Index Terms— culture, materials, instructional, category, reading, categorization, reference.

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture has been defined in a number of ways. Linton (1945) defines culture as “a configuration of learned behaviors whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society” (p.32). Thompson (1990) defines culture as the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances and meaningful objects of various kinds, by which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences, conceptions and beliefs. (p.132)

Culture is related to language. The relationship between language and culture is so great that they are referred to as the sides of the same coin.

Culture and ELT are two key concepts the present study intended to focus on. The relationship between these two has been examined by different researchers. Cheng (2003) examined authentic conversations between Hong Kong Chinese and their friends or colleagues who are native speakers of English. She makes a number of prior assumptions about the cultural differences between Hong Kong Chinese and native English speakers, and investigates the extent to which these differences are reflected in her intercultural conversation data. However, she argues that study goes well beyond simple confirmation of such assumptions. She provides thorough analyses of authentic intercultural conversations, arguing that they will enhance our understanding of the conversational process and behavior of the individual participants, and expressing the hope that this cultural understanding will be beneficial. It sounds ambitious, especially with EIL, since the number of the encountering culture is numerous. It is likely to be imprecise because many teachers may not possess a thorough knowledge of the target culture. What an ELT teacher can do is raising the students' consciousness to basic rules and makes them ready for appreciating the differences. According to Kramsch (1993) since culture is always changing, it is not really possible to teach it to students. She, then, says " what language learners have to acquire is less understanding of one other national group than an understanding of difference per se"(p.350).

To explore the socio-cultural context of ESL from the teacher's perspective, Gougeon (1993) interviewed 27 senior high school teachers and concluded that in spite of official statements to the contrary, school systems are fundamentally ethnocentric, supporting the “English language Anglo-Saxon culture” and they are uncommitted to providing equal service to ESL students.

Kramsch (1993:355) reports on a small-scale experiment involving 12 teachers, from three different language and cultural backgrounds, who were participating in a three-day training seminar in France. The purpose of this seminar was for teachers to explore the complexity of culture, culture teaching, and culture learning. The teachers perceived their greatest difficulty to be doing justice to the diversity of perspectives and values that exist among natives within the

same national culture. Kramsch points out that not one single national group was able to achieve consensus on what version of American, French or German culture should be taught abroad. This inescapable diversity of perspectives in turn made teachers "realize their own, subjective perspective in their choice of pedagogical materials." the second pedagogical challenge was making the target culture "attractive enough to be worthwhile studying, yet casting enough of a critical eye on it to make believable." among the insights gained during the seminar, the participant mentioned (1) the notion of cultural relativity; (2) a heightened linguistic vigilance and distrust of lexical equivalences; and, (3) an awareness of the importance of personal contact and dialog when trying to understand another culture. Kramsch calls this last insight an "essential reality check against stereotypical visions of the other." She concludes with a 4-stage model for the process of cross-cultural understanding which would include an initial misunderstanding of intent, a subsequent misunderstanding of the source of misunderstanding, attempts to explain the problem with one's own frame of reference, and finally, a (necessary) switch to the other person's frame of reference. According to Kramsch, for the development of language pedagogy, two implications follow from such a model. First, it presents authentic documents together with their contexts of production and reception, i.e., the different readings given to these texts by various native and non-native readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Second, learners and teachers must be given the opportunity to reflect upon the "cultural fault lines" that underline their classroom discourse. From her own classroom observations, Kramsch (1993) concludes that the reflective component is most sorely missing as "too many opportunities for cross-cultural reflection are brushed aside in the name of communicative practice" (p.537). Her statement underscores once more the urgent need for classroom-based research that would help identify the ways in which cross-cultural reflection can be encouraged.

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 the English language programs in Iran in particular. Ranging from English linguistic imperialism and cultural invasion to cultural neutrality, the interpretations of the state of ELT in Iran is still controversial. In particular two extreme evaluations of ELT appear in the agenda. On the one hand, English, as a school 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. This unresolved controversy prompted the present investigation into the cultural content of ELT in Iran. It is not clear how culture is addressed in ILI textbooks, so this study considers the place of culture in these books.

