



## **Intercultural Competence: A Neglected Essential in the Iranian ELT Textbooks**

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### **Abstract**

As an important focus of modern language education, intercultural language learning reflects greater awareness of the inseparability of language and culture and the need for providing the learners with materials concerning teaching intercultural communication to enhance learners' intercultural competence in an increasingly multicultural world. Proper development of a learners' understanding of another culture's perspective and worldview is an essential of effective communication. Regarding the significance of issues, the present study is an attempt to consider the trend of addressing culture in Iranian ETL textbooks at the high school level of education before and after the Islamic Revolution. The research findings indicated that the cultural contents are neglected in the ELT textbooks used both pre- and post-Islamic revolution. Therefore, due to overlooking learners' cultural communicative needs intentionally or unintentionally, Iranian ELT textbooks are insufficient materials for teaching communicative language and in overall teaching culture-general skills such as intercultural competence and understanding. It is noteworthy that this study recommends constructive changes in textbooks to make them more communicative and more consistent with the students' needs and expectations.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Competence, Culture, Target Culture, Source Culture, High School English Textbooks, ELT in Iran

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## **Introduction**

Culture, a tangible term lending itself to diverse and ongoing definitions, plays a vital role in language classrooms and is defined as a fundamental part of the second language learning process. Growing professional articles and works with an emphasis on cultural issues in language learning indicate intercultural language learning as an important instructional objective as communication (Moore, 2006). Intercultural language learning stance in language learning and teaching emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the significance of intercultural understanding as a goal of language education (Ho, 2009). Research on teaching culture has shown that language and culture are interrelated and are best acquired together (e.g., Brown, 2007; Kramsch, 1998; Kuang, 2007; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2005; Schulz, 2007). On the interrelatedness of language and culture, Brown (2007) reflects stating “that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition [...], is also the acquisition of a second culture” (pp. 189-190).

Based on the abovementioned findings, it is obviously clear that language and culture learning are inextricably linked and in order to avoid encountering possible linguistic and cultural barriers, it is required that intercultural communicative competence to be developed alongside linguistic competence on the part of learner. Hence, teaching from an intercultural perspective implies developing critical cultural awareness of learners’ own culturally-shaped world view and behaviors as well as the necessary skills and standpoints to perceive and successfully interact with people from target cultures, i.e. to improve linguistic and intercultural competent (Ho, 2009). To this end, it is essential that teachers and material designers in ELT and specially in EFL contexts shift their perspectives from a traditional to an intercultural teaching and therefore spend the same amount of time on teaching culture in the classroom as grammatical and lexical components of the language; and it should not leave it as the weakest component in the curriculum. In spite of acknowledging the crucial role of culture in L2 learning, there is an integral question to be answered: How should and could cultural teaching effectively occur at the classroom?

## **Literature Review**

### ***ELT Textbooks in Iran***

Backgrounds of English education in Iran dates back much before this time and many researchers believe that the history of formal teaching of English in Iran dates back to 1930s (Foroozandeh, 2011). The first English textbook series designed and published by the ministry of culture in the academic year of 1938-9 included 6 books for 6 grades of high school education. These series were developed by a committee of Iranian writers and a group of English speaking educators who launched and implemented this joint project under the sponsorship of the ministry of culture. Foroozandeh (2011) evaluates that “the 6-book series did not follow the

same design and procedure in all the lessons ...” (p.68). These initial series were taught up until 1964 when they were replaced by a very well-known and widely discussed series called “the Graded English series”. Graded English which was also a 6 books series was claimed to adopt the main stream approach of its time (situational language teaching) and the textbooks were designed in a way that get the students acquainted with the basic knowledge and information of English necessary for *daily life* and future academic studies.

The Graded English series stayed in circulation of formal education system up until the Islamic revolution of 1979, when it was completely removed from the schools and replaced by other series, the most well-known one being “Right Path to English”. Recently they are replaced by the newly designed “English for School” series which are again claimed to include communicative skills.

It seems that the pros and cons of teaching English in post-revolutionary Iran considerably corresponds to different historical and socio-political periods in a way during the first years of the revolution victory, the English teaching underwent some consecutive. In general, in the political situation in which top US officials had and have spoken of Iran as an enemy state and blamed Iran of being “the axis of devil” and put the strongest political and economic sanctions against this country, it seems quite rational that some Iranian officials may be disposed in a situation of not being so eager to back teaching English willingly and strongly.

