Full Length Research Paper

Tracing the local culture in a reading book

Mehmet Durmaz

School of Foreign Languages, Middle East Technical University, Northern Cyprus Campus, Kalkanlı, Güzelyurt, TRNC via Mersin 10, Turkey.

There is a strong relationship between language and culture, both carries the DNA samples of one another, which makes it hard to imagine English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in classrooms and textbooks without any reference to target culture(s). Therefore, teaching a language cannot be thought only as teaching grammatical structures of the target language, but also teaching the culture(s) of the target language or society. However, considering intercultural communicative competence, along with the target culture(s), the local culture should also be included in the textbooks. This study aimed to trace the local culture (Turkish) in a book used in a Turkish higher education institution. In order to do this, an in-house published reading book was evaluated through thematic content-based analysis and item frequency analysis. The results showed that in spite of the fact that the evaluated reading book is dominated by the target culture, and there is an inadequacy in terms of providing elements from the local culture, it was revealed that the book does not favor any specific culture(s), and it exhibits an increased awareness about intercultural communicative competence.

Key words: Intercultural communicative competence, culture in textbooks, language, culture.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and culture has always been a hot debate among the researchers and teachers in English language teaching field. As for many people, language and culture cannot be seen as two different elements rather they should be viewed as two combined and integrated bodies feeding each other (Kay and Kempton, 1984; Matalene, 1985; Jiang, 2000). Therefore, there is need to look at the place of culture in the language classrooms, especially in the textbooks since they are regarded as the main sources of language teaching process, which makes them also the source for the culture of the target language. For instance, Jiang (2000) states that "language and culture make a living organism; language is flesh and culture is blood. Without culture, the language would be dead; without language,

culture would have no shape" (p. 1). This quotation once more emphasizes the undeniable relationship between language and culture, which was also argued by Sapir and Whorf (Matalene, 1985) through linguistic determinism and linguistics relativism. While linguistic determinism claims that grammatical structures affect how people sense the world, the latter puts forward that people speaking different languages will perceive the world differently. Reflecting back on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it becomes clearer that there is no strict boundary as to which influences which one (language affecting culture or culture affecting language); however, it is once more obvious that there is a strong relationship between language and culture, both carrying the DNA samples of one another. Considering the strong

E-mail: mehmetdurmaz2010@gmail.com.

relationship between language and culture, it is hard to imagine English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and textbooks without any reference to target culture(s).

Therefore, teaching a language can not only be thought of as teaching grammatical structures of the target language, but also teaching the culture(s) of the target language or society. However, teaching culture in the English language teaching classrooms is another debate among the people in the field because it brings out the question "whose culture should be taught in the classrooms?" If we are going to teach the native speakers' culture, which gives rise to another question: Who is to be considered as a native speaker?

In his three-circle model of World Englishes, Kachru (1985) described the varieties of English in terms of three concentric circles. The inner circle consists of the countries such as the USA, the UK and Australia which are considered as 'norm-providers' while the outer circle involves mostly former British colonies such as Pakistan, India and Singapore where the English has gained an important role in the institutions of the society and assumed the second language position over the years.

These countries are also seen as 'norm-developing'. The expanding circle, on the other hand, includes countries such as Turkey (the focal country in this study), Iran, Russia and Bulgaria, regarded as 'norm-dependent' where English has a foreign language role, functions as a means for international communication besides reading scientific magazines and articles.

According to his model, the people living in the inner and outer circle countries are native speakers of English language; hence, they have equal value in terms of culture if the native speaker's culture is going to be taught in EFL classrooms. Therefore, throughout this study the target culture will refer to the cultures of inner-circle countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia.

The proponents of the view of English as an international language also claim that the number of the non-native speakers is far more than the number of the native speakers of English; therefore, English not only belongs to the countries in the inner circle or outer circle, but also to the countries in the expanding circle; thus, their cultures become as important as the native speaker cultures.

Ho (2009) states that there is a need to shift from traditional language and culture teaching to intercultural teaching to develop both linguistic and intercultural competencies of learners. There is this need because we are living in a multicultural world in which language learners need to develop both competencies to overcome the linguistic difficulties and cultural barriers they may face during the interaction with people from different cultures (Ho, 2009).