At present the dominant trend in Iran is toward more English language teaching. As a required course from the second grade of junior high school, English is taught three to four hours in a week. There is an extensive and still growing private sector of education in the country, a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools functioning within the three levels of general education in Iran, namely primary, junior and high schools, English receives striking attention and probably extra hours of practice. English is so crucial a factor that the quality of the English program and the skill of the teacher or teachers working in each school may determine the families' choice to send their children to one school or another. Private language schools or institutes have attracted an increasing number of interested learners from young children to adults. The multiple variations observed in the programs delivered signify a great tendency to learn English in Iran, on the one hand, and a notable endeavor to fulfill the learners' communicative needs, on the other.

So far, as Talebinejhad and Aliakbari (2001) stated, English seems to have found its way smoothly right to the heart of Iranian society, proving itself to be a necessity, rather than a mere school subject. Just as with the outer world, English is the dominant language of foreign trade, international conferences, for air traffic in international airports, and in sea navigation. Iran's relation with the world is mainly through English. Though native-like pronunciation, which is not contradictory to EIL assumptions, is aimed at in classrooms, native English speakers do not make up the sole possible interactions for Iranian English learners. In fact, English is often used for non-native interactions. English dailies, weeklies, journals and other English periodicals directed by Iranian nationals are issued and available throughout the country. The government's policy for promoting the export of non-oil products made companies and exporters take advantage of this medium to introduce their goods and products to the world market. The Iranian national TV has started broadcasting authentic foreign programs, especially English ones. The Internet, the use of which requires a substantial English proficiency level and through which people enjoy world relationships, has gained national recognition. Iran's cooperation with the UN, Islamic Conference Organization, ECO, OPEC and other regional and world organizations makes English a practical necessity for the involved nationals. International book fairs and trade exhibitions held annually in the capital demonstrate the country's readiness and its dependable capacity to maintain its world relationships in English (Aliakbari 2002).

There is a serious absence of studies that examine the quality and the types of materials used in teaching culture in Iran Language Institute especially at advanced level at which the students are supposed to be proficient enough. Therefore, the major purpose motivating this study is to find out, on the one hand, whether the available English materials especially in this institute provide sufficient content for students' cultural understanding and make them ready for intercultural communication; or, on the other, whether the 'culture' taught merely familiarizes students with their native culture. More specifically, this study was interested in screening the cultural references in the content of the instructional materials of Iran Language Institute at Advanced levels according to Ramirez and Hall's 1990 model. In Iran, Aliakbari (2002) did the same research on high school textbooks based on this model. He found that ELT

textbooks currently in use in Iranian high schools are inadequate in their portrayal of the target culture or other cultures. The same approach was done in elementary level textbooks "Success-Communicating in English" (Walker 1999) which is set in the United States and marketed worldwide. This study showed the multicultural nature of American society which was portrayed in these books.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

There is a serious absence of studies that examine the quality and the types of materials used in teaching culture in Iran Language Institute especially at advanced level at which the students are supposed to be proficient enough. Therefore, the major purpose motivating this study is to find out, on the one hand, whether the available English materials especially in this institute provide sufficient content for students' cultural understanding and make them ready for intercultural communication; or, on the other, whether the 'culture' taught merely familiarizes students with their native culture. More specifically, this study was interested in screening the cultural references in the content of the instructional materials of Iran Language Institute at Advanced levels.

To achieve the objectives of this study answers to the following questions are sought:

Research Questions

1. Whose cultures are represented in the cultural content of the ILI Advanced Iranian English textbooks?
2. To what extent that specific culture is represented?
3. Do the textbooks have enough variety in presenting culture?

The major intent in the analysis of the textbooks in this study was an investigation of their contribution to the exposure of students to intercultural environment. The results of the textbooks analysis seem to confirm such a quality to some extent.

This is of course very important for such a successful institute to examine the cultural content of its advanced books. After graduating from this institute the students are supposed to be proficient in English language. This institute once changed its books in 1382 because the books and their appearance seemed boring to the students.

This study is thought to be helpful for ILI English material designers, developers of policy and curriculum, to encourage them to consider texts that are culturally effective and also language teachers who are sometimes suspended between the tendency towards their native culture and the foreign culture.

