

Cultural categories in three mainstream EFL textbooks in Iran: A case study of Top Notch, American English Files, and Four Corners

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Abstract

Cultural content and developing learners' intercultural competence has become an important issue after the advent of intercultural communicative approach (ICC) in language teaching field. Therefore, the cultural content of EFL textbooks as learners' main source for language learning is an important issue for investigation. The current study analyzed cultural content of three mainstream intermediate level EFL textbooks, namely Top Notch (volume 2), American English Files (volume 3) and Four Corners (Volume 2). This study analyzed the cultural categories which included target culture, source culture and international culture based on Coratzzzi and Jin's (1999) categorization as well as the category introduced by Aliakbari (2004), culture free to complement these three. This was a quantitative study. The quantitative data focused on an account of the amount (percentage and frequency) of the cultural content treatment in the textbooks. To find out if the difference between cultural categories was statistically significant or not, chi-square test was applied. The result of the study showed statistically no significant difference among the three books in terms of their cultural categories.

Keywords: intercultural competence; culture learning; source culture; target culture; international culture; culture free; content analysis

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1. Introduction

To master a language, one must be completely familiar with its culture since the language is used in a particular cultural context. As identified by *Standards of Foreign Language Learning*, culture is one of the five main chief areas that needs to be addressed in English language teaching (ELT) and should be inserted in all language curriculums (Bateman & Mattos, 2006). Brown (1986) asserts that cultural competence can improve linguistic competence. Therefore, another point regarding the close relation between language and culture is that cultural knowledge affects linguistic knowledge and vice versa. According to Mitchell and Myles (2004), language and culture are inseparable and acquiring one will help acquiring the other. However, this has led to some debate over which culture should be more focused: the target culture, the source culture, or both.

Some believe that the target culture needs to be highlighted, others insist on the source culture and still there are others who think both cultures need to be emphasized while acquiring a new language. For instance, Stewart (1972) asserts that the target culture is an indispensable part of foreign language instruction, while the local culture reference in language teaching is absurd. Méndez García (2005) proposes that familiarizing language learners with the target language culture has five main advantages: (1) it enhances learners' knowledge of world and foreign society, (2) culture learning acquaints learners with prominent behavior related patterns of target community, (3) it fosters their respect and tolerance attitude, (4) it promotes ones' concept of his/her culture, (5) it highlights ones' cultural assumption role or increases one's intercultural communication competence. However, there are some other scholars who emphasize on both target and source cultures, hence focusing on the intercultural competence. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) maintain that language learners shall associate their language use with behaviors that are culturally appropriate in order to be successful in communication. Thus, acquiring the intercultural competence in language learning and instruction is an important competence in today's world, which results from the interaction between different cultures (Dervin, 2010). In this regard, Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010, p. 16) state that intercultural competence is "one's awareness of others' cultures as well as his /her own culture". So, giving reference to both target and source cultures is necessary. In the same vein, Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) also refer to intercultural understanding as the ability to comprehend both target language culture and one's own culture. Then, Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFLs) are of no exceptions and have to acquire and be exposed to both cultures.

What is worth mentioning here, the crucial role textbooks play in a language teaching classroom and recognition of their role as culture transferors. Cortazzi and Jin (1999, p. 7) maintain that the textbook "can be a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, and an ideology." Teachers' use of textbooks is to plan and teach lessons while students' reliance on it is for its linguistic models and content (Cunningsworth, 1995). Since there is an abundance of ELT materials available in the market and new commercially textbooks are produced per year, it is necessary to choose a textbook which can enhance learners' intercultural competence which results in efficient intercultural communicative competence.

1.1 Statement of the problem

There are some shortcomings in most textbooks to establish the niche of cultural contents in language education textbooks as learners' and teachers' reliable source in language classroom. One problem of usual EFL texts is their inadequacy in providing real and unrestricted cultural information (Widdowson, 2005). However, most experts believe that a great number of ELT materials are published in English speaking countries, so the books' cultural contents refer to English countries and culture specific perspectives' standards of target language affects the kind of English taught in class (Modiano, 2001; Phillipson, 1992). Furthermore, although

cultural-content analysis of EFL textbooks is a fertile ground for research, there has been scarce research on EFL textbooks that are widely in use in Iran. Introducing models for such an analysis Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) have contributed greatly to such analysis.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Given the intertwined relation between language and culture, as well as the role of EFL textbooks as carriers of cultural values which is referred to as "hidden curriculum" (Cunningsworth, 1995; Hinkel, 1999), the main purpose of this study is to explore cultural content of some EFL textbooks based on Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) classification of cultural content. So, to answer the problems introduced above, this study has explored the cultural content of three mainstream EFL textbooks in Iran, namely Top Notch, Four Corners and English Files based on the introduced cultural content classification.

