

CULTURAL ITEMS IN READING TEXTS IN EFL CLASSES

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Abstract: *The article displays a study conducted to find out the cultural items in the reading texts of EFL course books. Byram's (1993) evaluation criteria were taken as the basis for the study. The quality of cultural context in a textbook plays an important role in language classes. In this study, it is hypothesised that without teaching the culture, one cannot teach a foreign language, and the following research question was put forward: To what extent do the selected EFL course books display the target culture? The text book analysis revealed the fact that cultural items are not sufficiently embedded into the course books to enable the teacher to get involved in teaching culture.*

Key words: *culture, culture teaching, EFL, ELT*

1. Introduction

In this study, it was hypothesised that without teaching the culture, one cannot teach a foreign language. It is only possible to use a language properly by being familiar with the target culture. Otherwise, it does not make sense. While learning the target culture, foreign language learners get the chance to discover similarities and differences between the new culture and their own culture. The increased awareness of other cultures helps develop the social and linguistic competence of the students and inspires self-awareness of their own culture. Therefore, integrating culture into EFL reading texts is very important.

Kramsch (1998: 8) points out that “language is not a culture-free code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture, particularly in its printed form.” In a similar way, Harklau (1999: 109) states that “language is inextricably bound up with culture. Cultural values are both reflected by and carried through language. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that representation of culture implicitly and explicitly enters into second language teaching.”

Culture teaching assists learners to understand other cultures while appreciating their own. Kramsch (1993: 216) also states that “besides trying to understand the foreign culture on its own terms, learners have to be aware of their own

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cultural myths and realities that ease or impede their understanding of the foreign imagination.”

Lewis (1999: 213-214) claims that customs and traditions handed down from generation to generation, literature written over a long period of time, architecture, traditional ceremonies, art, music and movies from the past and the present, family relations, societies’ values and communities’ shared sense of humour can be thought as aspects of culture that can be taught in a language class. The list can be extended by taking other important cultural artifacts into consideration.

Reading can be used as a means of fostering learners’ cultural knowledge. As a process in itself, it involves following the printed script with one’s eyes and comprehending the ideas presented. Williams (1996: 2-3) states that reading is the process where someone looks and understands what has been written. Understanding is the key word here, as reading aloud without understanding does not presuppose reading. According to Chastian (1976: 216), “reading is a process involving the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange of information from one person to another.” Williams (1996: 12) lists the following styles of reading: involuntary, rapid, intensive, and extensive. Rapid reading is for acquiring general information about the text (skimming) and information from the text (scanning). The reason for intensive reading, however, is not only to get information from the text. Apart from that, learners are involved in reading with specific aims and tasks. With extensive reading, though, the goal is pleasure, or satisfying one’s curiosity or interest.

2. Methodology

In this study, a descriptive and illuminative approach was taken as the research model.

The evaluation of cultural items was done in 5 steps:

- Forming the criteria of culture analysis of reading texts in EFL textbooks;
- Book selection;
- Selection of reading texts presented in the books;
- Analysis of cultural items in the texts for reading;
- Evaluation.

The presentation of culture comes in various forms in textbook reading texts. Therefore, while analysing the cultural content found in EFL reading texts, the following criteria adapted from Byram (1993) were used:

Item	Definition
- Belief	Moral and religious beliefs
- Behavior	Daily routines
- Socialization and the life cycle	Families, schools, and employment
- Stereotypes and national identity	What is typical in the target culture; symbols of national stereotypes

Table 1. Criteria for textbook evaluation focus on cultural content

Three ELT books used in a tertiary level ELT programme were selected for the evaluation of cultural items. A1/A2-B1 levels were chosen on purpose in order to discover whether these levels included cultural items in their reading texts. In this respect, reading texts from the following three main course books were analysed: Oxenden C., Latham-Koenig C., P. Seligson's *New English File: Elementary Student's Book* (2004); Redson C., Cunningham G.'s *Face to Face: Pre-intermediate Student's Book* (2005) and Saslow J., Ascher A.'s *Top Notch 2* (2006).

The first course book (level A1/A2) consisted of 9 files and included 31 reading texts. The second textbook (level B1) consisted of 10 units and included 28 reading texts. The third course book (level B1) had 12 units and included 26 reading texts. 50% of the reading texts from each course book were chosen by the authors of this study to make sure the study was reliable. The texts were chosen randomly and ordered according to their sequence of appearance in the course books.

3. Data and analysis

The analysis of the EFL course book reading texts was done according to the criteria adapted from Byram (1993), as was already mentioned. For example, in one of the reading texts of the first textbook, learners read about four foreigners in the U.K. talking about British people and Britain. The text focuses on the *behaviours* of British people with the following examples: One of the foreigners is Romanian and works in a pub in Manchester. According to him, British people drink coffee and beer a lot. Another character is a student from Russia who studies at Bristol University. He feels that Britain is not a good country for smokers because when he feels like smoking he has to go out. A tourist from Spain claims that people in the U.K. read newspapers everywhere. He is also surprised that cars stop on the zebra crossings, adding that such things never happen in Madrid. There are also a few examples about *socialization and the life cycle* of British culture in terms of family. A woman from Brazil who works in Cambridge believes the family she lives with is a typical British

family. She says the woman does not cook but still watches cooking programs every day, and the man cooks on the weekends. Their child’s food consists of fish fingers, chips and burgers. The pictures of a beer pint, a plate of fish and chips, an English house and a newspaper next to the reading text can be seen as the **stereotypes** of the target culture. It reads that people in Britain drink a lot of coffee and beer and read newspapers everywhere. Therefore, here in this text, British culture’s **behaviours, socialization and life cycle** and **stereotypes** are presented.