III. METHOD

A. Materials

There are eighteen levels in adult section of Iran language institute, Basic 1, Basic 2, Elementary 1 (E1), EL2, EL3, Pre_intermediate1(Pre1), Pre2, Pre3, Intermediate1(Inter1), Inter2, Inter3, High 1, High 2, High 3, Advanced 1(Ad 1), Ad 2, Ad 3, Ad 4.

The ILI English series has four books at advanced level, planned, published and revised by the Research and Planning department. These are designed based on a similar pattern and structure. Advanced one and two have the same design. Each lesson starts with section one (listening one) in which some new words are introduced. Section two is reading in which most of the new words are introduced.

The next is section three which is a grammar part. The next is section four which is the second listening in which some new words are introduced. The last section is section five which is a section to practice writing. Advanced three and four have the same design. Each lesson starts with section one which is a listening part in which some new words are introduced. The second section of these books is a Reading which usually aims to present a grammar point in real life situations and most of the new words are introduced in this part. Grammar is the next section. There is also a section to practice writing.

A close examination of the textbooks made it clear that the vocabulary and reading sections of the textbooks are the kernel sections of the books. They are to provide new vocabularies and new information. Other sections are to help students internalize the information obtained in these two sections. Accordingly, the present study aimed at the analysis of these two sections of the textbooks.

In the New Words section of the textbooks, each new word is used in listening or reading. This is done to contextualize one of the meanings of the word. Throughout the study each single exemplification or illustration for the meanings of words was considered a unit of study because each statement conveyed a particular meaning independent of the preceding or the succeeding sentences.

B. Coding Scheme

Several ways of manipulating texts are common in content analysis. For Weber (1990), they include word frequency counts, key-word-in-context (KWIC) listing, concordances, classification of words into content categories, content category counts, and retrievals based on content categories and co-occurrences. Which way suits a particular study is not an easy question. Thus, Weber (1990) notes, "by the way there is no simple right way to do content analysis. Instead, investigators must judge what methods are most appropriate for their substantive problem"(p. 13).

The process of creating and applying a coding scheme consists of several basic steps. One of the most fundamental and important decisions concerns the definition of the basic unit of text to be classified. Word, word sense, sentence, theme, paragraph and whole text are six commonly used options (ibid.).

Throughout this study, two different coding schemes were tried for the sections under investigation. With reference to the nature and the quality of each section decision was made. The quality and the justification of the choices are given in the following sections. In the following section two coding schemes for both reading passages and new words are presented.

C. Coding Scheme for Reading Passages

Observing Ramirez and Halls' (1990) study of content analysis and the above classifications, two sections of advanced ILI textbooks were put under investigation. The total number of units in either section of the textbooks was examined and their respective references to different countries or groups were tabulated. Indirect references were also taken into account. If the name of a country or group was not specified, the names of the interlocutors or any other indirect identity, if provided, were taken as clues for determining the related countries or groups.

To get close to the central idea of the passage, which is considered the major objective of reading comprehension, the whole text or excerpt was taken as the unit of study for the Reading' passages. Based on the findings of the pilot study, after examining all the reading passages, a coding scheme with eight categories was established. These categories included reference to English speaking countries (H), reference to non-English speaking western countries (I), reference to eastern countries (L), Cross-national comparison (M), reference to Iran (N) and, reference to Islam or Islamic traditions (O). Two other categories were established for a different reason. Category (J) was to embody general texts such as those related to science, biographies, historical events and life stories which did not concentrate on the life style but on the introduction of a scientist, a world figure or a man of will. Six categories were meant to embody references to culture as life style, locations, tradition and customs, special events or occasions among different targets. Although these texts might occasionally include references to certain personalities or places, due to their general and worldwide recognition classified as general texts with no particular cultural reference. The pilot study showed that references in some texts were probably intentionally dropped. They seemed to be adopted from known sources but were presented to students anonymously. Expressions like "one university research and "in one country.... an unusual experiment was done recently" are not rare. Accordingly, category (K) was decided to embrace 'Reading' passages whose identity had been left out.

D. Coding Scheme for 'New Words'

In the New Words` section of the textbooks, each new word is followed by one sentence, which is to contextualize the meanings of the word. Throughout the study each single exemplification or illustration for the meanings of words was considered a unit of study because each statement conveyed a particular meaning independent of the preceding or the succeeding sentences.