1.3 Research Questions

For the above mentioned objective, this study tries to address the following research questions:

- Which categories of culture in terms of Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) classification, are highlighted in the chosen textbooks?
- Is there any significant difference among the textbooks in terms of the highlighted cultural categories?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study would be of value to EFL teachers and institutions. The result of this study can provide them with a good deal of information about one of the main criteria of choosing a good textbook, that is, the inclusion of cultural content in the curriculum. Findings of this study also inform teachers, institutions and students of the most successful textbook in terms of portraying the target culture and source culture; that is to say, to show which is more useful for familiarizing learners with target culture as one of the main aspects of developing intercultural competence and therefore making them better communicators.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the cultural content, different EFL/ESL textbooks represent culture in various manners. Cortazzi and Jin (1991) categorize EFL textbooks to three types depending on their treatment of culture. These categories include: source, target and international. Respectively, the first type is produced at national level, that is learners learn to talk about their own culture (C1) to visitors and they are not made ready for encountering other cultures' speakers so they do not develop intercultural awareness. The second type is target textbooks whose focal point is on target culture of countries such as the United Kingdom and United states. These kinds of textbooks are usually criticized for their commercial nature (Garrido, n. d.). The last type, international textbooks, includes a vast range of cultures from countries whose language is English to countries where English is used as an international language. Aliakbari (2004) added another type to these which refers to textbooks with neutral cultural materials; these textbooks usually deal with school or university subject through the use of target language.

Many studies in literature have tried to address the cultural content of ELT textbooks. Kawano (1987) analyzed cultural content in 10 senior high school English textbooks which were published in Japan. Findings of the analysis showed inadequacy of textbooks to raise students' cultural awareness. The analysis showed national and ethnic bias in the textbook as white Americans were dominant groups and presented as wealthy, clever, and sharp people. Researcher believed that this bias may prevent students from improving intercultural awareness. In accordance with this study, Sukarni (2003) mentioned in her study that intercultural considerations are important to be included in ELT materials. She maintains that textbooks should consider learners' context of environment,

culture and society as well as target language culture. In this way, students are encouraged to use target language in real life experiences and become aware of cultural diversity. Furthermore, students learn to respect and appreciate others' culture as well.

In the context of Iran, Ziaei (2012) examined cross-cultural issues in four levels of American English files textbooks. The purpose of the study was to determine the scope of global English consideration in them. The outcome of the study showed frequent reference to UK and USA in the reading texts. However, there was no reference to Iran and among Asian countries Japan was the most frequent mentioned one.

In another investigation, Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) examined four English textbooks namely Interchange, Headways, Top Notch and On Your Mark which are used in Iran, to detect their cultural dimension. In this study, an examination on the textbooks was carried out based on the cultural dimensions adopted from Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990). The result of the study revealed that the cultural focal point of the textbooks is "localized culture". In harmony with this, cultural presentation and tendency of these books toward the source cultures include direct and explicit integration of local culture such as some texts explaining about local dance and festivals. Intercultural behavior is introduced and there are some examples of western and target language culture comparison in these textbooks. However, their English language is English as an international language (EIL) which describes local culture and values of other universal speakers as well. So, generally the result of the study showed that culture integration is advantageous to language proficiency and the Iranian ELT ideology can be traced in cultural occurrences in these textbooks.

Despite the number of studies which addressed the issue of culture in ELT textbooks, to the best of researchers knowledge none of have yet thoroughly examined EFL textbooks cultural content regarding their inclusion of source, target and international content. Since the inclusion of these aspects of culture and how they are dealt with in the content of the text can have great impact on student's intercultural competence, there is an important urge to conduct this study. So, since three of the main ELT textbooks used, particularly in Iran are American English Files, Top Notch and Four Corners analysis, these books were examined to find out their treatment of source, target, international culture and also culture free, a new category proposed by (Aliakbari, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1 Materials of the Study

A content analysis was carried out on three prominent and in use EFL textbooks in Iran in order to explore the nature and categories of the cultural content presentation in the textbooks. The materials of the present study were intermediate levels of three popular and in use series of English textbooks entitled Top Notch, Four Corners and American English Files. In this study, dialogues, pictures and activities presented in each unit of the books were analyzed based on the little "c" and big "C" types of culture.