Byram et al. (2002) also emphasize the importance of developing intercultural competence in the EFL classroom, and claim that the main aim of intercultural teaching is not transmitting information about a foreign culture, rather it is helping language learners to understand how intercultural interaction takes place and how they perceive people and how people perceive them influencing the success of their communication.

Alptekin (2002) claims that native speaker-based model of communicative competence is limiting and utopian since "it portrays a monolithic perception of native speakers language and culture. It fails to reflect the lingua franca status of English, and it associates the concept of authenticity with the social milieu of the native speaker" (57).

As a result, there is a need to realize developing intercultural communicative competence in the EFL classrooms. Moreover, Alptekin (2002) argues that, in the intercultural communicative competence view, teaching culture cannot be confined to teaching target culture only. It should also include teaching the local culture as well as familiar context and content to motivate students more since they do not feel intimidated by the non-familiar target cultural concepts.

He further suggests designing instructional materials where cultural content chiefly comes from the familiar and indigenous features of local setting in order to motivate students since "most textbook writers are native speakers who consciously or unconsciously transmit the views, values, and beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of their own English-speaking society, usually the UK and the USA" (Alptekin, 1993: 138).

In addition, Alptekin (1993, 2006) states that familiar schemata, especially in the reading texts, eases language acquisition process as readers' cultural background knowledge play a facilitative role in understanding the text. Taking this view into consideration this paper aims at answering the following question:

(1) Is there a place for a local culture (that is, Turkish culture) in the reading book 'www.dbe.offlinereadings0.5'?

The analysis is concerned with three aspects of the culture: places, persons and practices which were also the focus of a study conducted by Yuen (2013). Since the study is concerned with these three elements there is a need to elaborate on them. While places refer to the contexts and surroundings in which the events happen throughout the reading text, persons refer to the representatives of a culture such as heroes or famous people whereas practices refer to customs and traditions peculiar to a specific culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Upon analyzing the high school EFL conversation textbooks in Korea, Kang-Young (2009) found that the

culture in the book is dominated remarkably by the US culture almost leaving no space for the local one or cultures of other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, etc. She suggests that cultural content of textbooks should include both the target culture and the local culture elements; however, target culture does not only mean the culture of UK or US but also other English speaking countries.

Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2013) found out that Chinese EFL university textbooks contained cultural information related to the target culture, and there was little place for international culture and the source (native) culture. They claim that such lack of international and local cultural input might create difficulties when Chinese students participate in international communication practices.

In a study conducted in Japan, Reimann (2009) states that many EFL books in Japan avoid the inclusion of international or local cultural content, which might result from the fact that the students are quite exam oriented, and the examination does not require any cultural knowledge. Some other books which allocate some space to cultural knowledge do it without considering the accuracy, presentation and practicality. Therefore, there is a need to restructure the cultural content of the EFL books in Japan.

Nault (2006) claims that we are now living in a global world in which English does not belong to only British or American people; as a result, the cultural content of the EFL books should not only focus on the cultures of these countries. It is a fact that English learners do not communicate only with native speakers coming from these countries, which necessitates including more global cultural elements in the books along with the local cultural elements in order not to "Anglo-Americanise" the students learning English" (p. 325).

In a study carried out in Iran, Aliakbari (2004) revealed that Iranian high school textbooks appeared to be weak in terms of exposing students to international cultural elements and broadening their worldview or cultural understanding. The evaluated textbooks were insufficient in terms of teaching culture specifics and culture-general skills as well as lacking relevant vocabulary items in the texts. Therefore, the books were not qualified enough to equip students with intercultural communication skills.

The investigation of the cultural content of the EFL books in Turkey has also found out similar results in terms of the importance given to the international and local cultural understanding. The study conducted by Iriskulova (2012) presented that the cultural content of the ELT books in Turkey is insufficient, and there is a mismatch between the perceptions of teachers and the students about culture and the cultural elements included in the books. The evaluated ELT book was considered to be insufficient regarding providing native (local) cultural elements which were the desire of the teachers and the students.

A similar study was conducted by Çelik and Erbay (2013), in which they analyzed the cultural content of three ELT books in Turkey. They concluded that there seems to be an increase in the awareness of creating an intercultural communicative content in the recent books published by the government. The researchers reached this conclusion as the books under investigation included worldwide cultural elements, although it was dominated by European cultures.