In the teacher’s book, it is suggested to ask the students which of the pictures in the reading text show something “typically British.” Thus, in the teacher’s book, it is emphasised that cultural items should be studied in the classroom. The reading text represents British culture’s **behaviors, socialization and life cycle** and **stereotypes**, but in order to instill an intercultural point of view within the learners they could be asked to compare these with that of their own culture.

The figure below lists the cultural elements in the reading texts:

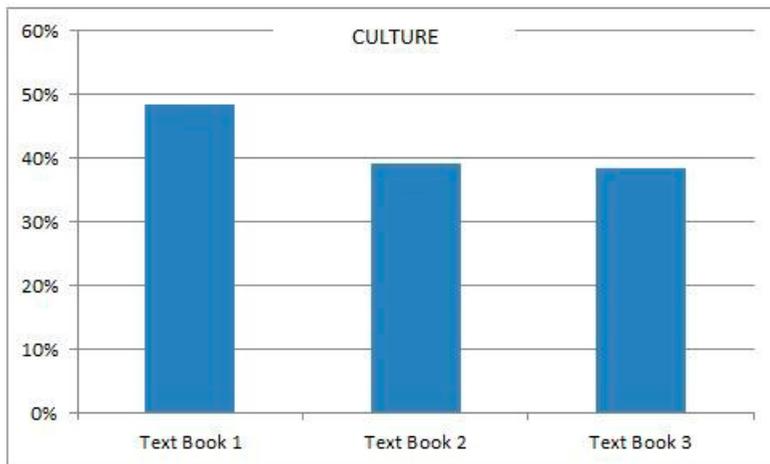


Figure 1. Summary

The following figure shows the cultural elements in the reading texts:

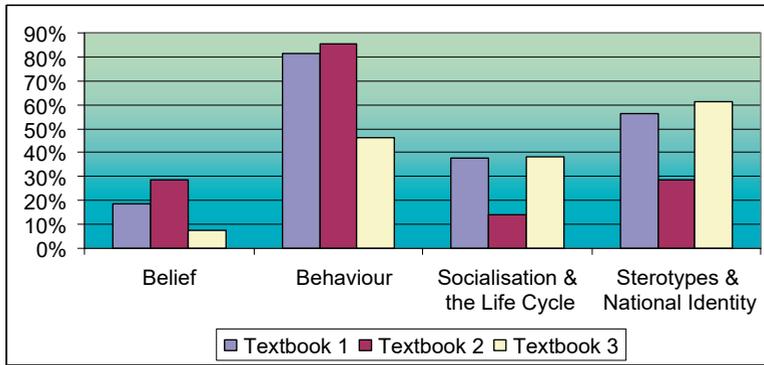


Figure 2. Evaluation

As can be seen in the figures above, the course books present cultural items in unsatisfactory doses. The teachers' books also contain some cultural information and activities to help teach culture, though, once again, not enough to be satisfactory. Therefore, it is up to the language teacher to work on cultural items additionally in the classroom.

When we look at the course books in terms of the cultural items they provide, it is apparent that, according to the criteria, they refer to the target culture but also contain references to other cultures around the world. With the suggested activities in the teachers' books, and those given in this study, students are able to study a new language's grammar and vocabulary and at the same time learn about the culture of that language, as well as about their own culture. The teacher's attitude toward teaching culture is very important in this regard. Language teachers need to accept that teaching a new language means teaching a new culture, too.

4. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to reveal the inseparability of language and culture in terms of foreign language learning. A survey was conducted to find cultural items in the reading texts of three ELT main course books. This textbook evaluation showed that the reading texts present culture in the following ways: belief, behaviour, socialization and life cycle, and stereotypes and national identity. It was also seen that some of the cultural items are not represented to an adequate degree. This analysis was done to prove the hypothesis that without teaching culture, one cannot teach a foreign language.

To make the foreign language teaching process complete, including cultural elements is essential, as it is impossible to separate language and culture. Culture needs to be brought into the language classroom by language teachers. Integrating the culture of the target language in EFL classes is essential in

terms of gaining a complete understanding of the language. Teaching only the language itself is no longer sufficient. In order to communicate in the target language and understand it better, learners need to understand the culture of the language they are learning.

While learners study the target culture, they also get the chance to understand their own culture a little better. With a new understanding of their own culture, learners gain the self-confidence that allows them to understand other cultures as well. It can heighten their motivation and interest toward the language lessons. The comparison of their own culture with the target culture is a great opportunity for learners to realise the differences and similarities between the two. An understanding of their own culture also helps learners to be more tolerant toward people from other cultures. In addition, the textbooks also include information about different cultures around the world. Again, working on these cultural items widens a learner's perspective and allows them to understand the world a little better. It also stimulates their curiosity toward the language lesson. A language class can be turned into a culture festival by working on cultural items from all over the world.

In other words, by using and analysing cultural items by means of the reading texts in EFL classes, language becomes live and rich in the eyes of the students. English is widely spoken throughout the world, and that means a lot of different societies with different cultures share a common language. Analysing cultural elements, differences and similarities among these societies through readings not only improves a learner's English skills, but also gives them the satisfaction of understanding the world in a global sense. To sum up, it is in the teacher's hands to make the language learning process complete for the learners by integrating culture into the classroom.

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