

English Language Teaching, National Identity and Globalization in Iran: the Case of Public Schools

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Abstract

Present study aimed to investigate cultural pattern of English language materials taught at public schools of Iran to see to what extent these materials are appropriate in terms of national identity and globalization. In doing so, high school textbooks published by ministry of education were analyzed in order to examine if they are suitable for the age of globalization. Content analysis of textbooks revealed that authors of these textbooks have avoided cultural matters of foreign countries as much as possible. As a result, textbooks are mostly neutral in terms of culture. The focus of most of the texts has been scientific subjects and also the value of education. In terms of national history category, there is no reference to ancient history of the country. Belief and behavior part including daily life is accentuated in different parts of the books. As the data reveals, due to the fact that activities and passages related to national identity and international issues constitute less than 7% of the textbooks, these books are not suitable for educating students at the age of globalization.

Key words: globalization, textbooks, high schools, national identity

1. Introduction

English language teaching in the milieu of promoting globalization has been approached from diverse views because of its importance as an international language used for global, political, cultural and financial exchange. (Chang, 2006). As Acar (2004) asserts, there exist many different conceptions of globalization and its influence on native cultures. One of the most frequently used terms for globalization is westernization or more specifically Americanization since western countries or the United States is now the superpower, with a leading economic, cultural and military position in the global order and also with many of the most apparently cultural expressions of globalization (Giddens, 2000). Unlike this view of globalization, some others believe that globalization is as a multi-way process. It is not supposed to make all nations homogenous rather to make them familiar with greater variety as well as the pervasive variety of native cultures.

Hsieh (2010) holds that a main feature of modern global society is the interrelation between numerous communities. This is manifested mainly in the inter-dependence of global economics from which the concept of globalization has appeared. In present world where different distances are much shortened and sometimes deleted by transportation and communication technology, globalization is becoming interwoven with any facet of human's life. Globalization is the strengthening of the universal social relationships which connects distant communities in such a way that local events are being shaped by events occurring far distance away. (Giddens, 1990, p.64) In terms of language choice for worldwide relationship and communication, the rational foundation of globalization has led to growing international prose on the theme of English language in both academic and business fields. As Hjarvard (2004) elaborates on the past two or three decades, English has gained a particular place among languages. It is nowadays a *lingua franca*. English has become the *lingua franca* of the World Wide Web too. It is the nexus for spoken and written communication across national borderlines. Different languages have also been influenced by the challenge English imposes, inclining to a greater or lesser amount to establish English words, pronunciation, word order, and so forth in their languages.

As a result, English would play a vital role in worldwide relationships and brings significant interest to any community. For many countries, English language education policy has become a major attention of their officials. However, educational policy of these authorities has influenced their communities in ways that are often controversial. According to Chang (2006) English has been the prevailing foreign language in the curricula of educational institutions and in foreign language learning. As Bamgbo'se (2001) holds, English is accepted as the dominating language in the world as globalization comes to be commonly known in political and educational communication.

English as a global language flourished with the spread of British colonial power in the 19th century and its leading position has been fortified by the powerful influence of the United States in the 20th century. Furthermore, the power and influence of the internet is evident too. Globalization and English language in countries' education have been widely recognized nowadays in the context of globalization. Bottery (2000) showed that the development of "globalization" has been related to the authority of the English language. Short *et al.* (2001, as cited in Chang, 2006) indicated that cultural globalization was closely linked with the development of English as a global language. Globalization has been operating as a moving force to enhance the position of English as an international language. There is no doubt that many countries have been making attempts to support English education in order to engage actively in international activities. As such, finding the ways which help in teaching English and culture in a balanced manner seems inevitable.

Language textbooks seem to play a pivotal role in educational system of every country. In Iranian schools, ELT textbooks are used widely and serve as syllabus and main guideline for teachers. In this study, high school textbooks published by ministry of education were analyzed in order to examine if they are suitable for the age of globalization. The study attempts to contribute to content analysis of Iranian ELT textbooks by identifying cultural pattern of the textbooks.