To the researcher's knowledge, the studies conducted concerning the cultural content of ELT books in Turkey is limited both in numbers and scope. Although the studies mentioned earlier focused on the books which are used in the primary and secondary level, a similar study concerned with the ELT books at the university level has not been encountered. Therefore, there is a need to look at the ELT books in the tertiary level, and the present study, despite analyzing only a book, aims at contributing to the field by filling this gap.

METHODOLOGY

Setting

This study was conducted at Middle East Technical University Northern Cyprus Campus (METU NCC), School of Foreign Languages (SFL). METU NCC is an English medium university; therefore, students are required to take METU English Proficiency Exam (EPE) and score a minimum 60 out of 100 in order to be able to continue their education in their respective departments.

Those who cannot pass the exam need to attend English preparatory classes at METU, NCC and SFL, and for additional preparation for the English proficiency exam. METU, NCC and SFL offers different level courses for students. Beginner, elementary and intermediate level courses are offered in the first semester, while pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper intermediate level courses are offered in the second semester. Students are placed in the respective courses according to the results of a placement test administered by the SFL.

SFL uses different types of books both published by international publishing houses such as Top Notch Fundamentals and Language Leader and in-house publications such as www.dbe.offlinereadings0.5. It is expected that international books directly or indirectly expose students to their own cultural elements; therefore, there is a need to look at the books published by the school itself to discover whether or not there are traces of the local culture in the books.

The textbook under evaluation

The present study evaluated the reading book www.dbe.offlinereadings 0.5 (Gülsen, 2011). It was prepared and written by Figen Gülsen and published by Department of Basic English, Middle East Technical University in order to enhance reading skills of beginner level students. The book consists of 121 pages, 12 units and 46 reading texts. There are different topics in each unit, and the types of the questions related to the text range from reference questions, comprehension questions to graphic reading questions. There is no statement regarding the topics of the units. However, each text in each unit revolves around the same topic with the other texts in the unit. The list of the topics in the units (Table 1) was suggested by the readers according to the content of the reading texts in each unit during the content analysis of the reading texts. The suggested topic list is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The list of the topics in each unit.

Unit 1	Cities
Unit 2	Job (Ads)
Unit 3	Interesting creatures
Unit 4	Leisure time activities
Unit 5	Means of transportation
Unit 6	Food and eating habits
Unit 7	Shopping
Unit 8	People
Unit 9	Interesting inventions
Unit 10	Finance
Unit 11	Architecture
Unit 12	Tourism

Research design and procedure

The present study focuses on evaluating a textbook in order to find out whether there are cultural elements in the reading texts or not; if there is, to find out the frequency of cultural elements and to sort out according to the source cultures. In order to decide whether or not there were cultural elements in the texts, the study adopted a thematic content-based analysis of the reading texts. As a result, each passage was carefully read by two different readers to check if the texts included cultural elements in their contents. During the process, the readers took notes, marked the cultural elements and compared and discussed their findings. Finally, each element was sorted out in terms of country and type of the cultural element (place, person and practice). In addition to thematic content-based analysis, the study used item frequency analysis (Aliakbari, 2004; Liu and Laohawiriyanon, 2013; Iriskulova, 2012). Upon sorting out, the number of cultural elements across different cultures were counted and they were converted to percentages. Lastly, the frequency of items and percentages of elements from target culture and those of local and other cultures were compared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After evaluating and analyzing the content of the book, it was found out that 12 reading texts out of 45 were discovered cultural content free texts. These reading texts were about general knowledge including topics such as animals, food, shopping, sleeping, etc., without any reference to any specific culture or group of people.

The remaining 33 texts, on the other hand, contained cultural elements or references from different places around the world. As shown in Table 2, the number of the places mentioned in these reading texts was 72 (for example, United States, Britain, and China), the number of the persons (representatives) was 34 (for example, Uğur Dündar, Michael Schumacher and Lady Gaga), and the number of the practices was 21 in total (for example, Sokran Festival, pastimes of Australian kids and leisure activities in India). The order of the items in the table is in accordance with the frequency of appearance in the texts.

