The Role of EFL Textbooks in Improving Intercultural Competence

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Intercultural Competence

▸ Knowing about other cultures or the ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures etc. (Byram,1997).

▸ Each person within him- or herself has *different layers of identities* which become relevant within a particular intercultural situation.
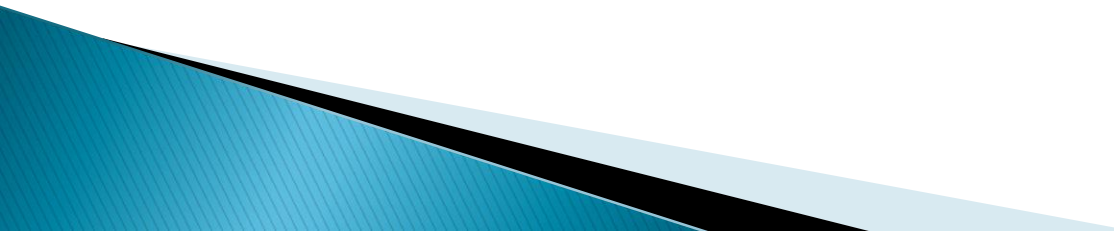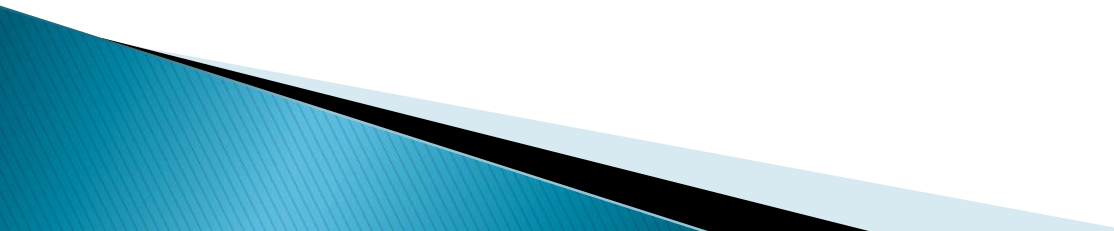
▸ However, all individuals have the same *basic human needs* for self-affirmation: security, trust, inclusion, connection and stability.

▸ An interculturally competent individual will interact in such a way that *all participants feel understood, respected and supported*. (Suzanne Weber, 2003).
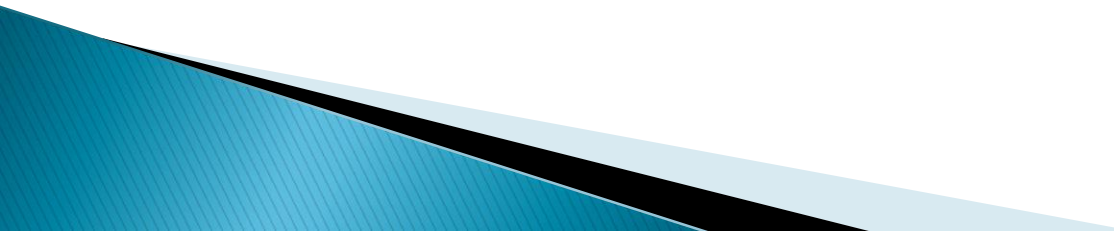
Research Problem

▸ In EFL situations learners are not in close contact with

people from other cultures especially in countries

which are not cosmopolitan; therefore, they might face

communication breakdown in the real world

interactions.

- Classroom instruction must expose EFL learners to information about different cultures.

- Textbooks are among the important devices in foreign language contexts that can equip students with cultural competence.

Research question

▸ Therefore, this study set out to analyze one of the popular books taught in English schools in Iran in an effort to find out to what extent they enhance language learners' intercultural competence.