2. Literature review

There are few studies which have investigated ELT textbooks in Iran. These researches studied textbooks from a number of perspectives (see e.g. Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Jahangard, 2007; Keshavarz & Akbari Malek, 2009; Riazi & Mossalanejad, 2010; Ahmadi, 2002). Ansary & Babaii (2003) tried to analyze the status of sexism in current ESL/EFL textbooks in Iran. To this end, two types of analysis were performed to study the manifestation(s) of sexist views and values in two textbooks (Right Path to English I & II) that are locally planned to furnish for and correspond to the English language needs of Iranian students at secondary schools. Firstly, a planned quantitative content analysis was performed regarding to (a) sex visibility in both contexts and illustrations and (b) female/male topic existence in conversations and reading passages. Then, a qualitative analysis was carried out into (a) sex-linked job possibilities, (b) sex-based activity categories, (c) stereotyped sex roles (d) priorities and (e) male generic conception. Results showed that Right Path to English I & II can be considered sexist textbooks that present students, in their early experience of English language studies, with an unjust and intolerable picture of women. They proposed that this sexism, though discomforting and unappealing, seems to represent the legitimate unjust sex bias to the disadvantage of women in society.

In line with these studies, Aliakbari (2004) studied the culture addressed in ELT in Iran in general and the place of culture in ELT at the high school level of education in particular. Throughout the research, this theme as tested with reference to the related theoretical background and the content analysis of prescribed English textbooks was scrutinized. The research results indicated that recent materials or textbooks were superficial and shallow according to their treatment of culture. He concludes that these materials are insufficient to the task of teaching culture specifics in the deeper sense values, beliefs, etc or culture-general skills such as intercultural communication and understanding. Yet in another study, Keshavarz & Akbari Malek (2009), studied three aspects of meaning namely social relations, subject positions, and contents in the dialogues of advanced parts of two series of textbooks namely *ILI* (Iran Language Institute) and *True to life* textbooks to detect whether there was any sensible ideological direction(s) in the two series of textbooks based on a critical discourse analysis framework. The analysis showed that in both series of the textbooks, social relations were mostly identical i.e. dialogues take place between participants who accomplish almost equal social status. Concerning subject position, analysis demonstrated that after friends, occupational and commercial associated positions were the leading ones in the selected textbooks. Investigation of the contents in the conversations illustrated that emphasis was mainly on market and market related activities. They sustained to maintain that textbooks had a tendency to signify a particular discourse type more dominantly.

In a recent study, Riazi & Mossalanejad (2010) reported a study that investigated the types of learning objectives represented in Iranian senior high school and pre-university English textbooks using Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives. Three high-school textbooks and the pre-university textbook were included in the analysis. A coding scheme was developed based on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning objectives so as to codify the learning objectives. The exercises and tasks of the textbooks were assigned codes and the frequencies and percentages of occurrence of diverse learning objectives were calculated. Results of the study indicated that in all grades lower-order cognitive skills were more prevalent than higher order ones. Moreover, the difference between the senior high school and the pre-university textbooks in terms of the levels of the taxonomy were significant. In addition, the pre-university textbook used some degrees of higher-order learning objectives.

As the study of relevant literature shows, previous studies investigated the textbooks in relation to a number of factors such as cultural matters, gender and discourse aspects; however, there are no studies investigating textbooks in terms of national identity and globalization. As a result, present study strives to shed light on this area by answering the following questions.

2.1. Research Questions

1. To what extent do Iranian ELT textbooks promote a sense of globalization?
2. To what extent do Iranian ELT textbooks promote a sense of national identity?
3. To what extent do these textbooks meet the demands of Iranian English language education in the age of globalization?

3. Methodology

In the procedure of content analysis, Byram's (1993) checklist was used. This checklist evaluates the extent and manner in which a textbook includes a focus on cultural content. It includes the following categories;

- a) Social identity and social group (social class, regional identity, ethnic minorities)
 - b) Social interaction (differing levels of formality; as outsider and insider)
 - c) Belief and behavior (moral, religious beliefs; daily routines)
 - d) Social and political institutions (state institutions, health care, law and order, social security, local government)
 - e) Socialization and the life cycle (families, schools, employment, rites of passage)
 - f) National history (historical and contemporary events seen as markers of national identity)
 - g) National geography (geographical factors seen as being significant by members)
 - h) Stereotypes and national identity (what is "typical" symbol of national stereotypes)
- (Byram, 1993, As cited in Juan, 2010, p.138).