In a closer examination, these sentences were classified into four categories. A large number of sentences had no reference to a target group in any way. It was not clear when, where and by whom they were produced. They did not include names of people or places either. Such sentences, general enough to be used by people in any country or culture, were classified as No Reference, Culture Free Statements (NRCFS). They usually started with or included unclear, generic pronouns such as he, she, they and I. Some of them would refer to general categories such as, students, the children, doctors, people and the like such as the following sentence.

1) Children love their fathers and mothers.

A second category of sentences was labeled No Reference, Culture Specific Statements (NRCSS). These sentences often had no indicator of their referents. However, compared with the previous category, they were considered special or peculiar to an unspecified target group, culture or country. For instance:

2) People always talked about war. You know this was a topic for conversation a few years ago.

Another type of sentences included proper names of people, places or objects that indirectly specified the source group, culture or country. These sentences were then subdivided into two classes. A vast majority of them were classified as Sentences with Culture General Reference (SCGR). Apart from their references to particular people, places or objects, people from different culture backgrounds could potentially use these sentences.

3) He spoke English so well that I never realized he was a German.

4) If you accept the job, it will involve living in Bandar Abbas.

A fourth group of sentences included particular references. Such sentences were labeled Sentences with Culture Specific References (SCSR). For example, there were frequent references to the imposed war in Iran or particular occasions such as:

5) The 15th of Sha'āban is a religious celebration.

6) During the imposed war many people were killed in air raids.

Eventually, four coding schemes for the analysis of the 'New Words' were established. No Reference, Culture Free Statements (NRCFS) did not express a particular culture; at least they were considered neutral or thought to be potentially used by speakers of different cultures. No Reference, Culture Specific Statements (NRCSS) bore special cultural references but their references remained hidden to the students. Sentences with Culture General References

(SCGR) included certain names and references but their usage were not merely peculiar or limited to those references. Sentences with Culture Specific References (SCSR) dealt with known groups and normally specified cultural reference about their references.

In order to make the classification and the discussions easier, the categories were labeled as A (NRCFS), B (NRCSS), C (SCGR) and D (SCSR).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. New Words

The New Words were contextualized by about 1749 sentences. As the data show, about twenty nine percent of sentences were found to be statements with *culture specific reference*. About nine percent was related to sentences with *culture general reference*. So, about forty percent was culturally loaded. Six hundred seventy three sentences were found to have *no reference, culture specific statements (NRCSS)*. So, most of the sentences refer to the second category (NRCSS). About twenty four percent were sentences with *no reference culture free statements*.

It is completely different from what Falsgraf (1994) found that metacultural and metalinguistic instruction is not necessary at the early age since teaching through language provides sufficient input for the acquisition of implicit culture, but you observe that in Book One there is the highest percentage of culturally loaded sentences.

Data collected and represented through tables showed that in Advanced one and two the focus was on sentences with *culture specific references*. In the third and fourth books the focus was on sentences with *no reference culture specific* background. The fewest sentences referred to the third category or sentences with *culture general references*.

Figure C-1 to C-5 Representation of the type of sentences in 'New words' section Of Advanced Books.

Figure C. 1. New words in Book one

Figure C. 2. New words in Book Two

Figure C. 3. New words in Book Three

Figure C. 4. New words in Book four

Figure C. 5. New words in all four Books

The results show that in Advanced One and Two most of the sentences are *no reference culture free statements*. But in Advanced Three and Four most of the sentences are *no reference culture specific statements*. There are 1749 sentences in all these books, 420 sentences are *no references culture free statements*, 673 sentences are *no reference culture specific statements*, 155 sentences have *culture general references*, 501 sentences have *culture specific references*.

B. Reading

The results of analysis of reading passages of ILI advanced textbooks are shown in Table 4.3.

