

Culture in English as a Foreign Language Algerian Middle School Course: Learner's Attitudes and Textbooks Content

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Abstract—The present research attempt to investigate learner's attitudes toward the target culture dealt with in the English language classroom and, find out the main reasons behind such attitudes. It also aims at exploring the reliability of the used textbooks in regard to their cultural content and finding out whether or not they promote cultural prejudices against the target culture. Accordingly, a questionnaire was distributed to a sample of students and the Middle School English textbooks were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed and evaluated in terms of their cultural focus, using criteria of analysis created by Risager (1991), Skopinskaja (2003). The obtained qualitative and quantitative results indicated that learners showed admiration for the foreign culture. Furthermore, we noticed that no textbook encourages or invites learners to come together to discuss and examine their opinions regarding the several cultural topics encompassed in the course books. In the light of the obtained results, some practical recommendations are made to remedy the weaknesses observed to offer better teaching context for our young generation.

Index Terms—Attitudes, Culture, English language teaching, Evaluation, Learners, Textbooks.

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent research corroborates the influence of culture on language teaching McKay (2003, pp. 1-2). This effect is marked in two significant approaches: Linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, culture affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language, which makes culture important in the linguistic aspect of the language itself. Pedagogically, culture affects the selection of language materials because the cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while selecting the language materials.

Peterson and Coltrane (2003) point out that culture is, in many cases, learned implicitly through linguistic forms in

which it is embedded. They further argue that for teachers to make students conscious of the cultural characteristics and they may opt to render those cultural subjects explicit through discussion in relation to the linguistic forms being dealt with. This is for the purpose of understanding the socially appropriate communication in the target culture. Kitao (1991) also supports this view. He claims that studying culture is a convenient part of foreign language (FL) education due to its influence on language and communication. Furthermore, Kitao (1991, pp. 18-19) argues that culture affects even language learners by increasing motivation and student's interest in target culture and its people and by improving student's understanding of their own culture. In a sense, there has been found no counter-argument relating to the crucial influence of culture on language learning.

Integrating culture into FL class objectives is said to have cultural dimension which is avoiding stereotypes and prejudices. Parmenter (2003) maintains that learners are supposed to be "willing to question their own cultural assumptions and beliefs and willing to accept other ways of acting and thinking without prejudice or discrimination." That is to say, FL teaching can perpetuate students' prejudices about foreign culture and language teachers have the responsibility to promote positive rather than negative attitudes toward all other cultures and its people.

In spite of the acknowledged significance of incorporating culture in the language teaching process, FL teachers have been criticized for their insufficient treatment of culture in FL classrooms. According to Crawford-Lange and Lange (1987, p. 58), there are two reasons that may explain why culture is given a second-rate position in the FL teaching process. Firstly, FL educators may not teach culture because they do not have enough knowledge about it. Secondly, FL teachers may have received insufficient training in how to systematically incorporate culture in the FL teaching strategies. Teaching materials, particularly textbooks, have also received negative criticism in terms of their cultural contents. In this regard, Florent and Walter (1989, p. 182) have demonstrated that many English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks are socially and culturally biased. Similarly, Risager (1991, pp. 213-214) states that textbooks are often very superficial and values, personal feelings, and historical perspectives are given only little attention. For example many

textbooks present mainly imaginary and stereotypical middle-class families, who have no major problems in their life. According to Risager, illustrating the target culture in such a way leads to misconception. Moreover, Dema and Moeller (2012) associate the problem of stereotypes more, particularly with FL teaching materials. Textbooks, for example, may deliver unimportant details or information that can be seen disconnected, and possibly induces FL learners to develop biased and stereotyped attitudes about the target culture.

Speaking about stereotypes and cultural prejudices, which are common problems associated with FL teaching/learning, Fenner (2000, p. 148) explains that it is unsurprising if tolerance and understanding are not the outcomes of encountering the target culture in a FL class. Instead, learners might have a stereotyped view as a “short-term result” of simplification when dealing with complex and unfamiliar situations concerning the target culture. Having said that the present study attempts to (1) investigate learner’s attitudes toward the cultural elements which are included in the used EFL textbooks, and (2) investigate the extent to which EFL textbooks promote understanding and tolerance toward cultural differences.