For the sake of incorporating items related to globalization, we included two additional categories namely life in other countries and international and intercultural aspects.

For each textbook, researchers identified and explored indicators that fit into each category mentioned in the checklist. For the sake of reliability two raters analyzed the material and degree of their agreement on clustering one part of the book to an especial category was determined.

3.1. Materials

Three ELT textbooks which are being taught at high school level in Iran were selected for analysis. The list of the books is as follows:

- 1- Birjandy, P., Soheili, A., Noroozi, M., & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2006). *English Book 1*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- 2- Birjandy, P., Noroozi, M., & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2005). *English Book 2*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- 3- Birjandy, P., Noroozi, M., & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2007). *English Book 3*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.

3.2. Method of Analysis

Content analysis method was applied for analysis. Based on mentioned criteria, a coding scheme was designed. Then different parts of the books including reading passages, new words sections, and language functions were coded in terms of the theme and meaning that they suggested. At last, number of different codes was calculated and frequencies were extracted. In order to increase the reliability of analysis, two raters analyzed the textbooks.

4. Results

The results of content analysis are indicated in Table 1. As the frequencies and percentages show, the largest parts of the textbooks were related to belief and behavior part (51.89%). After that, social interaction (9.46%), social identity and social group (5.68%), national geography (3.78%), socialization and the life cycle (2.65%), social and political institutions (2.27%), international and intercultural aspects (2.27%), life in other countries (1.89%), stereo types and national identity (0.37%) were in the next ranks respectively. 19.69% of activities were completely neutral and were related to culture-free materials e.g. nature and natural rules. In the next part, research questions are treated separately.

RQ1. To what extent do Iranian ELT textbooks promote a sense of globalization?

As the percentage of activities shows, in the high school textbooks, 1.68% involves activities and passages related to life in other countries. In addition, only 2.27% of activities and tasks involve international and intercultural aspects. As such, it can be concluded that the percentage of textbooks materials related to globalization is very limited.

RQ 2. To what extent do Iranian ELT textbooks promote a sense of national identity?

As table 1 and figure 1 show, cultural categories which are related to national identity do not constitute a large portion of activities and passages. There is no material involving national history of the country. Additionally, only 0.37% of the textbooks materials were related to stereotypes and national identity. As for national geography, 3.78% of materials were related to this category. So, it can be concluded that the percentage of textbooks materials related to national identity is quite inadequate.

RQ 3. To what extent do these textbooks meet the demands of Iranian English language education in the age of globalization?

As the data reveals, due to the fact that activities and passages related to national identity and international issues constitute less than 7% of the textbooks, these books are not suitable for educating students at the age of globalization.

5. Discussion

The results of the study clearly show that high school textbooks have not been successful in familiarizing students with cultural matters of other countries. The authors of these textbooks have avoided cultural materials and have tried to be neutral in terms of culture. This can be attributed to the fact that some authors believe that cultural matters should not be transferred through the textbooks (Ketabi & Talebinejad, 2009). These findings are in line with Ketabi & Talebinejad (2009) and Aliakbari (2003) who maintain that the cultural aspects of language learning have not received sufficient attention in the textbooks. In general, the wealth of research has revealed that the ELT textbooks in Iran seem too weak to offer fresh information or widen students' worldview or cultural understanding. In other words, the study seems to suggest that changes should be made if we want to prepare the students to communicate in the multicultural world of English and if we desire to utilize the nationwide developed textbooks for the optimal advantage. Besides, national identity and history of Iran has not been taken into account in high school textbooks. Generally, it can be concluded that these textbooks are not suitable for the age of globalization. Globalization has not implemented merely to unify language and increase use of English. In this regard, national linguistic cultures may be under pressure which is very much compatible with globalization theorists' characterization of the process. Governments must pay close attention to languages. Language is a key factor in identifying national identity.