TABLE 4.2.1
RESULTS OF 'READING' ANALYSIS

Lessons	Title	Reference							
		H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Lesson1	Clothing and image								
Lesson2	Names and signs								
Lesson3	Friendship								
Lesson4	Jobs								
Lesson5	Superstitions								
Lesson6	Schooling								
Lesson7	Man and animal								
Lesson8	Shopping								
Lessons	Book2	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Lesson1	Personal traits								
Lesson2	Man and adaptation								
Lesson3	Stress								
Lesson4	Different kids								
Lesson5	Cultural misunderstandings								
Lesson6	Stay tuned up								
Lesson7	Keep your distance								
Lesson8	TV and children								
Lessons	Book3	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Lesson1	Calm down								
Lesson2	Cultural differences								
Lesson3	Overcoming shyness								
Lesson4	Watch what you eat								
Lesson5	Poor animals								
Lesson6	From one world to another								
Lesson7	Family								
Lesson8	Caring parents								
Lessons	Book4	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Lesson1	Maintaining cultural identity								
Lesson2	In the nick of time								
Lesson3	Managers and employees								
Lesson4	A matter of life and death								
Lesson5	Intelligence								
Lesson6	Making a difference								
Lesson7	For god`s sake								
lesson8	Appreciating life								

In this table, the title of passages and related categories are shown by filled cells. For example, the title of *lesson one* reading in *advanced one* is *clothing and image* and this passage was about *English speaking countries* (category H in Ramirez and Hall's categorization).

There were 32 reading passages in the four textbooks. Based on the coding scheme explained each lesson has been classified into one of the eight categories. About forty seven percent (15) of the passages referred to general texts such as science, biographies, historical events, and life stories with focus on the introduction of a scientist, a world figure or a man of will. About nineteen percent (6) of the text were passages with reference to cross-national comparison. And again 19 percent (6) referred to English speaking countries. Nine percent (3) referred to passages whose identity had been left out. Six percent (2) referred to passages with reference to Islam and Islamic countries. The following chart shows the variety of text more clearly.

The results of this research are different from those of Aliakbari (2002) in which he could not find more than two main categories. So, these books did not show a good variety(two out of eight) and the results of Ramirez and Hall's study on high school books were not so significant, but these books showed a good variety (five out of eight categories). There was no passage with reference to non-English countries, with reference to eastern countries or with reference to Iran.

Figure C. 6. Representation of the cultural references in reading sections of ILI textbooks.

The data collected for the categorization of the 'Reading' passages were represented in figure C-6. The height of the bars signified the frequency of the text in each category.

In sum, the result of these analyses is as follows:

1. The results of the study signify that Advanced textbooks in use in Iran Language Institute proved helpful in developing intercultural understanding. There was no evidence that the books deliberately distract attention from culture or cultural points. The data showed that the cultural content in both the 'New Words' and 'Reading' comprehension sections are available.
2. Another major finding with the Advanced textbooks was a large number of topics (about 47 percent) on science and the related fields. The instructional goals of the text were not found deliberately focused and narrow. There were almost a few texts with reference to other fields such as literature or art.
3. Reading passages with omitted identity were not so much to consider them as another disadvantage of the textbooks.
4. In these books passages with reference to English speaking countries, cross-national comparison, Islam or Islamic traditions, and general texts could be found.
5. The study found that the texts were good enough not only in the depth of cultural information but also in the range of the cultures depicted. Of course, it doesn't mean that they were perfect. More than forty four per cent of passages were about English countries.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the place of culture at Advanced levels of ILI textbooks. In particular, two kernel parts of these books were examined. According to the results the answers to research questions are available:

1-Whose cultures are represented in ILI Advanced textbooks?

a) In Advanced one and two the focus was on sentences with culture specific references and in Advanced three and four the focus was on sentences with no reference culture specific background. Half of the texts are general texts related to science, biographies. The rest of the texts are related to the culture of English speaking countries and Islamic culture.

2-To what that specific culture is represented?

b) Half of the texts is general texts related to science, biographies. Nineteen per cent is related to passages whose identity had been left out; seven per cent of the texts is related to Islam and Islamic culture.

3-Do the textbooks have enough variety in presenting culture?

c) According to Ramirez and Hall (1990), there were eight categories to consider passages and there were five out of eight in Advanced books; so, there was a good variety in these texts.

Texts could be much better if there were more culturally loaded texts for example: texts with reference to non-English speaking western countries, or eastern countries especially Iran. The study found that texts were good enough not only in depth of cultural information but also in the range of cultures depicted.

The results also showed that in Advanced One and Two most of the sentences were *no reference culture free statements*. But in Advanced Three and Four most of the sentences were *no reference culture specific statements*. There were 1749 sentences in all these books, 420 sentences were *no references culture*.

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