

Cultural Contents in Albanian Language Books for Foreigners

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Abstract

In the field of foreign language teaching, one aspect that emerges often as a topic of discussion is the relationship between knowledge of a foreign language and knowledge of the culture of the country. While professional discussion of culture in foreign language teaching materials has been emphasized for several years, there has been little investigation of how Albanian textbooks for foreigners serve as sources of cultural content in teaching Albanian as a foreign language. To address this issue, this paper evaluates textbooks for their cultural content. Native speakers are the best advocates of the cultural component, history, and traditions represented in textbooks. The inclusion of cultural texts guides the interest of the foreigners toward important historical events, national heroes, traditions, the country's uniqueness.

The books will be evaluated by following some guidelines for their cultural contents:

- 1. What is the cultural component included in these textbooks?*
- 2. Where is the information taken from? Is this information based on other books?*
- 3. Can we speak about typical cultural content for the Albanian books for foreigners?*
- 4. What cultural and social groups are represented?*
- 5. Is there any difference in cultural content based on the countries in which these books are used?*
- 6. Do the books address specific learners?*
- 7. Do the books represent the culture in an objective way?*
- 8. Do the books include generalizations about the culture?*
- 9. What is the role of illustrations, if present in these textbooks?*
- 10. Are there any specific activities related to learning culture?*
- 11. Is this information related to the specific topic of each lesson?*
- 12. Does the information about culture help the learners to have a better understanding of the Albanian history and traditions?*

In the field of foreign language teaching, one aspect that emerges often as a topic of discussion is the relationship between learning the language and gaining an understanding about the culture that uses that language. This is due to the fact that it is often argued that in order to be able to use language in real-life situations, people need to understand the link between language, context and culture and to gain insight into some of the aspects of the context and culture that come into play in situations of language use. Researchers in this field have tried first to discuss the definition of culture and then the role culture plays in foreign language teaching. Kramsch argues that culture should be considered as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" Kramsch (1993:1). Indeed, he states that "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners

When they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them". [1]

The importance of including host culture into foreign language curriculum, and the need for the learners "to gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures" is included in the "Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century". These standards stress the importance of understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. "Cultural practices refer to patterns of behavior accepted by a society and deal with aspects of culture such as titles of passage, the use of forms of discourse, the social "pecking order", and the use of space. In short, they represent the knowledge of what to do when and where".[2]

Another standard for the foreign language learning is the demonstration of an understanding between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. This standard focuses on the products of the culture studied and how they reflect the perspectives of the culture. "Products may be tangible (e.g. a painting, a piece of literature, or intangible (e.g. an oral tale, a dance, a sacred ritual, a system of

education). *Whatever the form of the product, its presence within the culture is required or justified by the underlying belief and values (perspectives) of that culture, and the cultural practices involve the use of that product*".[3]

Linguists, especially language teachers and educators, are among the first to realize that textbooks play an important role in the process of learning about the culture.

As Cunigworth (1995:90) states *"if they have any subject content, course books will directly or indirectly communicate sets of social and cultural values which are inherent in their make-up. This is the so-called "hidden curriculum" which forms part of any educational program, but is unstated and undisclosed. It may well be an expression of attitude and values that are not consciously held but which nevertheless influence the content and image of the teaching material, and indeed the whole curriculum. A curriculum (and teaching materials form part of this) cannot be neutral, because it has to reflect a view of social order and express a value system, implicitly or explicitly.*"[4]

The cultural content of the textbooks is important not only for self-learners and students, but also for teachers, who can rely on the information included in the textbook for a better understanding of a specific culture.

This article analyses textbooks from a cultural point of view, focusing on the cultural sensitivity of native speakers as textbook authors. The article is mostly based on the guidelines to evaluate cultural content in textbooks (Kilickaya, 2007).

For a better understanding of the present situation in the textbooks of Albanian for foreigners, it is important to briefly outline the situation of the Albanian textbooks for foreigners.

Albanian textbooks for foreigners have been limited. Under the communist regime, Albania was a closed country and the foreigners who were allowed to enter the country were only diplomats, or members of the communist parties of other countries. The numbers of foreigners studying Albanian in Albania was reduced drastically after the communist regime decided to take "a different road to socialism" and break up first with the Soviet Union in the 60s and then with China in the 70s.