II. METHODOLOGY

The present research tackles an English language teaching-related problem. It investigates the Algerian EFL textbooks which are designed for the middle school level, in regard to their cultural contents to discover whether or not they promote cultural stereotypes. The significance of the study derives from the belief that textbook is a central tool in teaching and learning a FL. It is regarded as one of the important resources for introducing the target culture to EFL learners. In addition, the study aims at exploring the pupils’ attitudes toward learning about the target culture and finding out the explanation for such attitudes.

To achieve the previously set objectives of research, it seemed to us very useful to base our study on both qualitative and quantitative methods that are suitable to analyze the data which were collected by means of analyzing the used textbooks in terms of their cultural components, as well as constructing two questionnaires, one of them for EFL teachers and another for learners at the middle school level.

A. Research Questions

The data and results are meant to answer the following research questions:

- What attitudes do learners hold toward the target culture?
- How do EFL textbooks designed for the middle schools address the target culture?
- Do EFL textbooks allow learners to challenge their attitudes toward and views of the target culture to raise their understanding and tolerance of the different visions of life?

B. Research Instruments

In the present study, two research instruments are utilized. Firstly, a questionnaire was administrated to a sample of

(100) 4-year middle school pupils – also across the city of Tizi Ouzou – to investigate the attitude they hold toward the foreign culture. The second research means is an investigation into the four textbooks designed for the middle school level to explore if they incorporate any cultural or gender stereotype. Textbooks analysis, which is both quantitative and qualitative in nature, is conducted on the basis of three models created by Skopinskaja (2003), Risager (1991), and Michel (1986). To obtain precise data from textbooks analysis, it seems relevant to us to base our investigation on the following targeted question:

Are learners invited or given the opportunity to negotiate differences between the local and foreign cultures?

The analysis of this area is based on criteria put forward by two authors: Skopinskaja’s (2003) and Risager’s (1991). The former examines EFL textbooks according to the:

Presentation of content through an attitudinal perspective that is development of tolerance and empathy toward otherness as well as a feeling of the national identity; challenging the learners’ existing stereotypes; arousing curiosity about otherness; and preparing students for an adequate behavior in the target language (pp. 46-47).

As for the latter, Risager illustrates the criteria as follows: “One can find examples of invitations to discuss the stereotypes that different nationalities are supposed to have about the country and the people in question” (p. 188).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results of Pupils’ Questionnaires

Learner’s Attitudes Toward Culture and The English Language

All the surveyed pupils showed admiration for the English language. The participants have different reasons why they like English. The obtained results indicate that the most scored reason why pupils like English is that they like the people who speak it (82). The second scored reason is that English is an easy language to learn (63) whereas the reason that learners like English because they use on social media like Facebook ranked third (61). These results reveal that pupils do not have positive attitude toward only the English language but also toward its speakers.

Moreover, some pupils mentioned other motives behind their admiration for English. Some of these motives are: Listening to songs and watching movies in English. Some pupils even claimed that they like English because they sing songs in this language. To sum up, pupils’ explanations of their appreciation for English may suggest that songs and movies take part in the spread of English among learners.

As for their opinions regarding the importance of leaning the foreign culture, 69% of respondents acknowledged that learning foreign culture is a matter of importance. Most of them defended their opinions by claiming that learning some cultural features allows them to: Acquire new vocabulary, know the people and country to which this culture belongs. Some other pupils argued that culture learning is important

because it is a part of personality. Only two pupils thought that learning a foreign culture is an act of no significance, yet they did not explain why. On the other hand, 28 pupils answered that they did not know whether it is important or not to acquire some knowledge of a foreign culture.

Involved learners were also asked whether they had a desire to learn about foreign culture. The elicited data indicate that most of the surveyed pupils (81) showed the inclination to know things about the foreign culture. Only six pupils did not have the tendency to discover things related to the foreign culture whereas the other 13 pupils responded that they did not care. This might be explained by two factors: Firstly, the foreign culture does not arouse these pupils' curiosity. Secondly, these pupils would rather discover the English language than its culture(s).

