

**DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL AWARENESS
IN IRANIAN ENGLISH CLASSES**

The development of cultural awareness in Iranian high school English classes has been one of the major problems of language learning in Iran. Actually most of our students do not have any clear knowledge about the culture of the people whose language they learn. The fact that as time passes the intercultural communication between this generation of students and the English language communities will become weaker and weaker in future. Their ability to express themselves in the English language fluently after studying English at school for six years seems not to be satisfactory. It seems that it is partly due to the textbooks used, and partly to the kinds of instruction, procedures and techniques used for teaching English as a foreign language at high schools. In this paper the researcher has taken an analytic look at the course objectives and English language textbooks written for the high school students by carefully analyzing the content of high school English textbooks prepared and published by the Ministry of Education in Iran.

Key words: *EFL learning, cultural awareness, high school textbooks, culture, Iranian English classes*

Carefully analyzing the English language textbooks in Iran demonstrates that the foreign language culture is totally ignored in them, and there are not any relevant topic about the culture and costumes of English speaking communities, or any comparison of cultures. Although High School English books are expected to teach the language and the culture at the same time which are different from the learners' native language and the culture of their own, in Iran no foreign language culture or tradition is explicitly discussed in the English language textbooks or implicitly reviewed in the pictures, which any language learner is naturally eager to know.

In any pages of these books you only find proofs of irrelevant, contradicting and even culturally meaningless images which only represent Iranian culture if any. The pictures presented in these books are irrelevant with regard to the presentation of culture which is crucial in any language learning environment. So, for a new language learner who is eager to learn about the people and their culture along with learning their language, these books appear to be boring and tiresome. No reference to English Speaking countries was found, nor was a picture exclusively dealing with cross-cultural comparison. High school textbooks developed in Iran seem to

fail to meet the standards normally used in the preparation of materials of this type. Incorporating the cultural and social aspects of language in these books is an important issue which seems to have been neglected. Since textbooks have very great role in any teaching and learning settings and students usually willingly and uncritically absorb knowledge represented by their textbooks, this study is going to investigate a discourse analysis of cultural factors which are implicitly or explicitly mentioned in the pictures presented in Iranian High School books.

Rather than the problem of textbooks, the other major problem is that of the procedures and techniques teachers use to achieve the goals they have in mind. Some of them can use their creativity to change the existing materials of the textbooks into communication tasks and give their students enough practice in different skills. Although during the recent years there have been many changes in English syllabuses at high schools, these changes have not always yielded positive results.

The researcher wishes to see whether it is possible to present the culture of English speaking countries in the content of Iranian high school English textbooks to develop cultural awareness to help improve intercultural communication skill of EFL learners in Iran. The present high school English textbooks and the procedures and techniques used for teaching them cannot help learner to overcome their communication problems in English.

With regard to the aforementioned problems due to the textbooks and the teaching techniques and procedures, the researchers are determined to take an analytic look at high school textbooks and highlight the problems related to both the content of materials and the techniques used in teaching them. The problem here seems to be bidirectional. First, the textbooks themselves should be written in a way that may encourage students and motivate them to engage in the learning activities, and teachers should use new methods, techniques and strategies to prepare their students to take part actively in learning situation in order to achieve the goal; i.e. communication.

In Iran, the educational system of the country has gone under major qualitative and quantitative changes since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In this country, general education is free and parents are obliged to enroll their six-year-old children at schools. It comprises 6 years of primary school, 3 years of Middle high school, and 3 years of secondary high school.

Here, the educational policies are decided primarily by the central government. All of the decisions made by the central government are passed down through provincial organizations for implementation at lower levels which have less authority in decision-making. All major educational policies concerning the school systems, the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system and so on, are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (ME).

In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) and is practiced within a context-restricted environment where language learning is shaped largely by classroom practices, including the use of particular textbooks and the teacher's management of classroom work, without substantial support from social contexts outside the classroom. Educational policies for all classes in government schools are decided primarily by the central government. All of the decisions made by the central government are passed down through provincial organizations for implementation at lower levels which have less or no authority in decision-making. All major educational policies concerning the school systems, the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system and so on, are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

Students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks Jahangard (2007). They are not tested in the university entrance examination, as well as in the final exams during the three years of senior high school and one year of pre-university education. Teachers, even if they are familiar with the foreign language culture, cannot make use of any intercultural communications in government schools. Actually they put much less emphasis, if any, on oral drills, pronunciation, listening and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. Of course, there is no place for foreign language culture and intercultural communication in Iranian English language textbooks. The main focus is to make students pass tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books.