▸ Do *Top Notch* series have enough cultural themes to help EFL students in Iranian language schools improve their intercultural communicative competence?
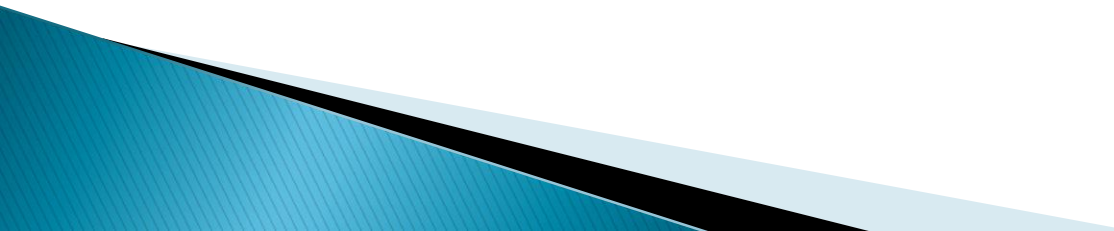
Design of the Study

▸ A *descriptive content analysis* method was used to analyze the extent and number of the cultural representations and their distribution in *Top Notch series*.
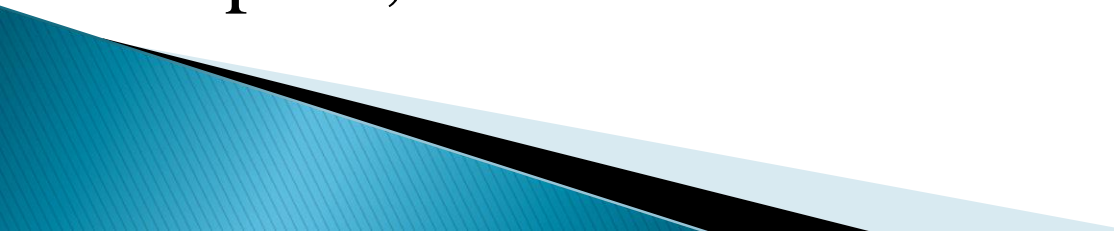
Instrument

- The data analysis framework that the researcher used to carry out content analysis was the framework of Yuen (2011), which was influenced by the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLEP, 1996, 1999, 2006).

- In this framework, cultural elements are categorized into four parts namely *product, practices, perspectives, and persons.*

Products

- Tangible: Books or paintings etc.

- Intangible: Oral tales or traditional dances etc.

- The cultural elements related to *food, entertainment, merchandise, print, tools, dwellings, clothing, laws, education, religions, and travel were grouped as products.*

Practices

- The second category is practices which are related to the behavioral patterns of a particular society. These practices may encompass customs and information about daily life, form of address, use of personal space, and rituals.

Perspectives

▸ The third category which refers to perspectives includes the *underlying beliefs and values, inspirations, myths, superstitions, and world views of a particular society.*

Persons

▸ Finally, the fourth category, persons, encompasses *famous individuals and fictitious or unknown people from a particular society.*

Data Analysis

- Based on Yuen's (2011) content analysis framework cultural elements were categorized into four parts. The frequency of each category was counted in each book.
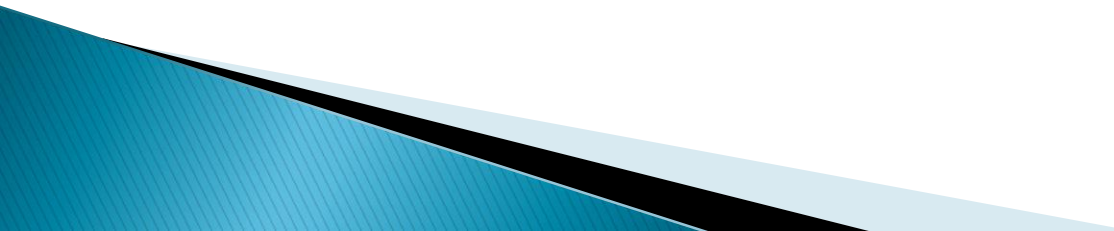
Top Notch	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons
Fundamental A	7	27	4	8
1A	27	4	1	12
2A	36	31	14	7
3A	15	40	16	9

▸ Some guides from previous studies were used to design some questions targeting products, practices, perspectives, and persons to help analyze the books.