Learner's Attitudes Toward Efl Textbooks Cultural Contents

Learner's points of view on whether the cultural contents of EFL textbooks highlight only the similarities between the pupils' own culture and the target culture or also the differences between them were also investigated. Results show that 84% of the participant learners agreed with the statement that the foreign culture which EFL textbooks present is different from their own culture. Thirty-nine pupils declared that they partly agree, 35 pupils agreed, whereas 10 learners expressed strong agreement with the statement. These scores suggest that the used EFL course books include features of the foreign culture which seem for pupils different from those of their own culture.

Further learner's opinions regarding the customs and traditions of the foreign culture which are included in the EFL textbooks were revealed. The gathered data show that 22 pupils expressed strong disagreement with the statement that textbooks show foreign customs and traditions that do not fit with the values of their society, whereas 35 pupils disagreed and 14 others slightly disagreed with it. It is also shown that 17 learners partly agreed with the statement whereas nine agreed and only one pupil strongly disagreed with it. In a word, the observed data reveal that almost three-quarters of the participants, 71% showed a disagreement against the statement that EFL textbooks present foreign

customs and traditions that do not fit with the values of the learners' society.

The questionnaire includes a statement designed to discover the learner's opinions concerning the way in which culture is transmitted in textbooks. It attempts to check if the textbooks discuss the target culture in a facilitated way for learners to understand it. According to their answers, 15 pupils disagreed and three others slightly disagreed with the statement that cultural aspects in the Algerian English course books are presented in an easy way. On the other hand, most of the involved pupils (82%) agreed with the statement. Thirty-nine showed a partial agreement, whereas 42 pupils were in complete accord with it, and one pupil expressed a strong agreement.

In addition, participants were asked to make any comments and express any opinions regarding foreign culture. Some of the given comments and opinions were:

- "I like to know more about English culture. I like it more than any foreign culture. I find it more interesting"
- "Firstly, I think that it is very interesting to learn culture because it permits us to have a large knowledge about different countries. Then, learn culture is a way to travel abroad. Finally, it helps us in our development"
- "I don't like foreign culture because it very different from our culture"
- "It's different because there is change in religion and tradition."

To sum up, it can be concluded that all of the learner's comments and opinions are centred on the following points:

- It is important to learn about foreign culture
- The foreign culture is totally different from the native culture
- Some norms of foreign culture are unacceptable in the native culture.

B. Findings of Textbooks Analysis

Findings of Spotlight on English Book One Analysis

As will be shown in the following in Table I, in many occasions, learners are asked to work in pairs or groups

TABLE I
COMPARISONS BETWEEN LEARNER'S AND FOREIGN CULTURE IN *SPOTLIGHT ON ENGLISH BOOK ONE*

Page	Cultural features discussed	Comparison between local and foreign culture	Are learners asked to show their choices?	Are they asked to show their beliefs and attitudes?
32	Monuments	Different monuments belonging to the local and foreign cultures	No	No
56	Greeting	Greetings in native and other foreign languages	No	No
	Celebrations	Feasts in local and foreign cultures	No	No
75	Sports	Different traditional sports and their clothing norms in local and foreign cultures	No	No
96	Education	Comparison between the Algerian and the British schools; years studying in school, school clothing	No	No
97	Keeping animals at home	Comparison between how animals are treated by the Americans and the Algerians	No	No
115	Dishes	Different dishes from native and foreign culture	No	No
137	Names of countries	Comparison between the origins of names of America, Britain, England, and Algeria	No	No
	Catchphrases	Comparison between some English and Arabic/Amazigh common expression	No	No

and discuss various cultural features and draw comparisons between the foreign cultures and theirs.