Considering the results of this study, one can suggest several proposals for developing textbooks and materials that may support to make a more enjoyable move toward the future of English language education in Iran. First, one of the objectives of foreign language study is to expand insight into the foreign nations since understanding different cultures will guide students toward globalization. The teaching of culture is not a secondary objective, rather equally important as, and balances the linguistic syllabus of English teaching and learning typical English language instructional materials to convey cultural messages from a one dimensional-base view toward a wide view. Second, more energy should be put forth on guiding students to take a more reflective or ethnographic attitude toward the cultural values of other nations as a way of raising their knowledge of intercultural issues. Through this method, students could value the plurality of behavior, expectations, thought, perspectives, and values of other different cultural groups. As mentioned above, one aim of many foreign language classes is to inform the students the existence of discrepancies in current life patterns between the foreign cultures and the native one (Yim, 2003).

To present an intercultural point of view, textbooks should smooth the way to assess and compare foreign cultures to balance them by incorporating the students' own cultures as a fundamental basis. Because national identity of students is very important, students should be familiarized with their national history and identity. This is a better trend to acculturate learning than simply providing just a bulk of static knowledge about foreign countries and people. This may be done by critically comparing cultural phenomena and pointing out the differences and similarities that exist between the two cultures. The way we understand phenomenon in our own culture is by juxtaposing and comparing them with other phenomena. In this way, students will be familiar with two types of culture and identify the mismatches. Textbooks authors can allocate some textbook content to activities and passages that require students to compare and contrast customs and cultures of two or more nations while bearing in mind that the cultural manifestations are always constructed and therefore, open to analysis and debate.

Furthermore, cultural learning is not only aimed at creating an empathetic understanding of the foreign culture. It also helps the individuals to tolerate cultural differences even when it is not fully understood or articulated. Such an approach fosters generally open-minded, tolerant and sympathetic attitude towards other cultures. Students should understand that every culture should be respected; however, in the area of globalization, people should do their best to keep their valuable cultural customs. Teachers should attempt to relate cultural themes to suitable language learning activities. These skills and habits include critical thinking, discussion and etc. Cultural training does not necessitate teachers to act as information providers because details about different cultures are already available in a vast number of related publications including textbooks. Instead, teachers require implementing exposure to realities as simply a basis for grasping student's interest in real communication with foreign people and cultures. Eventually, the role of the English language teacher, beyond teaching students how to speak, understand, read, and write English, is to provide opportunities for students to involve in meaningful communication with different people and cultures and to react critically on these interactions. By doing so, It can be a starting point to achieve the Iranian government's mandate for English language educators to shed light in the way of preparing students as leaders and supporting participants in today's international society.

6. Conclusion

Present study revealed that current ELT textbooks which are being taught in Iranian high schools are not efficient at the age of globalization. This is due to the fact that these textbooks do not promote sense of national identity in a proper manner. Additionally, they do not consider global trends in the world as they do not make students familiar with other countries and their cultures. It is suggested that policy makers and textbooks authors pay close attention to these areas and redesign the textbooks in line with latest trends in the world. Further research considering globalization in relation to textbooks of other levels will contribute to development and revision of textbooks in accordance with new trends.

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Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of different cultural subcategories in the textbooks

Category	Book 1		Book 2		Book 3		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Social identity and social group	4	4.08	8	10.38	3	3.29	15	5.68
Social interaction	14	14.28	8	10.38	5	5.49	27	9.46
Belief and behavior	36	37.75	41	53.24	60	65.93	137	51.89
Social and political institutions	4	4.08	1	1.29	1	1.09	6	2.27
Socialization and the life cycle	3	3.06	1	1.29	3	3.29	7	2.65
National history	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
National geography	4	4.08	0	0	6	6.59	10	3.78
Stereo types and national identity	0	0	0	0	1	1.09	1	0.37
Life in other countries	3	3.06	1	1.29	1	1.09	5	1.89
international and intercultural aspects	0	0	1	1.29	5	5.49	6	2.27
Neutral	30	30.6	16	20.77	6	6.59	52	19.69

Figure 1: percentages of different cultural subcategories in the textbooks