Results and Discussion

- ***Products***

- **1. Which/how many cultural topics and themes are covered? Are many aspects of life in the target country acknowledged? Are they relevant and interesting for students?**

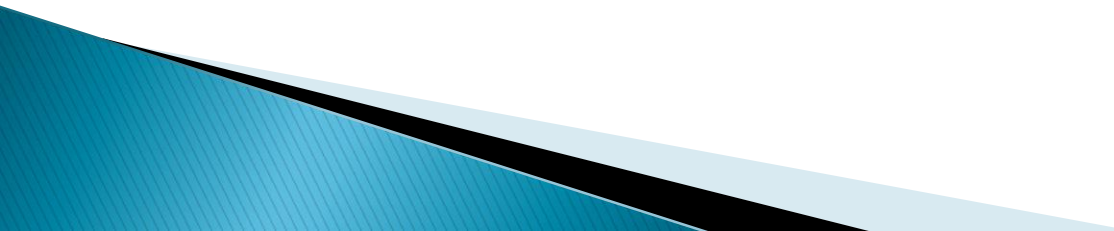- The books offer a great variety of cultural topics and acknowledge both high culture and daily culture.

- The situations chosen to convey the themes are not limited to American culture

- For instance, when it comes to **entertainment,** the series gathers different situations from all around the world and tries to communicate the point that even if the characters are from seemingly diverse cultures, they, as citizens of one global village have the same way to become entertained.

- Other products like merchandise, travel, education, clothing, and etc. are included in all four books.

- However, they are not just restricted to the United States or other English speaking countries as the series collects situations from different countries.

- **2. Do the tasks with a cultural component trigger the students' active engagement? Do they encourage dialog and interaction?**

- The series employs a variety of characters from a variety of age groups. Therefore, it seems sensible to expect the books to encourage students from different age groups to get involved in the activities.
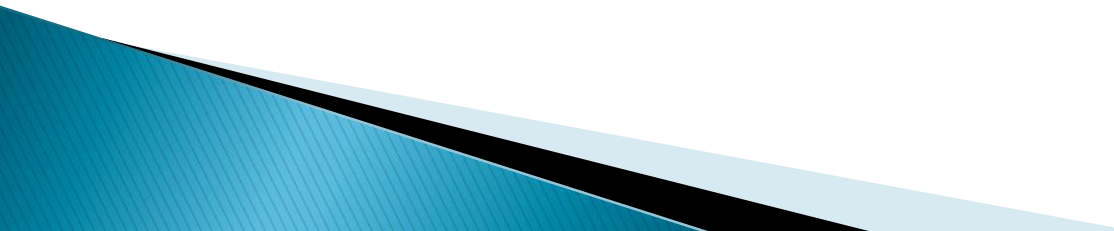
▸ Most tasks that focus on culture trigger the students' active involvement. They require the students to use productive skills such as writing or speaking and often involve partner or group work.
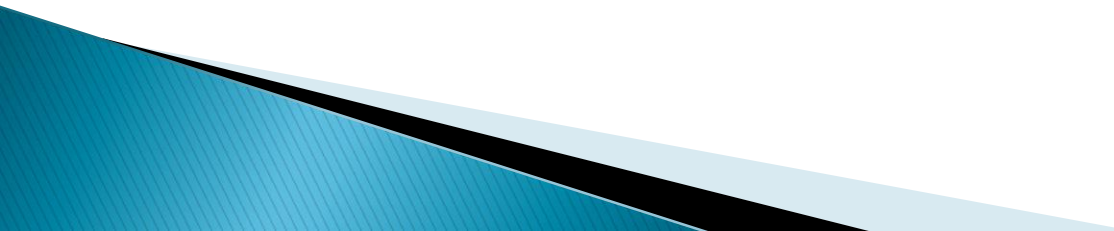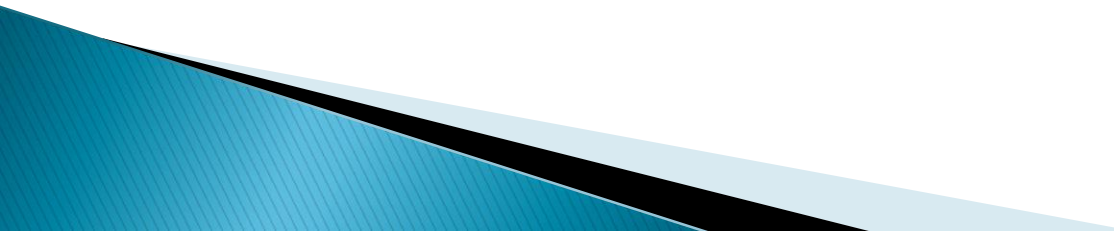
- **3. What products do the tasks emphasize more? Do they help the learners form a special understanding about the target culture?**