Similarly, according to Namaghi (2006), there are sociopolitical forces which help determine teachers' work in Iran. First, since teachers cannot choose a textbook which is in line with their students' needs, their input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, the output is controlled by the mandated national testing scheme so that teachers cannot develop tests which have positive wash back on teaching and learning. Third, since a higher score is culturally equal to higher achievement, the process of teaching and learning is controlled by grade pressures from students, parents and school principals. As a result, Namaghi argues, teachers become mere implementers of prescribed initiatives and schemes without recourse to their own professional knowledge and experience. With such background information on Iran's pedagogic culture, this study seeks to find out how these textbooks can be modified by comparing the behaviors of these students with those of the learners who attend private institutes and learn English in classroom settings and through textbooks and methods which are not directly controlled by the government. More specifically, the paper seeks to explore whether it is possible for teachers to teach the western culture by using modern methods of language teaching while they have to use the prescribed textbooks.

The Iranian national curriculum for teaching English runs to more than 150 pages in the Persian language. "Students' acquaintance with other cultures" and

“using the English language for training experts up to high levels” have been claimed as the two main goals of the curriculum /Sarab, 2006/.

Teaching four language skills has also been emphasized as one of the main aims of the national curriculum. However, careful analysis of the curriculum document suggests that its main concern is about reading comprehension and grammar. It is the case because each skill is defined in the framework of reading. Furthermore, the bulk of the document is devoted to a presentation of reading strategies and how to teach this skill as well as teaching grammar.

Formal education in any society is based upon various influences and policies. However, there exist some essential sources of impact, which play a vital role in determining the prospect of social foreign literacy, and academic and non-academic communities. Communicative competence, which is tangible to eradicate the borders of differences and challenges, requires enhancing through not only linguistic gain but also more importantly intercultural awareness.

Learning a foreign or second language is not simply mastering an object of academic study, but more appropriately focused on learning a means of communication. Communication in its deep conceptualization in the real and given situations is never out of context- even if it might seem as fatigue communication- and because culture is a part of context, communication is seldom culture-free. Thus, it is today increasingly recognized that language learning and learning about target cultures cannot realistically be separated /Kramersch, 1993; Valdes, 1986/.

Based on my own experience teaching at different levels from high school to university, I argue that external pressures, especially the use of particular testing instruments, affect how teachers use these textbooks in Iran. The highly standardized national tests force both teachers and learners to focus only on structural or formal grammatical features of English because these are the ones that are required to perform well in the exams. The immediate implication of this study concerns the need to use textbooks which address the needs of the students. However, it is also necessary to go ‘up’ to the level of policy-making.

Because of the huge impact of testing on teaching in the classroom, there must be a serious reviewing of the Iranian curriculum in English language teaching in order to broaden the skills required for students to learn in school. In this case, a close collaboration between the language curriculum developers and testing authorities is very important: it will help ensure the incorporation of communicative skills into the curriculum and the standardized (national) examinations. In the process, the communicative potential of English language teaching in Iran and in Iranian schools in other countries will be greatly enhanced /Ghorbani, 2007/.

Even Iranian students at the university level lack the necessary skills to be able to use English communicatively /Farhady, Jafarpoor & Birjandi, 1994/. Here, English language textbooks are very critical because they are the sole source of language input for the students. The quality of paper, binding and printing of these textbooks may be excellent, but they seriously lack variety in communicative tasks

and information gap activities. However, English teachers at Iranian private English language institutes use other teaching materials and methods (e.g., Interchange Third Edition series, a revised edition of New Interchange, under the rubric of CDA.). Thus, this can partly explain why Iranian language learners at such institutes are generally more proficient in using English communicatively than their peers in high schools. So what is it in these prescribed textbooks that highly constrain the learning of English?

Culture has always been with human being communities even before language was invented. Therefore this study is intended to carefully review the content of Iranian high school English books and analyze the pictures to see whether they meet the needs of modern world, and to see whether using methods of teaching the English language as a foreign language is possible here or not. As we have seen, there is no real possibility of real communication in English in a monolingual classroom. Learners must 'pretend' that they need to communicate in English. However, we can reduce the artificiality by looking at the features mentioned above. We can easily reduce teacher intervention, we can use more authentic materials, we can encourage a wider variety of language use, we can create more natural communicative purposes.