As Aliakbari (2004) points out, “English language teaching in Iran has passed through a host of ups and downs and has experienced extreme courses” (p. 1). To make it be appropriate with our aims of study, we consider the course of formal English language learning in Iran in three stages: prior to the Islamic revolution in 1979, post-revolution and present time; prior to the Islamic revolution, due to the exceptional close relations between the Iranian Government and the west, English language teaching experienced particular attention. English was taught in that period by native speaking teachers providing a genuine model of target language culture and several American and British institutions were contributing in the process of language teaching. The second period corresponding post-revolutionary period and oppositions against the US witnessed “book purging” movement with the aim of de-centralization of school and university English-teaching textbooks. In this process, as an urgent reaction, certain terms and concepts were replaced by a-cultural or neutral ones and consequently national course-books developed presenting the concepts, topics and ideas suitable for Islamic Iranian students. This trend of changing or deleting unsuitable terms continues to this day even in the books taught in private institutes written by native speakers. The dominant trend in Iran in these days is moving toward more English language teaching and learning. Besides studying language as a required course in school, an increasing number of interested learners from young children to adults learn it in many private language institutes. This great tendency to learn English in Iran as well as learners’ communicative needs requires changes in the text-books taught at schools and it has been done in the recent years, as it is claimed by ministry of education policy makers.

### ***Intercultural Competence and Its Importance in Foreign Language Education***

But what is this intercultural competence? How can this dimension be accessed? Is it teachable? How can it be learned? These are questions coming to mind as one hears about intercultural issues in language learning. In this section, our aim is to review the literature and consider important proposed models to find answer to them.

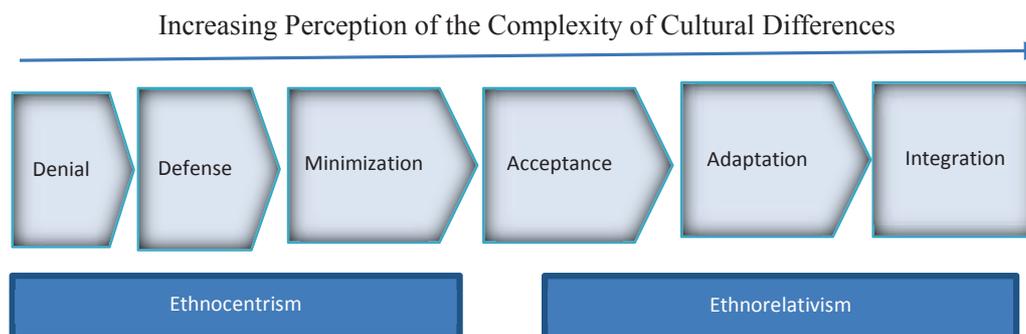
In spite of being seemingly a transparent, universally accepted and used concept, intercultural competence has defined in many different ways. Over the course of research on this type of competence, various terms and phrases have been proposed and used – time and again interchangeably – to explain it: “cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, multicultural competence, transcultural competence, global competence ...” (Deardroff, 2006, p. 32) and finally, Dervin (2006) offers “proteophilic competences” to appreciate the diverse diversities of the other and self or the point that “WE are all diverse” in terms of habits and artifacts, discourses and opinions within the same country. Dervin (2010) claimed that his aim of proposing this phrase is to distance himself from current scientific and political use of the concept and shows his certain theoretical, epistemological and philosophical stand point.

“Intercultural competence refers to the general ability to transcend ethnocentrism, appreciate other cultures, and generate appropriate behavior in one or more different cultures” (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003, p. 237). What Bennett et al. (2003) propose is that culture must be “at the core of the language curriculum.” Based on their model, called the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, culture understanding rests on six discernible stages “that can be explained by principles of constructivism”. These stages were labeled by Bennett et al. (2003) as *denial*, *defense*, *minimization*, *acceptance*, *adaptation*, and *integration*. Curriculum design should aim at working on culture teaching and comprehension throughout these six developmental stages differently but coherently since these can be linked to language development phases.

The most comprehensive and instrumental definition of intercultural competence is that of Michael Byram (1997 and later). Defining culture as “the beliefs and knowledge which members of a social group share by virtue of their membership” (p. 39) Byram maintains that having a positive view of the target culture is not a prerequisite for starting intercultural communication and understanding: “Attitudes which are the pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction need to be not simply positive, since even positive prejudice can hinder mutual understanding” (p. 34). He has considered five savors or components for intercultural competence being complementary to a language learner’s communicative competence (1997), which the author calls it “intercultural communicative competence”. His model’s significant advantage is its clear objectives (This model will be considered later in this section). In order to understand the key elements of intercultural competence, we continue this section

with reviewing the most cited intercultural competence models and their suggestions for teaching of this dimension.

**Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity:** this model under the title of *The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)* was created by Bennett (1993) as a framework to explain experiences of people in intercultural situations. It is not a model of changes in attitudes and behaviors but a model of development of cognitive structure (Bennett & Bennett, 2003).