These three aspects are defined as follow:

- **Pictures (P):** all the photographs and images included in each unit.
- **Dialogues (D):** conversations and interactions of each unit as a real life situation communication. Since there is no conversation or dialogue section in American English Files book, the reading sections will be examined instead (some of the readings, are in the form of conversation or interview).
- **Activities (A):** speaking and discussion tasks which are incorporated to enhance learners' communication abilities.

3.2 Data Collections Procedure

The criteria used for cultural content in this study were categorized in terms of target culture, source culture, international culture based on Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) classification and culture free proposed by Aliakbari (2005). Moreover, for each category, pictures, dialogues and activities included in each unit were considered. The purpose of this kind of categorization was to provide a comprehensive picture of how culture was portrayed in each textbook. After making an approximate prediction in phase one, the investigator carried out the second phase to examine main ideas of dialogues, activities and pictures. Then she coded them with the categories of culture.

3.3 Data Analysis

In order to answer the two posed research questions, the data was obtained from the textbooks analysis based on the categorization of cultural content into source culture, target culture, international culture and free culture. It was further quantified using frequency and percentages. Quantitative data focus on an account of the amount (percentage and frequency) of the cultural content treatment in the textbooks. To find out if the difference among the three textbooks in terms of these cultural categories was statistically significant or not, chi-square test was run.

4. Results

Answers to the first and second research questions were derived from data analysis. Data analysis was based on the percentage and frequency of occurrence of four categories of culture (target culture, source culture, international culture and culture free) in the textbook analysis. The distribution and percentage of these four categories of culture in each unit of the three textbooks are presented in this section.

The results of the analysis on the "pictures", "dialogues" and "activities" in Four Corners, volume 3 are presented in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1

Percentage and Frequency of Cultural Contents

	Target Culture	Source Culture	International Culture	Culture Free	Total
Pictures	9 45%	0 0%	10 50%	1 5%	20 100.0%
Dialogues	23 100%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	23 100.0%
Activities	0 0%	24 100%	0 0%	0 0%	24 100.0%
Total	32 47.8%	24 35.8%	10 14.9%	1 1.5%	67 100.0%

The data shown in Table 4.1 demonstrates that in the book Four Corners, Volume 3 the international culture content occurred in 10 pictures, comprising 50 percent and gaining significantly higher frequency than those aiming at presenting the target culture (45%), source culture (0%) and culture free (5%). In dialogues, cultural categories are limited to the target culture (100%) and in speaking activities by the source culture (100%).

To explore further, Table 4.2 indicates the distribution and percentage of cultural contents in Four Corners, volume 3. As shown in Table 4.2, the frequency of the target culture (47.8%) is more than that of other categories of culture, followed by the source culture (35.7%), international culture (14.9%) and free culture (1.5%), respectively. This signifies that target culture has been highlighted over other categories of culture.

Table 4.2*Distribution and Percentage of Cultural Contents in the Cultural Category Four Corners, Volume 3*

Culture	Frequency	Percent
Target	32	47.8
Source	24	35.7
International	10	14.9
Free	1	1.5
Total	67	100

The results of the analysis on the “pictures”, “dialogues” and “activities” in American English Files (volume 3) are presented in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3*Percentage and Frequency of Cultural Contents*

	Target Culture	Source Culture	International Culture	Total
Pictures	7 33.3%	0 0%	14 66.7%	21 100.0%
Dialogues	12 57.1%	3 14.3%	6 28.6%	21 100.0%
Activities	0 0%	18 100%	0 0%	18 100.0%
Total	19 31.7%	21 35.0%	20 33.3%	60 100.0%

The data demonstrated in Table 4.3 indicate that international culture has occurred in 14 pictures and occupied 66.7 % and gained higher frequency than the target culture (33.3%) and source culture (0%) in American English Files (volume3). In dialogues, cultural contents are mostly occupied by the target culture (57.1%) and in activities completely by source culture (100%). No free culture content has been found in this book.

For further investigation of cultural categories, Table 4.4 shows the distribution and percentage of cultural categories in American English Files, volume 3.

Table 4.4*Distribution and Percentage of Cultural Contents in the Cultural Categories in American English Files*

Culture	Frequency	Percent
Target	19	31.7
Source	21	35.0
International	20	33.3
Total	67	100

Table 4.4 demonstrates the percentage and frequency of cultural categories in American English Files volume 3. The obtained data reveal that the source culture with 35% has gained higher frequency than the international culture (33.3%) and target culture (31.7%), respectively.

