



The Role of EFL Textbooks in Improving Intercultural Competence

ZAREI Nahid (1)

Department of English, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran (1)

Abstract

Today the concept of competence in foreign language has gone far beyond grammatical and even communicative competence, and what has assumed importance is preparing foreign language learners for intercultural interactions and negotiations. Therefore, in order for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners to be able to communicate with other speakers from around the world and develop empathy and openness to other cultures, they need to become interculturally competent. One of the important ways of providing students with intercultural awareness, especially in a foreign language situation, is choosing the right material because textbooks, as one of the main educational tools, are deemed to address such a task. There are some models that have been proposed to help analyze textbooks from this point of view. Drawing on Byram's model, the present study aimed to analyze Top Notch series, as one of the textbooks employed in Iranian English language schools and some universities, to show whether these series include enough intercultural information to help students develop intercultural competence or not. A content analysis was carried out through Yuen's (2011) content analysis framework. The findings revealed that Top Notch series have the potentiality to help students garner some competence to communicate interculturally.

Keywords: *Intercultural Communicative Competence, Textbook, Top Notch series;*

1. Introduction

Through improving intercultural communicative competence and enhancing their cultural awareness, students are supplied with a means that enables them to communicate with people from diverse cultures on issues like addressing people, expressing regret, making requests, refusing, agreeing or disagreeing, talking with someone on weather, greeting, politics, etiquettes, and other topics.

Byram [1] describes intercultural communicative competence as follows:

- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own (savoir être).
- Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction (savoirs).
- Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own (savoir comprendre).
- Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire).
- Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (savoir s'engager).

Textbooks are among the important devices, especially in foreign language context, that can equip students with cultural competence. However, culture seems to be often neglected in EFL and ESL learning processes [2]. Even if it is not neglected, it usually focuses on the culture of the target language and the other cultures are given marginal or no attention. 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.

Thus the study attempted to provide the answer to the following question:

Do Top Notch series have enough cultural themes to help EFL students in Iranian language schools improve their intercultural communicative competence?



2. The Study

2.1. 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*.

2.2. Instrument

The data analysis framework that the researcher used to carry out content analysis was the framework of Yuen [3], 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.

The first category is titled products which include tangible products such as books or paintings and intangible products such as oral tales or traditional dances. The cultural elements related to food, entertainment, merchandise, print, tools, dwellings, clothing, laws, education, religions, and travel were grouped as products. 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. The third category which refers to perspectives includes the underlying beliefs and values, inspirations, myths, superstitions, and world views of a particular society. Finally, the fourth category, persons, encompasses famous individuals and fictitious or unknown people from a particular society.

2.3. Data Analysis

Based on Yuen's [3] content analysis framework cultural elements were categorized into four parts. The frequency of each category was counted in each book. Due to word count limitations in this paper, only the analysis of four books of the *Top Notch series* is reported (see table 1).

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

The researcher used some guides from previous studies to design some questions that would help analyze *Top Notch series* (see section 4). The questions targeting these four parts product, practices, perspectives, and persons were considered to help the researcher analyze the data gathered from content analysis of the books.

4. Results and Discussion

In order for the researcher to have a concrete tool to analyze the data gathered from the content of the series, the following questions were employed. The questions are grouped in a way to help categorize the data into the four categories as introduced by Yuen [3].

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?

Top Notch series offers a great variety of cultural topics and acknowledges both high culture and daily culture. In the books most of the cultural elements are introduced and focused through a selection of situations representing the relevant cultural concept. All the products are addressed all over the series except for religions. However, when it comes to entertainment, the series offers an array of entertaining activities. Interestingly, the situations chosen to convey the theme are not limited to American culture only since 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. It seems that this feature of the series helps students build up an ability of intercultural understanding because they gain the feeling that they can be part of this big society.

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?

It should be mentioned again that 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. Additionally, it seems that the publishers of the series understand what issues probably provoke a deeper engagement since they select some characters or situations that are of interest to people these days. 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 avoid personal themes like religions and rather emphasize the themes that are common all around the world. Therefore, themes like entertainment, food, merchandise and travel are more prevalent than other products.

Practices

The following questions were used to analyze practices in *Top Notch*.

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. *Top Notch 2A* addresses even body language and customs in different cultures. Apparently, 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 about 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 *Top Notch* series. There are a variety of tasks that introduce different gestures and customs in various parts of the world. In *Top Notch 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. It is worth mentioning 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 *Top Notch*. The colorful pages of the series are full of pictures of celebrities, common people and cartoons.

Perspectives

The following questions were asked to address 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 *Top Notch 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?

Concerning persons, there are numerous tasks that use different persons to help students appreciate themes. 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 *Top Notch* 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. Besides, incorporating visible facets of culture, such as food, places to travel, and famous people is useful for attracting students' attention because it may serve 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 *Top Notch* 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 [4; 5; 6; 7]. Thus, education systems should try to train some individuals that have no difficulty communicating themselves to others and comprehending others.

References

- [1] Byram, M. "On being bicultural and intercultural", In G. Alred, M. Byram, & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Intercultural Experience and Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LTD. (2003), (pp. 50-67)
- [2] Tseng, Y-H. "A lesson in culture". *ELT Journal* 56 (1), (2002), pp. 11-21.
- [3] Yuen, K. "The representation of foreign cultures in English textbooks". *ELT Forum* 65 (4), (2011), 458-466. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq089>.
- [4] Baker, W. "From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: Culture in ELT". *ELT Journal*, 66 (1), (2012), 62-70. doi:10.1093/elt/ccr017.
- [5] Houghton, S. "The role of intercultural communicative competence in the development of world Englishes and lingua francas". *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 15, (2009), 69-95.
- [6] Rajagopalan, K. "The concept of 'World Englishes' and its implications for ELT". *ELT Journal*, 58(2), (2004)111-117. doi:10.1093/elt/ccq089
- [7] Seidlhofer, B. "English as a lingua franca". *ELT Journal*, 59 (4), (2005), 339-341. doi:10.1093/elt/ccl064.