The materials chosen for a textbook should satisfy the students' needs and interests and motivate them to get involved in classroom activities and in the learning process. The researchers' findings showed that most of the reading texts included in English textbooks are not suitable for their age and do not motivate the students. To find out how the students feel about their course book materials, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed among students in three high school levels both for girls and boys in two high schools in Iran. The results of the research proved the researchers' viewpoints.

Not all students have the same motivation or purpose for learning English. Some of them look at English just as a course that should be passed. These students have low motivation to participate in class, and they simply try to get a passing mark to get rid of the course. Other students attend the classes to learn some special points to be successful in the University Entrance Examination so they pay attention to special parts of the book. To be successful in this kind of examination, only a good grasp of vocabulary, some grammatical points, and reading comprehension are sufficient, so the students pay little attention to speaking, listening and writing skills. It is a hard task for the teacher to motivate these students to get involved in classroom activities while most of them are top students. Only a few students are highly motivated to learn English as a means of communication. The high school textbooks' exercises and activities do not satisfy most of the students with different motivations for learning English. The result of the study done by the researcher proves this point. For example, only 21% of girls and 28% of boys believe that their English textbooks are excellent in helping them

learn English. Or only 12% of the girls and 9% of the boys believe that the reading texts have been organized according to the difficulty level.

The texts chosen for reading should be authentic or authentic like, not too difficult for the learners, suitable for the teaching goals and usable in the series of activities, lending themselves as a resource of information and ideas. They should also have currency of topics, situations and contexts. Some of the reading texts chosen in high school books lack currency.

The reading parts of the high school English textbooks have not been organized according to level of difficulty or background knowledge of the learners. The first lesson of grade one is more difficult than the other two lessons and it has so many new vocabulary items and expressions. The type of activities and exercises included in the comprehension part are not enough to really develop reading skill in the students because for developing this skill all the techniques related to it such as predicting the content of a text, scanning, skimming, intensive reading, extensive reading and guessing the meaning of unknown words can be dealt with.

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Հ. ԱՍԼԱՆԱԲԱԴԻ – Մշակութային իրազեկության զարգացումը Իրանի ավագ դպրոցի անգլերենի դասընթացում. – Իրանի ավագ դպրոցների անգլերենի դասընթացում մշակութային իրազեկության զարգացումը լեզվի ուսումնասիրման խնդիրներից մեկն է: Աշակերտների մեծամասնությունն հստակ գիտելիքներ չունի ուսումնասիրվող լեզվի ժողովրդի մշակույթի վերբերյալ: Ժամանակի ընթացքում ապագա սերունդների աշակերտների և անգլախոս հանրության միջև միջմշակութային հաղորդակցությունը ավելի ու ավելի կթուլանա: Դպրոցում վեց տարի անգլերեն ուսանելուց հետո աշակերտների անգլերեն հաղորդակցվելու կարողությունը կարծես թե բավարար չէ մասամբ ավագ դպրոցներում անգլերենի որպես օտար լեզվի դասագրքերի, մասամբ էլ դասավանդման գործընթացի և մեթոդների պատճառով:

Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրության են ենթարկվում դասընթացի նպատակները և ավագ դպրոցի աշակերտների համար նախատեսված անգլերենի դասագրքերը՝ մանրակրկտորեն վերլուծելով Իրանի կրթության նախարարության կողմից և հրատարակված ավագ դպրոցների անգլերենի դասագրքերի բովանդակությունը:

Բանալի բառեր. անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու, մշակութային իրազեկություն, ավագ դպրոցի անգլերենի դասագրքեր, մշակույթ, անգլերենի դասընթացներ Իրանում

Х. АСЛАНАБАДИ – Развитие культурной компетенции на занятиях по английскому языку в старшей школе Ирана. – Проблема овладения культурной компетенцией на занятиях по английскому языку в старшей школе Ирана является одной из насущных и сложных проблем системы образования в стране. Это является результатом того, что учащиеся школ не имеют необходимых знаний о традициях, культуре и образе жизни народа страны изучаемого языка. С этой точки зрения, проведен анализ учебников и учебных пособий, используемых в старшей школе Ирана, на основе которого предлагаются пути решения этой проблемы.

Ключевые слова: английский как иностранный язык, культурная осведомленность, учебники английского старшей школы, культура, преподавание английского в Иране