

Intercultural Communicative Competence in ELT Textbooks: The Case of Iranian High Schools

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ABSTRACT

The major aim of the current study was investigating the extent to which the content of ELT textbooks used in Iranian high schools boosts language learners' intercultural communicative competence. To this end, an in depth content analysis of *Vision 1*, *Vision 2*, and *Vision 3* were done based on Hillard's (2014) model in four phases. The results of statistical analysis indicated that the cultural topics covered in *Vision Series* were limited. Besides, most of the aural or written sentences and pictures were culture free. The textbooks contained no multicultural comparison and the authors used mono-perspective style in writing the texts, activities, dialogues, and exercises. Moreover, the series presented no information regarding historical backgrounds of the target culture. The findings of the study can be of great help for material developers and textbook writers. Also, the results make teachers and learners aware of the cultural content of the textbook.

INTRODUCTION

Considering a nearby association between language and culture, research indicates that achieving Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in ESL or EFL classrooms becomes a necessity (Gholami Pasand and Ghasemis, 2018). Dearsorff (2006, p. 248) regards ICC as a subcomponent of communicative competence, proposed by Hymes (1970), and defines it as learners' "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p.245). ICC refers to one's capabilities, information, and inspiration to communicate effectively and appropriately with interlocutors of different cultures through specific language (Wiseman, 2002).

The notion of culture directly goes to the heart of ICC. It helps to understand, interoperate, and negotiate meaning accurately in different cultural settings. Brown (1986) mentions that ICC has significant effect on other components of communicative competence, especially linguistic competence. Likewise, it is believed that ICC is indistinguishable from language proficiency (Mitchell and Myles, 2004) and learners with high ICC are aware of values of different cultures and tolerate the discrepancy between the native and target cultures (Byram, 1997).

On the other hand, textbook is considered as the main material for teaching ESL or EFL (Ahour et al., 2014; Ko-

bia, 2009; Nunan, 1988). Ahour et al. (2014) argue that it is one of the main sources of linguistic and cultural information. Moreover, it has an unquestioned role in constructing learners' point of view (Kobia, 2009), and is regarded "as resource books rather than course books" (Richards, 1993, p. 49). Besides, in EFL settings, like Iran, textbooks have a crucial role in making language learners aware of cultural differences because of limited opportunities to communicate with native English speakers in real contexts (Roohani and Molana, 2013; Soleimani and Dabbaghi, 2012).

Every year numerous ELT textbooks are published. Therefore, instructors are provided with lots of opportunities for selecting the appropriate ones. The significant point is selecting a book that can boost learners' linguistic knowledge as well as their ICC so that they gain the capabilities to communicate effectively with speakers with different cultures. The ELT textbooks that are used in Iranian high schools are designed, reviewed, edited, and published under the authority of specialists or teachers of Ministry of Education. So, EFL teachers in Iran are supposed to teach a predetermined book for each specific level.

This issue highlights the role of textbook analysis from different perspectives specially ICC. Some studies have been conducted to investigate teachers' perspective towards ICC (Valdes, 1990; Young and Sachdev, 2011) and students' intercultural sensitivity (Pourakbari and Chalak, 2015). Likewise, a few studies have been conducted to investigate

cultural content of EFL textbooks that were published by well-known publisher such as Oxford University Press or Cambridge University Press (Andarab, 2014; Hamiloglu and Mendi, 2010; Tozun, 2012) or textbooks that are used in private language institutes (Edalati-Kian, 2016). On the other side, most of these studies focused on native or target language cultural points (Gholami Pasand and Ghasemi, 2018) and most of them did not provide any suggestions (activities or tasks) regarding the improvement of language learners' ICC. Accordingly, this study was set out to fill these gaps and recommend productive suggestions for improving learners' ICC. Therefore, this study tries to answer the following research questions.

1. Which cultural topics are presented in *Vision Series*?
2. Can *Vision Series* boost EFL learners' ICC?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, culture is regarded as an integral part of language (Yildiz and Ortactepe, 2015). In fact, progressing in another language requires communicator sensitivity of the cultural values in different settings (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). Defining culture as "patterns of behavior and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create, and share" Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, p. 25) put forth that "people's culture includes their beliefs, rules of behavior, language, rituals, art, technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems".