As with all the textbooks written under the communist regime, the books for teaching Albanian to foreigners were influenced by the communist ideology that was trying to show Albania as the only country in the world that was building socialism all by itself. Under such a strong ideological influence in a country trying to be *"a shining light in the coastline of the Adriatic sea"*, the main goal of the books for teaching Albanian to foreigners was to introduce to the world socialist constructions of the achievements of the Albanian people. The textbooks that we have analyzed are written in Albania, from native speakers of Albanian, who have carefully selected the texts used in every unit. In a colorful selection of texts, the beauty of the country, the wonderful nature in the North and the South, the amazing Albanian Riviera, is intertwined carefully with text about the hard work of the communist people of the "new Albania", in their efforts to turn Albania into "a flourishing garden". The image of "a perfect country" where people live in harmony with each-other and have everything they want is in stark contrast to the real Albania, but this contrast is not apparent to foreigners using the textbooks.

In the few books that are published after the fall of communism, the tradition of introducing to the world the best part of Albania continues. There are very few textbooks that have a specific cultural component. Mostly, the focus of the authors is in the text selection.

The following guidelines for analyzing cultural content offer a more detailed understanding of the cultural component in these textbooks.

1. What is the cultural component included in these textbooks?

Almost all of the textbooks include authentic texts from Albanian writers, Albanian folktales, Albanian history books, touristic guides, etc. A general characteristic about these texts is the fact that the authors consider it very important to introduce to the world the real "pride of Albania"- the Albanian nature. In almost all the textbooks there is a variety of texts about the Alps, the wonderful Albanian Riviera, the lakes, etc.

Intertwined with the nature is the "pride" of an ancient country, full of history, where the traces of the ancient world, part of the world cultural heritage, are to be seen everywhere (texts about the castles, the amphitheater in Durres, the theater in Butrint, etc.)



2. Can we speak about typical cultural content for the Albanian books for foreigners?

We cannot speak about a typical separate cultural content that would give real information about everyday life in all the textbooks. Narratives on topics such as gestures, proper behaviors, and taboos rarely exist in these textbooks. Students have to read between the lines to understand what is acceptable and not in Albania, and even this is not always helpful. Albanian relationships to time (for example, with punctuality) and to money are very rarely included in the texts selected from the authors. Also, the dialectal differences are given only through poetry or texts chosen from different dialects.

3. What cultural and social groups are represented?

Albanians live in a country where the majority is Albanian. Therefore, there are few texts included about the minorities. Also, the information about gender issues and family relationships is given indirectly. The social structure of Albanian families can be understood through dialogues or texts, but communicating this is not a goal of the authors. Albanians are perceived as an entity.

4. Do the books address specific learners?

We cannot speak about books addressing specific learners. The target groups are foreigners who are interested in learning Albanian. The goal is to make Albanian even more attractive as the language spoken by an ancient nation, living in a beautiful country that is still awaiting discovery.

5. Do the books represent the culture in an objective way?

As we mentioned above we can speak about the culture introduced in an objective way in the books written after the fall of communism. As for the books written under Communism, they were strongly influenced by the communist ideology.

6. Does the book include generalizations about the culture?

We can speak about one important distinguishing characteristic Albanians take pride in, their generosity and wonderful hospitality. The Albanian authors try to echo this charming element of the Albanian tradition, and this is a thread that connects all these textbooks. In all the textbooks, there are texts or dialogues based on this characteristic of Albanians. We can speak also about typical information such as the food or the love for the country.

7. What is the role of illustrations, if present in these textbooks?

Usually, the illustrations play no important role in these textbooks.

8. Are there any specific activities related to learning culture?

There are exercises that follow the texts, and in the Internet era, the information received from these textbooks can serve to encourage the students to look for detailed information.

9. Is this information related to the specific topic of each lesson?

The cultural information is usually included in the text or the dialogue introduced in each unit. Rarely, the information is given separately, as added to the specific topic of each unit.

10. Does the information about culture help the learners to have a better understanding of the Albanian history and traditions?

In general, all these textbooks can be used also as reference books to learn about Albanian history, nature and traditions. This may be a legacy of the strong influence from the communist period as well as a product of a traditional educational system; this system influences the textbooks written in the recent years because the authors still focus on: the beauty of the country, the glory of the past, the ancient nation, the ancient traditions, the traditional dances and songs, the food, the religious harmony, the generosity and hospitably, and the important Albanians (Mother Theresa).

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