According to the results in Table 2, the places mentioned in the book is dominated by the target culture(s) as the total of the places of the target cultures (USA, UK and Australia) is 27 (37.5%). However, the number of the places from Turkey which is the source culture is also high which is 13 (18.08%). This can be considered as positive in terms of exposing students to familiar content, which can facilitate the comprehension of the text by Turkish students as suggested by Alptekin (1993, 2006). The number of the places from other European countries is 7 (9.72%).

Other places mentioned in the texts include Thailand, some African countries and Laos. Although the book and the reading texts expose students to different places around the world and also include the source culture, it can be said that it is still dominated by the European, British and American places considering the high percentage (43.05%) of the places allocated for these countries. This was the same concern put forward by the studies conducted by Kang-Young (2009) and Nault (2006).

However, the inclusion of places from Turkey in the evaluated book can be considered as the "increased awareness" about giving place to source culture in EFL books, which was also claimed by Çelik and Erbay (2013). Such exposure to different cultures along with the local culture might help students build intercultural communicative competence much more easily. Another issue to be raised here is that there is not any place mentioned in the book from the Middle East, Turkic countries and Caucasia despite the fact that Turkey is located close to the Middle East and it is a Turkic country neighboring Caucasian countries.

As to the persons or representatives of different cultures, the results are similar to those of the places because the evaluated book is also dominated by the target culture(s) as the percentage is 61.76. Although different groups of people such as San people and Clarice Adhiambo from Africa, Thai people from Thailand

Table 2. The results of the item analysis.

Places (72 in total)	No.	%
UK	15	20.83
Turkey	13	18.05
USA	9	12.5
East Asia	8	11.11
Other European Countries	7	9.72
Australia	3	4.16
Other	11	15.2
Persons (34 in total)		
American	17	50
African	7	20.58
British	4	11.76
Indian	2	5.88
Turkish	1	2.94
Other	3	8.82
Practices (21 in total)		
European	10	47.6
American	6	28.5
Asian	3	14.28
African	1	4.76
Australian	1	4.76

and Japanese people other than the European or American ones such as Frank Epperson, Mel Eddison and Tim Gillbanks, the only names used as representatives of the source culture are Sabancı Holding family and Uğur Dündar. Another interesting finding is that American or European persons are mentioned mainly through individual names whereas other culture groups are represented through a group of people such as San People, Japanese people, Thai people, etc.

There are 21 practices in total mentioned in the texts. The practices are also dominated by the European and American traditions and customs such as their eating habits and table manners. There are other traditions explained in texts such as how to behave in a Japanese house and how Thai people celebrate their new year; however, there is not any practice related to the local or source culture, that is, Turkish culture.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Taking the scope and the aspects into consideration, the present study has some limitations. The results of the study are confined just to this specific book, and they cannot be generalized to the other books used at SFL or published by this publishing house.

Moreover, there are only three aspects analyzed in this study. In further studies, a comparative study can be done to see the similarities and differences among the books by this publisher and among the books published by different houses. Despite its limitations, the present study has implications and suggestions for publishers and teachers

Considering the results, it can be said that the book consciously or unconsciously does not favor any specific culture(s), although it is dominated by the target culture(s) in terms of places, persons and practices. The results have revealed that there seems to be an awareness on the publisher's side in terms of using international and local sources along with the target cultural elements in order to equip learners with intercultural communicative competence (Alptekin, 1993).

Although there is such awareness, and the book tries to serve it, the inclusion of local culture is just limited to the inclusion of places which is not sufficient to improve learners' intercultural communicative competencies since without knowing about their own culture or the cultural terminology and references required to talk, learners cannot be expected to talk about or comment on them in the target language.

Therefore, in order to be a more effective book, the publishers (in newer versions or editions) can reduce the target culture dominance and add more local elements, especially in the persons and practices part. When this imbalance problem is solved, the book can serve more effectively as a material to develop the intercultural

communicative competence of the learners.

There are also implications for teachers using this book in the classroom. As they cannot change the content of the book, they can prepare extra materials about the local culture to support the content of the book. They can arrange discussion groups in the classrooms to compare and contrast different practices mentioned in the book with the Turkish practices. They can ask their students to role play the different practices through a comparative framework in which students can enjoy the text and the content more.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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