Data shown above indicate that *Spotlight on English Book One* gives learners many opportunities for intercultural comparisons in the textbooks. To illustrate, on page 96, learners are asked to compare between the Algerian and the British school. They are also given some ideas about what the British pupils wear at schools. However, they are not asked to express and discuss what they think about the British system of education or to make decisions if they would like to follow this system of education and give reasons for their decision. They are not even asked to discuss their attitudes and views about what their British peers wear and whether or not the British custom of school uniforms could be applied to the Algerian pupils' custom. Neither are they asked to give their views on the Algerian system of education nor to say what they would like to change to make them better. In other terms, they are not put in the position where they can argue for or against any aspect of both systems.

On pages 116–117, learners are also given identification tasks of some proverbs about food and some traditional dishes to be prepared in Britain for the New Year Eve. In the same vein, learners are asked to say if they usually celebrate the new year and what dishes did their mothers prepare for some religious events known in the local culture as Eid El-Fiter and Mawlid Ennabawi. Nonetheless, learner's attitudes are not reflected in these activities. What is worth doing could be to let them know about something different in terms of food, and at the same time rediscover that their traditional food and discuss this difference without giving a value judgement as the difference lie in the difference of lifestyle in connection with local specificities in terms of climate, geography, history, religion (...).

To conclude, it can be stated that although *Spotlight on English Book One* incorporates diverse cultural items leading to learners' realization of otherness. Yet, these items do not prompt pupils to examine their attitudes to otherness to help them increase tolerance and understanding of cultural differences.

Findings of Spotlight on English Book Two analysis

Except the few sights on the subject offered, *Spotlight on English Book Two* does not encompass a wide range of topics related to the daily life aspects of foreign cultures where they can be asked to find out about the similarities or differences between their culture and the others by exploring other cultures. The encounters with the target culture are shown in the following in Table II.

The obtained data show that the introduced famous figures are not presented in a way that permits learners to discuss any stereotyped opinions they might have about them. That is to say, even though learners are given the occasion to talk about some icons, they are not even led to discuss how to cope with the stereotypical traits they might have about these figures. In addition, the textbook does not offer any prompt to lead the learner to search for information about the different ways in which artists are valued by different societies.

As for the project entitled: *Making a medical guide* (page 70), learners are not urged to find information about

the way diseases used to be treated in their own culture and compare it to the those in the foreign cultures so that learners realize the differences and similarities among cultures in treating diseases.

Concerning the few features of daily life offered in the textbook, it can be noted that they do not provide enough information for learners to be aware of the cultural differences and similarities likely to develop their cultural awareness. Page 10, for example, presents a female's character holidays ritual under the title: *A day in the life of Jane Smith*. Here, Jane is described as a girl who got into the habit of going out at 9 p.m. with her friends to have dinner out and then at 2 am she returns home.

The portrayed behavior of going out at night might cause misunderstanding; it may look strange and foreign for some Algerian learners because the textbook does not leave space for them to discover, compare, and solve problems. Moreover, the book does not leave the initiative to the teacher to explain for their pupils the diversified lifestyles.

In short, the results of our analysis indicate that *Spotlight on English Book Two* does not encourage learners to compare selected features of the target cultures with their own culture so that they develop an understanding of cultural diversity and tolerance for daily life, including unfamiliar conventions and behaviors.

Findings of Spotlight on English Book Three analysis

It is noticed that *Spotlight on English Book Three* offers several cases that provide enough information for learners of the cultural similarities and differences between their own culture and the foreign one. The encounters with foreign cultures are illustrated in Table III.

The investigation findings show that *Spotlight on English Book Three* presentation of otherness does not challenge learners to express and discuss their opinions about it and therefore, the textbook does not seem to have any influence on learner's attitudes and views about the target culture. Very often, the textbook offers and encourages pupils to draw comparison between the native and foreign cultures. However, no question is raised to check if learners would decide if certain aspects of the foreign culture, for example, school rules which are presented on page 111, could be applied to the Algerian schools. Analysis of *Spotlight on English Book Three* shows that it does not initiate any task where learners are required to reflect on their attitudes and opinions regarding certain problems.

Findings of On the Move analysis

On the Move provides learners with enough comparisons to realize the differences and similarities among cultures as it is stated by the textbook designers: "The widening of the intercultural scope to new horizons (the USA, India, and Australia) through comparison and contrast with Algeria." Cultural comparisons are displayed on the following in Table IV.