**Figure 1.** DMIS-Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural relations increases. Each stage is indicative of a particular worldview configuration, and certain kinds of attitudes and behavior are typically associated with each such configuration (p. 154).

The scale of this model including six stages ranges from an *ethnocentric* perspective – i.e. one's own culture is experienced as focal to reality – to an *ethnorelative* – i.e. one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures – in which learners deals with difference. The learner moves from the first three stages of *ethnocentric* perspective including denial, defense, and minimization of difference to the second three stages of *ethnorelative* perspective including acceptance, adaptation to difference, and ending with integration of difference. In this model time is an important factor for the development of intercultural competence, involving passing through multiple stages.

In general, the ethnocentric stages can be seen as ways of avoiding cultural difference, either by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance. The ethnorelative stages are ways of seeking cultural difference, either by accepting its importance, by adapting a perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity (p. 155).

For Bennett, et al. (2003) there is a culture learning journey for learners, who are guided by their instructor, from a Stage I linked to the early-novice language learner all the way to Stage III connected to the late-advanced language student. As the authors admit, these stages in language development are not necessarily a

reflection of culture understanding since an early-advanced language learner can be in a defense level. In addition to this observation, educators are confronted with the fact that culture-awareness activities must be designed and developed in accordance to cultural sensitivity. It is a shame that these authors did not go beyond in their explanation on how literature can be used in a culture curriculum design that can help students develop culture sensitivity.

If “it is the apprehension of this subjective culture –temporarily ‘looking at the world through different eyes’ – that underlies the development of intercultural competence” (Bennett et al., 2003), literature can be greatly exploited in the classroom and vastly appreciated and enjoyed by learners in very specific levels of their culture and language training. Literature can be a way to move students from ethnocentric stages towards more ethnorelative ones, which could help students take great pleasure in novels, poetry, drama, and short stories written in the target language.

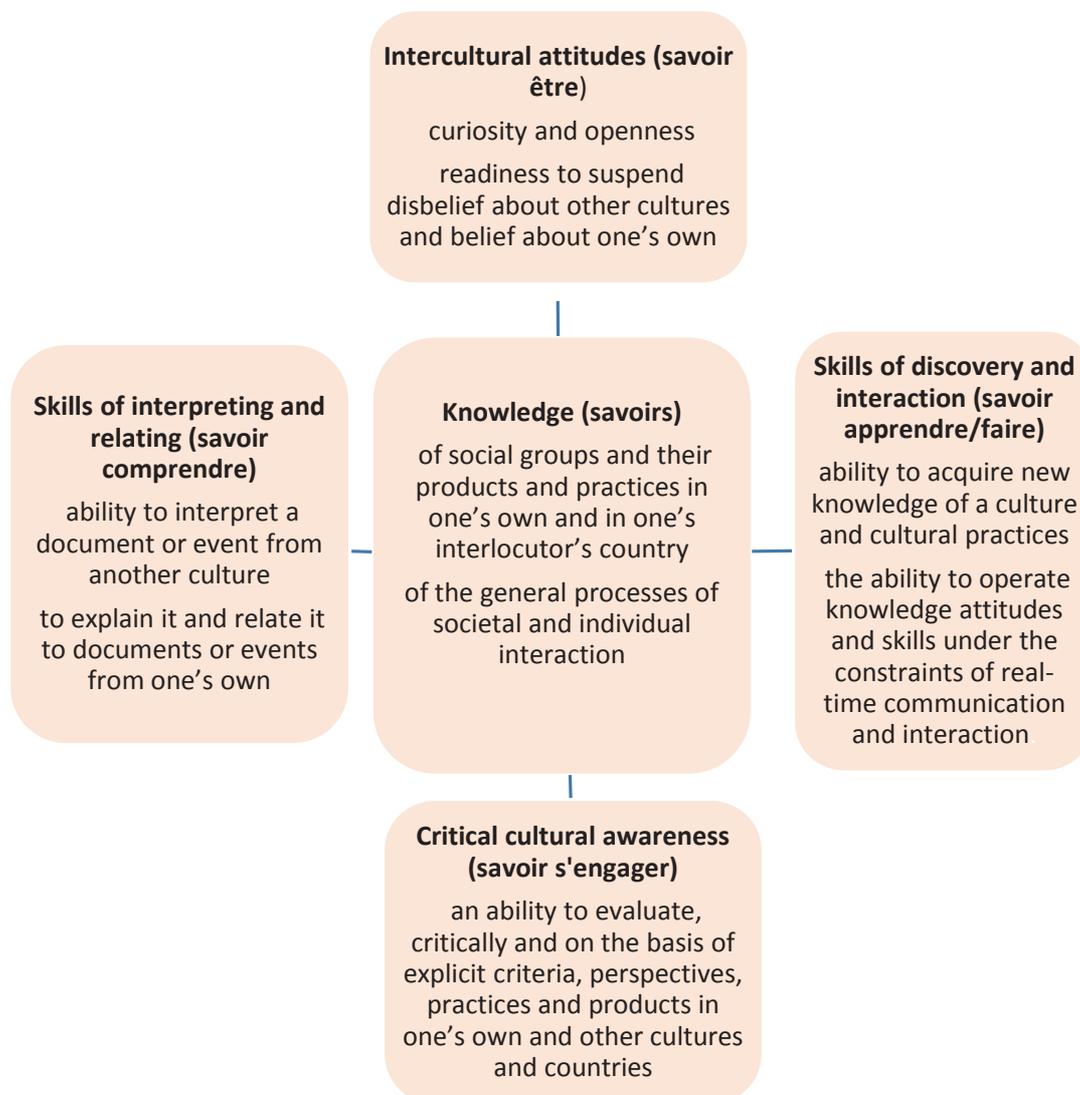
**Kramsch’s Notion of Third Culture:** Claire Kramsch (1993) used the concept of “third place” or “third culture” to explain learners’ needs to place themselves in a position which “grows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and new cultures he or she is being introduced to” (p. 236). She points out that “we have to explore the cultural dimensions of the every languages we teach if we want learners to be fully communicatively competent in these languages” (p. 218).