McKay (2002) asserts that language learning and teaching is influenced by cultural points both semantically and academically. In other words, culture has direct effects on the selection of words or structures and accurate and meaningful use of language in different sociocultural settings. Therefore, one should welcome the presentation of target or native language cultural values in course-books.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Plainly, linguistic knowledge is necessary but not enough for meaningful interactions in diverse multicultural settings. The appropriate feedbacks towards or accurate interpretations of co-communicators' utterances in different social contexts require additional knowledge. In addition to linguistic knowledge two other variables are associated with effective communication. One of them is learners' cultural and behavioral comprehension and the other one is students' ICC (Lee, 2009).

Fantini (2000, p. 1) defines ICC as "the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself". ICC refers to as a set of abilities, practices, and information needed to communicate ideas, intentions, or feelings with individuals from different cultures (Barret, 2011). The following example is adapted from Troncoso (2010, p. 84) for clarifying the specific role of ICC in communication:

Two Iranian girls were talking in a classroom (in a university in England). A few minutes later a Venezuelan boy entered. Since he knew one of them, he welcomed them in

a very friendly way. "The girl introduced her friend to him and the guy gave her a kiss on her cheek". "The girl left them and ran out".

Troncoso (2010) concludes that the reason of such misinterpretation of others' behavior is lack of cultural knowledge regarding greeting in other cultures. Likewise, Quappe and Cantatore (2007) note that when two interlocutors with different cultures communicate, they interpret the utterances in different ways. Therefore, giving a kiss on somebody cheek that is considered an appropriate behavior in Venezuelan culture is not acceptable in Iranian culture. Consequently, it can be claimed that ICC prevent misunderstanding.

ICC Models

ICC enables language learners to convey their intentions appropriately and make sense of others' articulations and behaviors accurately in different sociocultural settings. It also enables language learners to develop multiple perspective concerning specific subjects (Georgiou, 2011). In the same way, a review of related literature indicates that different models are presented for ICC.

Fantini's (2012) model of ICC includes five categories. Fantini (2012) listed the subcomponents of ICC as personality traits, linguistic knowledge, attitude and feeling, knowledge of diverse cultural values, and tendency to collaborate or communicate with target language speakers. In her framework of ICC, Dearsdorff (2006) put much emphasize on internal and external consequences of ICC. The former refers to students' tolerance of ambiguity and discrepancy (between the native and target culture) and the latter refers to the manifestation of the internal outcome in real communication in multicultural situations (Dearsdorff, 2006). This model is cyclical; "just as changed attitudes, knowledge, and skills can improve interaction, so good interaction can also positively affect attitudes, knowledge, and skills" (Mason and Suri, 2012, p. 69).

In another conclusive model, Byram (1997) proposes six components for ICC. These components are "knowledge", "attitudes", "skills", "skills of discovery", "skills of interaction", and "critical cultural awareness" (Byram, 1997, p. 31).

1. *Knowledge*: one's geographical, sociocultural, and historical information of both native and target language culture (Byram, 1997, Osman, 2015).
2. *Attitudes*: willingness to interact with target language people, to seek more information about others culture, and willingness to acculturation (Osman, 2015).
3. *Skills*: the capability to make a comparison between the learner's culture and the intended ones (Byram, 1997).
4. *Skills of discovery*: learners' potential to gain new information about co-communicators culture
5. *Skills of interaction*: interlocutors' abilities to implement their knowledge in actual interactions
6. *Critical cultural awareness*: the ability to think critically about "practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53)

Byram (1997) announced that language course-books should play a significant role in making learners aware of the target language culture. Romanowski (2017) added that

ICC is one of the main parts of every language classroom and we cannot separate it from teaching EFL or ESL. Nowadays, language teaching materials have undeniable socio-cultural effects concerning making students mindful of the significance of interaction in multicultural settings as well as in advancing the possibility of shared comprehension, resistance, and regard towards contrast in various multicultural situations (Troncoso, 2012).