Table 4.5 shows a detailed distribution and percentage of cultural contents in “pictures”, “dialogues” and “activities” in terms of categories of culture in Top Notch (volume 2). In this book, the international culture occupied 62.5% of pictures and gained higher frequency than the target culture (25%), free culture (12.5%) and source culture (0%). In dialogues, the cultural content is mainly restricted to the target culture (81.8%) and in activities, it is completely occupied by the source culture (100%). For further exploration, Table 4.6 shows the distribution and percentages of cultural categories in Top Notch (volume 2).

Table 4.5*Percentage and Frequency of Cultural Contents*

	Target Culture	Source Culture	International Culture	Free Culture	Total
Pictures	4 25%	0 0%	10 62.5%	2 12.5%	21 100.0%
Dialogues	18 81.8%	0 0%	4 18.2%	0 0%	21 100.0%
Activities	0 0%	20 100%	0 0%	0 0%	18 100.0%
Total	22 37.9%	20 34.5%	14 24.1%	2 3.4%	60 100.0%

Table 4.6*Distribution and Percentage of Cultural Contents in the Cultural Categories in Top Notch, Volume 2*

Culture	Frequency	Percent
Target	22	37.9
Source	20	34.5
International	14	24.1
Free	2	3.4
Total	58	100

The data shown in Table 4.6 demonstrate that the target culture (37.9%) has gained higher frequency than the source culture (34.5%), international culture (24.1%) and free culture (3.4%), respectively.

To find out the difference among three textbooks chi-square was run. Table 4.7 shows comparison of cultural categories among the three books using chi-square test. The data reveal that there is no statistically significant difference among the three books in terms of their cultural categories.

Table 4.7*The Comparison of Cultural Categories among the Three Books*

		Target	Source	International	Free	Total
Books	Four Corners	32 47.8%	24 35.8%	10 14.9%	1 1.5%	67 100.0%
	American English Files	19 31.7%	21 35.0%	20 33.3%	0 0%	60 100.0%
	Top Notch	22 37.9%	20 34.5%	14 24.1%	2 3.4%	58 100.0%
	Total	73 39.5%	65 35.1%	44 23.8%	3 1.6%	185 100.0%
	<i>Pearson Chi-Square: 8.832</i>		<i>df: 6</i>	<i>sig: .183</i>		

To conclude the above findings, in books Four Corners 3 and Top Notch 2, the target culture is highlighted over the other three categories of culture since it has gained the highest frequency. However, in American English files, source culture has gained the highest frequency, thus being more focused. Table 4.7 showed that there is no statistically significant difference among the three books under study in terms of cultural categories. Moreover, the cultural content presented in the chosen textbooks includes both the target culture and source culture. Therefore, they are basically designed with the aim of enhancing learners' intercultural competence.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study was set out with aim of assessing the cultural content of three in use English textbooks in Iran institutes in terms of target culture, source culture, international culture and culture free. The result of the study indicated that target culture is highlighted over the other categories of culture in Four Corners (volume3) and

Top Notch (volume 2). This finding is in agreement with Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2013), Herman and Noerkhasnah (2012), and Mahmood, Asghar & Hussain (2012) findings. Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2013) have reported that higher percentage of the content of EFL college English textbooks for Chinese non-English major students is devoted to the target culture. Herman and Noerkhasnah (2012) have concluded that in the data collected from textbooks “Grow with English”, the prominent focus is on the target culture. Mahmood, Asghar, and Hussain (2012), in their theory- based content analysis have found that the main focus of the EFL textbooks is on the non-native culture.

Nonetheless, in American English Files, the source culture has the highest frequency. The present study, however, has come up with results contradicting those of Ziaei (2012). The purpose of his study was to determine the scope of global consideration in four levels of American English Files textbooks. The findings of the study showed frequent reference to UK and USA in the reading texts, but no reference was given to Iran. However, it is worth noticing that the difference in the findings of this study might be due to the types of the data collected since this study was set out to analyze pictures, dialogues and speaking activities.