- Entertainment and themes related to it are of the highest frequency in the series. It encompasses a vast array of activities that people all around the world do to amuse themselves.
- The second theme which is addressed more than others is travel, which introduces different travel sites, accommodation and payment forms.

▶ Thus, it can be claimed that in terms of products the series are rich with different themes and are capable of equipping the learners with intercultural competence. It seems that the series avoids personal themes like religions and rather emphasize the themes that are common all around the world.
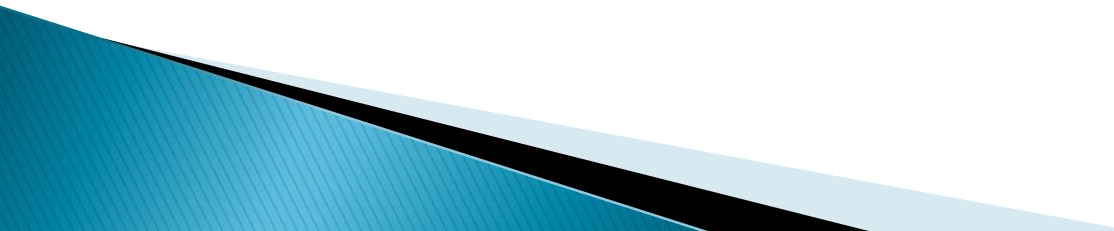
Practices

- The following questions were used to analyze practices in the books:

- **4. Are there any tasks that reflect customs and cultural practices of other cultures? How many tasks address these practices? What aspects of daily life of the target culture are accentuated?**

- There are a variety of situations where the series address greetings in different cultures to enhance cultural awareness.
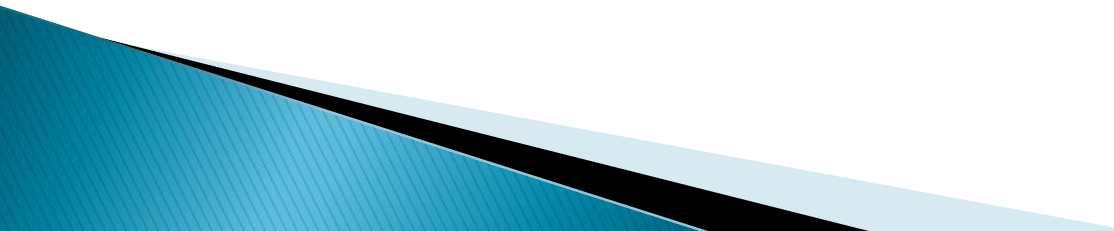
- The way the series approaches the theme related to greetings is not just about the United States or English speaking countries.

- Rather, it tries to introduce customs related to different cultures

- Book 2A addresses even body language and customs in different cultures.