Hamiloglu and Mendi (2010) analyzed the contents of five EFL books distributed by understood distributing houses like Longman. Their findings showed that there was no link between intercultural components and their production date. Edalati-Kian (2016) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the degree to which the contents of the books that are designed for teaching English in private institutes boost EFL' ICC. The findings indicated that these books put little emphasis on enhancing students' ICC. Moreover, her results showed that the books put unequal emphasize on the different subcomponents of ICC. In a similar study, Lee (2009) analyzed the contents of Korean conversation textbooks concerning their ICC. The results indicated that the Korean high school textbooks do not pay sufficient attention to target language culture or boost learners' ICC.

A conclusive review of related literature showed that some studies have been conducted to examine the cultural contents of EFL textbooks. However, most of them focused on the books that were published by well-known publishers or the books that were used in private institutes. Therefore, the current study was designed to analyze the contents of three books, namely *Vision 1*, *Vision 2*, and *Vision 3* that are used in Iranian high schools.

METHODS

Materials

A content analysis was done on three textbooks that are used in Iranian high schools. The books were recently distributed series entitled *Vision*. The Ministry of Education designed the *Vision Series* for Grades 10 (*Vision 1*), 11 (*Vision 2*), and 12 (*Vision 3*). *Vision 1* consists of four lessons. Each lesson has different parts like "get ready", "conversation", "new words and expressions", "reading", "grammar", "listening and speaking", "pronunciation", "writing", and a review exercises. Moreover, *Vision 1* has a work book that includes exercises like fill in the blank, matching, true-false items, and reading comprehension questions. The structure of *Vision 2* is just like *Vision 1* but *Vision 2* has fewer lessons (three lessons). Like the other books of this series, *Vision 3* focuses on four main skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in each lesson. It consists of three lessons. Each lesson presents different lexical and grammatical points. The idea behind publishing *Vision Series* is the development of learners' communicative competence.

Instruments

Hillard's (2014) model was used to analyze the content of the books. This model includes previously proposed models

by Gray (2010), Risager (1991), and Sercu (2010). It helps to analyze the pictures, subjects, conversations, and cultural viewpoints. It should be noted that in this study conversations, reading, speaking tasks, grammar sections, and pictures were analyzed. The framework consists of four main parts. The first part deals with the cultural topics. The second part focuses on international and intercultural issues and tries to compare cultures or deal with stereotypes. The third part presents the point of view of the author(s) and the last part focuses on cultural dimensions from micro and macro levels.

Procedure

The content analysis of each book was done separately. Each book was reviewed four times in order to deal with all of the subcomponents of the framework. First, the researchers tried to induced the topics presented in each lesson of the book, coded them, and numbered their frequencies. Then, the comparison between cultures that were presented in the book was calculated. After that, textbook authors' perspectives perspective was investigated and finally different cultures, countries, characters, social life, economical statues, or political issues were addressed. The results of content analysis of each book were coded. Their frequencies were calculated and were presented separately.

RESULTS

This study was set out with the intent of investigating the cultural points presented in the language textbooks used in Iranian high schools. Besides, the capability of such books in developing learners' ICC was examined. The collected data after coding and calculating were presented in separate charts for further analysis. The results of each research question will be discussed in depth. The first research question addressed the dimensions of ICC that were presented in the books. The results of data analysis are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 indicates that *Vision 1* consists of 57.28 pictures, sentences, or utterances that have no native or target language cultural information. Such pictures or sentences that were not uttered from the perspective of target or native language cultural point of view. These numbers for *Vision 2* and *Vision 3* were 61.40 and 52.40, respectively. On the other hand 28.14 of *Vision 1*'s statements and pictures were presented from native culture perspectives or has Persian names as their subject or object and 10.05 of such pictures or utterances were belonged to target culture. Concerning *Vision 2* and *Vision 3* these numbers were 32.20, 1.16 and 32.08, 9.62 respectively.

Table 1. Percentages of dimensions of ICC presented in *Visions 1-3*

Book	Source culture	Target culture	International culture	Culture free/ General reference
<i>Vision 1</i>	28.14	10.05	4.52	57.28
<i>Vision 2</i>	32.20	1.16	4.09	61.40
<i>Vision 3</i>	32.08	9.62	5.88	52.40

An interesting point to be mention here is that more than 95 percent of the ratio of target language cultural information was depicted in sentences that were designed to teach grammatical points or new words. Some examples of such sentences in *Vision 3* are presented below:

1. George wasn't hungry, was he?
2. The book was boring, but Tom had to read it
3. Joseph is very busy today. He cannot watch TV
4. I like learning Chinese

The cultural topics and their frequencies are presented in separate tables for each book.