The data shown above indicates that no encounter with these features urges learners to come together in groups to discuss their opinions and attitudes toward a certain differences between the cultures. Therefore pupils' attitudes

TABLE II
COMPARISONS BETWEEN LEARNERS' OWN CULTURE AND THE FOREIGN CULTURE IN *SPOTLIGHT ON ENGLISH BOOK TWO*

Page	Cultural features discussed	Comparison between local and foreign culture	Are learners asked to show their choices?	Are they asked to show their beliefs and attitudes?
21	Music	Types of music in local and foreign different cultures	Yes	Yes
41-42	Games	Games invented by societies	No	No
89	Cartoon	Series of cartoon created by in different culture	No	No
111	Theatrical genres	Difference between genres of theatre	No	No

TABLE III
COMPARISONS BETWEEN LEARNERS' AND FOREIGN CULTURE IN *SPOTLIGHT ON ENGLISH BOOK THREE*

Page	Cultural features discussed	Comparison between local and foreign culture	Are learners asked to show their choices?	Are they asked to show their beliefs and attitudes?
39	Governmental guards	Comparison between the British lifeguards and the Algerian republic guards	No	No
77	Celebratory songs	Comparison between the Algerian and the Scottish celebratory songs	No	No
111	Education	Comparison between the British and the Algerian school systems and rules	No	No
127	Geography	Comparison between the geographic features of Algeria and those of the neighboring countries	No	No
148	Language	Comparison between the Algerian, British, and American linguistic varieties	No	No

TABLE IV
COMPARISONS BETWEEN LEARNERS' AND FOREIGN CULTURE IN *ON THE MOVE*

Page	Cultural features discussed	Comparison between local and foreign culture	Are learners asked to show their choices?	Are they asked to show their beliefs and attitudes?
20-21	Food	Different types of foods belonging to the local and foreign cultures	No	No
28	Food	Comparison between the British and Algerian mealtimes	No	Yes
77	Education	Comparison between the Algerian and American pre-university systems	No	No
92	Art, cinema	Comparison between some Algerian and American singers and actors and what they were before being singers or actors	No	No
103	Science	Comparison between Muslim and Italian scientific figures	No	No
152	Science	Comparison between legend about how a Muslim and European scientists made their discoveries	No	No

and opinions are not asked for in many situations. Page 23, for instance, focuses on a set of table manners. Here, pupils are taught some instructions for table behaviors. However, they are not provoked to discuss how each culture views a certain table manner because what is considered to be a good behavior in culture could be seen differently in another culture. Moreover, these cultural features could be a starting point for learners to examine their attitudes toward how the different cultures think of a certain table manner to develop their understanding and tolerance to otherness.

On page 77, learners are asked to exchange information about the Algerian and American pre-university educational systems with American pen-friends. However, the point that ought to be made here is that learners need not only to know about the differences between the two educational systems but also to reflect on their attitudes and opinions about American education being different from their own. Furthermore, page 28 deals with the difference between the British and Algerian mealtimes, yet pupils' opinions and attitudes are not challenged in a way that helps them to develop openness to otherness. On page 122, pupils are informed about the difference between what pupils and teachers used to wear in

the past and what they put on at present. Yet, pupils are not urged to reflect on their attitudes about these differences nor are they asked if they would like to pursue a certain norm of school uniforms.

IV. DISCUSSION

The main aim of the study was to reveal young Algerian learner's attitudes toward the foreign culture, and then examine the cultural content of the four EFL textbooks designed for the Algerian middle school level and find out if they incorporate any stereotypes about the target culture. As diverse cultural features are covered in the textbooks, evaluation was conducted in addition to a questionnaire constructed to elicit information from learners to find answers to a set of research questions.

The first research question addresses the problem of attitudes that Algerian middle school learners hold toward the target culture. The results obtained from questionnaire revealed that most of learners considered learning about culture to be important. They even showed the will to learn about it. However, most of the respondents who expressed

their opinions about foreign culture focused on the difference between the native and the foreign culture.