Corbett (2003) asserts that one of the main goals of language teaching is to enhance learners’ understanding and tolerance of two different cultures, i.e. source culture and target culture. With respect to the source culture and target culture, observed from the results of textbooks analysis, the source culture occurred 35.8% (in Four Corners), 35.0% (in American English Files) and 34.5% (in Top Notch). The source culture was mainly found in the speaking activities, i.e. there was almost no reference to the source culture in activities other than speaking activities. The target culture covered 47.8% (Four Corners), 31.7% (American English Files), and 37.9% (Top Notch). It almost always occurred in dialogues, followed by pictures; there was almost no reference given to the target culture in speaking activities. The international culture followed the target and source culture, with the frequency of 14.9% (Four Corners), 33.3% (American English Files) and 24.1% (Top Notch). The least frequency belonged to the free culture which is a neutral category: 1.5% (Four Corners), 0% (American English Files), and 3.4% (Top Notch). Totally, the highest frequency belonged to the target culture (39.5%), followed by the source culture (35.1%) and the international culture (23.8%), respectively. The least frequency was occupied by the free culture (1.6%).

Since the textbooks were chosen from intermediate levels, the target culture higher frequency is in consistent with Benahnia (2012) diagram. He believed that beginner EFL learners should be mostly exposed to their L1 or mother tongue culture, since it gives them self-confidence and ability to talk to others about their own culture. When learners improve in their FL (foreign language) learning, they should be exposed to a wider scope of the target culture which in turn gives learners the chance to become familiar with a wider range of the cultural elements in the target language. Furthermore, another positive effect of the inclusion of the target culture in cultural content is motivation. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Adaskou, et al. (1990), integration of cultural components in language teaching materials motivates learners.

The second research question of this study was whether the cultural content/ information presented in the chosen textbooks comprised both target and source cultures. The data shown in Table 4.6 demonstrated that the target culture (39.5%), source culture (35.1%), international culture (23.8%) and free culture (1.6%), respectively were present in all three books. So, the current study found that both target and source cultures were included in the three chosen textbooks. Table 4.7 showed the results of the comparison of cultural categories made among the three books using chi-square test. The analysis revealed that with chi square rate of 8.832 and significance of 0.138, there was no statistically significant difference among the three books in terms of their cultural categories.

This is in agreement with our earlier observations of the shift from traditional trends of EFL to intercultural. Kramersch (1993) states that inter-cultural competence refers to this idea that EFL learners must acquire the competent to understand both source and target cultures, i.e. their own culture, and foreign/ target culture. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) can be defined as the “ability to ensure a shared understanding

by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, p. 10). A language learner is considered as “intercultural speaker” (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 1998) when he/she obtains the competency to interpret values, behaviors and beliefs of their own and of speakers of the other culture with different language and cultural background (Byram, 2006). Hence, these books are designed to develop intercultural competent speakers since they include both target culture and source culture.

This study exhibits that both target and source cultures are present in the three textbooks and there is no statistically significant difference among the three books in terms of their cultural categories. Thus, Top Notch (volume 2), Four Corners (volume 3), English Files (volume 3) are suitable for developing an intercultural competent speaker. As Abdullah and Chandran (2009) put it, intercultural understanding is exposing learners to target culture, which is English and somewhat American, and also introducing their own culture to them.

Moreover, According to Allen (2008), as course books are the most frequent foreign language instruction materials, they can be of crucial help to learners to become more competent learners. The teaching texts in these materials can act as a guidance to learning process (Hasan & Raddatz, 2008), and hence fulfill the functions, claimed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999), of a teacher, map, resource, trainer and so on. Furthermore, Paige et al. (2003) maintain that literature present on curriculum materials and teaching approaches stresses heavily on the importance of textbook application in classrooms because other materials are more time consuming, less effective, and harder to use for teachers. Byram, Esarte-Sarries, Taylor, and Allatt (1991) also claim that the textbook in a language class is widely used as an instructional guide, which establishes the sequence and themes of the materials. Taken together, these findings suggest the strong role of textbooks in promoting an intercultural competence speaker.

5.1 Limitations and Suggestion for Further Study

This study was limited in several ways. First, the study used a convenient sample that could be manageable. Carrying out a cultural content on all the levels of the three series of text books could have provided more reliable results. Second, to find out whether the language learners are truly intercultural competent or not, relying merely on a cultural content analysis would not suffice. An experimental group test after at least one course instructing learners with the books would have resulted in better conclusion. Thus, it is recommended that further research be undertaken in the following areas:

- Further experimental investigations are needed to estimate intercultural competency of language learners who are instructed by each of the three books.
- Research is also needed to determine cultural content analysis of complete series of the three textbooks.

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