It should be noted that some of the topics that were mentioned in Hall's (2002) and Sercu's (2010) models were not addressed in *Vision 1*, such as community, health/welfare, transportation, history, body/fashion, commence/economy, etc. likewise, the number of cultural topics that were mentioned in *Vision 1* were very limited.

Table 2. Frequency of cultural topics in *Vision 1*

Cultural topics	Frequency
Travel	7
Education	1
The workplace/ occupation	2
Current events	1
Religion	7
Arts/humanities	2
Politics/charities/world organization	3
Geography	21
Culture	5
Science/animals	14
Food/drink	1
Other	

Table 3. Frequency of cultural topics in *Vision 2*

Cultural topics	Frequency
Personal life/identity	2
Sports	3
Health/welfare	4
Education	8
The workplace/ occupation	2
Religion	2
Arts/humanities	11
Politics/charities/world organization	2
Leisure/ hobbies	1
Geography	8
Media/communication	1
Culture	1
Science/animals	1
Food/drink	5
Other	4

As Table 3 shows, *Vision 2* addressed more cultural topics. However, this book did not include topics such as body/fashion, history, transportation, community, and family/family life.

As Table 4 indicates, like the other two books, the range of cultural topics in *Vision 3* was limited and it did not mention issues like personal life/identity, travel, the workplace/ occupation, and current events.

Moreover, some topics are common among three books. The interesting points about interactions and contexts of interactions are that most of the interactions were boy-man, girl-man, girl-girl, and girl-woman. No sample of boy-girl or man-woman interactions was observed. Moreover, the situations of interactions were limited to the Iranian or Islamic cultures. Regarding national ceremonies just the name of Norooz was mentioned in examples, without any specific information. Most of the pictures and sentences in these books were culture free with no specific cultural references.

Geography and science/animals were topics that received most attention in the books. The names of different Iranian cities, Shiraz, Meibod, Varamin, Bam, Mashhad, Qom, Marivan, etc., and places, Milad Tower, Golestan Forest, Damavand, Gahar Lake, etc. were used in the books. For the target cultures the authors used the name of different countries such as Africa, Australia, Brazil, Chinese, Italy, Spain, and France. It should be mentioned that the names of such countries were used only to introduce different nationalities and nothing more.

Vision 1 includes brief information about Iranian scientists or poets like Tahereh Saffarzadeh, Mohammad Gharib, and Ghiyath al-Din Jamshid Kashani. It also talks briefly about Alexander Fleming and Edison. The authors used Persian names (Mohammad, Babak, Maysam, Saeed, Farzaneh, Behzad, Reza, Mehdi, and so on) and a few international names (Nancy, Diego, Susan, Carlos, and Margaret) in the three books.

The findings were not in the same line with the findings of Dehbozorgi et al. (2017). Their findings of the content analysis of *American English Files Series* showed that the

Table 4. Frequency of cultural topics in *Vision 3*

Cultural topics	Frequency
Family/family life	1
Community	1
Sports	2
Health/welfare	4
Education	4
Arts/humanities	2
Politics/charities/world organization	1
Environment	7
Geography	8
Culture	6
Science/animals	3
Food/drink	1
Other	1

books contain lots of references to the UK and USA cultures, without any references to the Iranian cultures. Moreover, the results contradict the findings of Herman and Noerkhasnah (2012). They analyzed the contents of *Grow with English* textbooks. Likewise, Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2013) found that *Chinese English textbooks* present more target language cultural viewpoints than Chinese culture.

The second research question focused on Vision Series' capability in boosting learners' ICC. The results of statistical analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that the books provide little or no information about socio-political problems. On the other hand, the percentage of social facts about contemporary society and historical background are limited to .03-.05 percent.