Textbooks analysis indicates that they cover a satisfactory variety of themes related to technology, discoveries, arts, etc. However, the less satisfying offered topics are those of day-to-day culture. Consequently, teacher's answers imply that EFL textbooks designed for the Algerian middle school could not be considered as sufficient materials for the teaching of culture. Most of teachers explained their opinions by claiming that the used course books do not meet learner's interests and do not cover the subjects in which pupils are much interested such as the daily life aspects of the foreign culture. Therefore, teachers use the Internet as the main alternative source for teaching the target culture. This, in turn, supports Graves' (2000) perception that textbooks may encompass uninteresting topics for learners.

The analysis shows that EFL textbooks incorporate insights into learners' own culture and foreign culture likely to offer opportunity for learners to compare between cultures. However, cultural comparisons are not covered in a way which encourages learners to examine their attitudes toward the several cultural related problems which are incorporated in the textbooks. There is no encounter with the target culture which may serve as a starting point for learners to discuss their attitudes toward the target culture and thus develop their understanding to widen tolerance toward otherness. The inference might be that the authors of the textbooks left it to the teachers to discuss and explain any simplification. It cannot be, however, guarantee that this will happen since the time which is devoted to culture teaching, in teacher's words, is not enough due to the overloaded program. In short, all the four textbooks help the learner to be aware of the other, but they do not prompt them to change their behaviors and opinions toward difference. In this vein, Bhawuk, and Brislin (1992, p. 416) claim, "to be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures" (Hammer et al., 2003. p. 422).

V. CONCLUSION

There is a consensus among applied linguists such as Kramsch, Byram, and Corbett, among many others, on the important role that culture plays in the process of FL teaching to develop learners' tolerance toward otherness and intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, they have always advocated the inclusion of diverse cultural elements in FL programs. One of the tools that may provide adequate coverage of the language syllabus is the textbook. The latter, however, as indicated by literature, may deliver unimportant details or information that can be seen disconnected, and possibly induces FL learners to develop biased and stereotyped attitudes about the target culture. Furthermore, learners' resistance may push them to have a negative attitude against learning the target culture. Therefore, this research is aimed at investigating whether

or not course books designed for pupils of Algerian middle schools incorporate any kind of stereotype. Similarly, it explores the attitudes of learners toward learning about foreign culture.

To address the aforementioned research objectives, we tried to collect and interpret data by means of questionnaire administrated to a sample of learners in addition to EFL textbooks analysis, which was both quantitative and qualitative in nature, using three criteria of analysis generated by Skopinskaja (2003), Risager (1991), and Michel (1986).

Data elicited from learners' questionnaire showed that learners had positive attitudes toward learning about foreign culture. Learner's responses to survey items indicate that they are interested in discovering many things about foreign culture. However, some pupils' comments imply that a certain degree of ethnocentrism is rooted among some learners.

Results obtained from textbooks analysis revealed that most of the cultural contents of the four studied textbooks were centered on the big "C" cultural references, such as the names of artists, scientists, and so on. The textbooks, however, lack strong cultural information about lifestyle of the target culture, a subject which is, according to learner's responses to item number seven, the most favored topic. In turn, this lack might be a reasonable explanation for teacher's negative answers to question 17, whether the textbooks are suitable and adequate sources for teaching culture.

Although the four textbooks were found to offer many encounters with the target culture which are aimed at making learners realize otherness. Yet, pupils are not provoked to examine their attitudes and opinions about the diversified versions of life presented in the textbooks. That is to say, results of textbooks analysis indicate that EFL textbooks in question do not present any prejudiced view of the incorporated foreign cultural elements, but they do not develop learners' tolerance either.

To conclude, the present study is aspired to be interesting for the Algerian middle school teachers of EFL as they use the tackled textbooks in their profession. The results that this research attained prove that it is the EFL teachers' duty to help their pupils avoid having negative attitudes toward the foreign culture since the tackled course books do not adequately serve as a means to widen learners' openness of otherness. In addition, this research may be of use for the Algerian textbooks writers and syllabuses designers as it might aid them in considering what kind of impression they want to leave on learners about the foreign culture.

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