- The books place a paramount importance on interpersonal relationships in this global world.

- Overall, all aspects of daily life are addressed in the series.

- There are a number of parts about daily activities from meeting friends to going to the movies to trying to work out solutions to common problems to phone calls to name just a few.

- **5. Which types of activities are offered to learn about other cultures? Are there any tasks asking the learners to reflect on their own culture and relate it to the target culture?**

- It seems that personal space, gestures, and customs are accentuated more than other practices in the series.

- In book 2A and 3A the whole lesson 1 and 2 are devoted to cultural practices like gestures, customs, etiquette, taboos, greetings, and time to name a few.

- The writers do not look at the culture just statically and stereotypically but dynamically too.

- For instance, a reading related to etiquette in the United States, in 3A, discusses how it has changed overtime. At the end of these tasks students are asked to reflect on their own culture and compare and contrast it with the others.
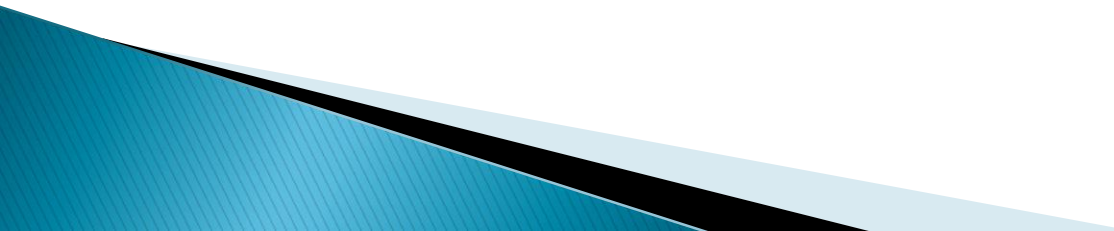
- **6. Is there a great variety of social status, gender, age, culture, and race practices?**

- There is a mention or picture of people from different social status and gender, race and culture in almost all books of the series.

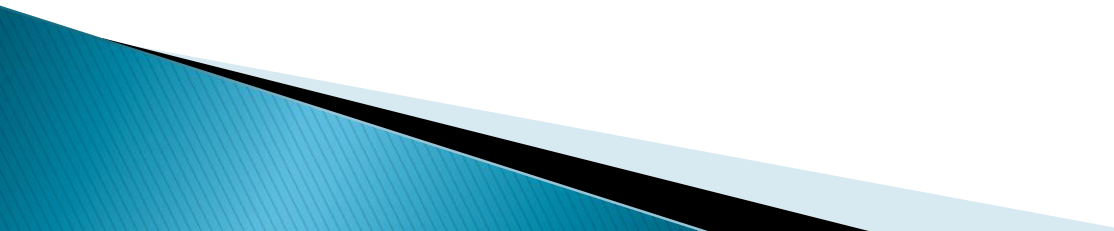- The colorful pages of the series are full of pictures of celebrities, common people and cartoons.
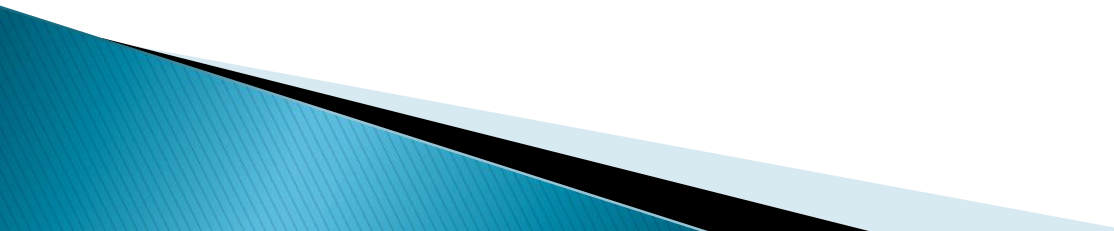
Perspectives

7. Are all areas of intercultural competence, i.e. knowledge, skills, and attitudes, represented in the textbook?

▸ In terms of perspectives, the series includes a variety of activities that address perspectives like beliefs, values, inspirations, and world views. The books most often address topics like attitudes to family, TV programs, punctuality, beauty and so on.