According to Table 6, *Vision 1* and *2* provide no information concerning intercultural situations, comparison between cultures, or stereotype. *Vision 3* merely provides a comparison between two cultures in the case of proverbs. Some examples are provided in Table 7:

Table 5. Macro-level analysis (Percentage)

Book	Broad social facts about contemporary society (geographical, economic, political, etc.)	Broad socio-political problems	Historical background
<i>Vision 1</i>	.05	0	0
<i>Vision 2</i>	.04	0	0
<i>Vision 3</i>	.03	0	.05

Table 6. International and intercultural issues (Percentage)

Book	Comparison between cultures	Intercultural situations	Image, stereotype, etc.
<i>Vision 1</i>	0	0	0
<i>Vision 2</i>	0	0	0
<i>Vision 3</i>	.04	0	0

Table 7. Persian-English proverbs

Source culture	Target culture
از تو حرکت از خدا برکت	God helps those who help themselves
سحر خیز باش تا کام روا باشی	The early bird catches the worm
درب یم داب ار مدر و آ داب	Easy come easy go

**Vision 3*, pp. 83-4

Table 8. Point of view of authors

Book	Mono-perspective	Multi-perspective
<i>Vision 1</i>	✓	✗
<i>Vision 2</i>	✓	✗
<i>Vision 3</i>	✓	✗

✓ indicates the existence of each perspective

✗ indicates the nonexistence of each perspective

Table 8 presents the points of view of the authors. Mo-no-perspective method was implemented in writing the three books. All over the textbooks, the pictures or names of different cities in Iran were mentioned. Moreover, various Iranian sceneries or places to visit were presented in aural or written forms in the textbooks.

On the other hand, most of the exercises in *Vision 1*, *Vision 2*, and *Vision 3* were true-false, matching, scrambled sentences, or reading comprehension questions. The exercises did not focus on engaging learners affectively or cognitively. They were not designed to develop learners' curiosity or critical thinking. However, as Tozun (2012) argues ELT textbooks should focus on developing learners' cultural awareness. Indeed language textbooks should aim at developing learners' perceptions of the target cultures (Corbett, 2003).

The results were supported by the findings of Gholami Pasand and Ghasemi (2018). They analyzed the contents of *Prospect Series* and came to the conclusion that the textbooks did not aim at developing learners' ICC. Also, they concluded most of the cultural topics were ignored in the *Prospect Series*.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to shed more light on the content of ELT textbooks that are used in Iranian high schools. An in depth content analysis of the three textbooks of the textbooks was done. The results indicated that cultural topics were limited in the textbooks which failed to focus on improving learners' ICC. Moreover, the situation of interactions was limited and most of the interactions did not represent real life situations. The cultural topics that received more attentions in these textbooks were geography and animals. In the textbooks, the authors tried to introduce different cities in Iran.

An interesting point about *Vision Series* is that the textbooks pay little attention to the socio-political and socio-cultural issues. Likewise, no cultural values were compared between the two cultures. The author used a mono-perspective style over the series. No attempt was made to improve learners' critical thinking or cultural sensitiveness.

Implementing ICC in ELT textbooks is regarded as an integral part of the books (Corbett, 2003; Georgiou, 2011; Liu and Laohawiriyanon, 2013). Georgiou (2011) asserts that developing learners' ICC helps them to communicate successfully. Therefore, making learners aware of the differences between cultures enables the interlocutors with different cultures to tolerate the cultural differences and ambiguities. Troncoso (2010) mentioned some exercises that can be used in developing learners' cultural sensitiveness. Such activities include intake response, awareness task, readiness, experiential, and text driven (Troncoso, 2010). Likewise providing samples of cultural differences, historical backgrounds, social and political issues and worldwide event can be regarded as beneficial choices for improving learners' ICC.

The findings of the current study add new insights to the literature of ELT textbooks development. Moreover, they can guide textbook developers and material writers in implementing multicultural perspective in material development.

One of the limitations of this study was the limited number of textbooks. In this study the researchers focused on *Vision Series* including *Vision 1*, *Vision 2*, and *Vision 3*. Therefore, replicating this study by including more textbooks may lead to more fruitful results. On the other hand, the implementation of different models or frameworks in content analysis may result in different outcomes.

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