▸ **8. Are there any tasks to challenge learners' attitudes or negotiate meaning?**

▸ There are several tasks challenging learners' attitudes.

▸ For instance, in book 1 A, the writer asks learners' ideas about the time children should leave home.

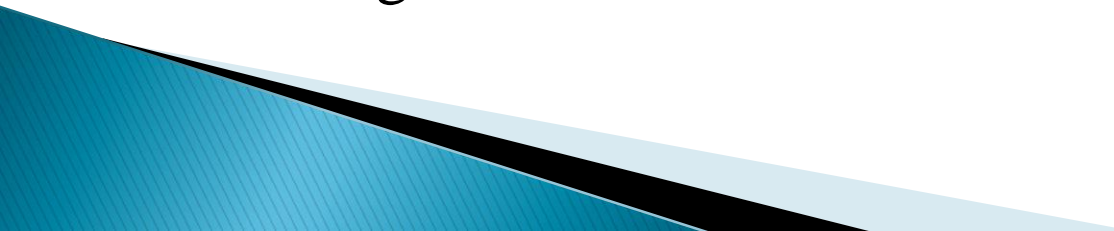▸ There is a questionnaire and also a writing task asking students to compare and contrast their country with another.

Persons

- Finally, the fourth category, persons, encompasses famous individuals and fictitious or unknown people from a particular society.

- **9. Do the tasks represent people in a stereotypical manner or are they presented as individuals?**

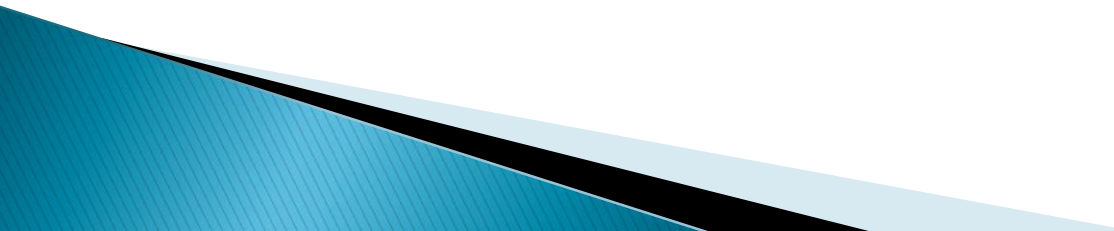- The series uses both famous individuals and fictitious characters to communicate themes.

- Along with these persons, some unknown people are also introduced to help create a situation to practice themes.

- It can be said that the persons are not introduced as stereotypes rather they are individuals like other people who are different because they developed some individual capabilities.

- **10. Does the inclusion of famous individuals in the textbook help students learn anything about target culture and help them develop intercultural communicative competence?**

- The introduction of famous individuals and their life story or the way they managed to succeed in their life help learners learn about some cultural themes that are both universal and specific.

- For instance, the books show the attitudes of different cultures to family relationships, life style, transportation and so on through the famous individuals.

5. Conclusion and Implications

▸ The findings revealed that the series presents a well-balanced view of diverse cultures, involving elements not only from the home culture, but also from target and international cultures.

▸ In addition, the present study demonstrated that the most frequently represented cultural elements comprised products and practices to create greater motivation for learning.

- Overall, the fact that the series tend to expose students to various cultural aspects, rather than English culture alone, can be interpreted as the alignment of the series with the goals of the Common European Framework.

- Additionally, the social and technological transformations taking place worldwide have significantly altered the nature of foreign language education, placing great emphasis on the concept of intercultural communicative competence.

▸ Thus, education systems should try to train some individuals that have no difficulty communicating themselves to others and comprehending others.

Thank you for your patience