**Byram’s Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence:** Byram’s five “savoir” categories or “components of intercultural competence” (Byram, 1997; Byram & Zarate, 1997; Byram Gribkova & Starkey, 2002), is an often cited set of objectives for intercultural content. The five “savoir” categories, emphasizing the development of skills, attitudes, and understanding provide a useful framework of objectives that inspires the learner to avoid arbitrary cultural information and national stereotypes and to develop a more critical awareness toward both their own and other cultures; in other words, rather than being a mere “consumer” of culture he becomes a critical participant in intercultural exchanges. *Knowledge, skill, and attitudes* are components of intercultural competence which are complemented by the learners’ *understanding* and *cultural awareness*. Therefore the role of the language teacher is to develop skills, attitudes, and understanding of values of both the native and target culture (Byram et al., 2002).

The notion of learner’s having to be open to accept a new perspective and looking at things through “someone else’s eyes” is in common point in all three models which allows for differences. Considering this notion it is manifest that ELT textbooks and materials should be prepared and designed in a way that ensure the skill of looking at things through the lens of target culture.

It is important to use authentic material but to ensure that learners understand its context and intention. Materials from different origins with different perspectives should be used together to enable learners to compare and to analyze the materials critically. It is more important that learners acquire skills of analysis than factual information (Byram et al. 2002, p. 19).

Next section is to analyze Iranian ELT textbooks of senior high school level to show the extent to which they encourage this point of view.



**Figure 2.** Byram's Five "Savoir" Categories (Adapted from Byram et al. 2002)

### Statement of the problem

English language teaching in Iran is based on the locally designed EFL textbooks which are subjects to approval from Ministry of National education. The present study aims to trace cultural competence developing contents in five successive EFL textbooks taught before and after revolution. As mentioned in the liter review, due to the political and socio-cultural conditions of Iran before the Islamic Revelation, it is claimed that in that era Iranian Regime tried to establish western cultures in Iran or in other words to *westernize* it. Following the revolution and change of political perspectives toward West and principally United States and faultily paralleling of

English to the US, ELT suffered much hostility, some alternations took place, especially during Iranian Cultural Revolution (1980 – 1987). Following these changes, national course-books were designed generally presenting the concepts and ideas confirming to Islamic doctrine. However, in recent years, considering students failure in using English in real life situation and for academic purposes, ELT textbooks taught in schools have gone under content changes to include communicative issues to meet learner's needs. Regarding to abovementioned content changes, the present study aims at investigating amount of cultural contents included in ELT books taught before revolution – before book-purging movement – and the books designed later in order to answer the following questions:

1. What range of cultural references is represented in the high school textbooks (fourth grade) before Islamic Revolution?
2. Whose cultures are represented in the in the cultural content of Iranian fourth grade English text books before Islamic Revolution? And to what extent?
3. What range of cultural references is represented in the high school textbooks (fourth grade) after Islamic Revolution?
4. Whose cultures are represented in the in the cultural content of Iranian fourth grade English text books before Islamic Revolution? And to what extent?

## **Methodology**

### **Materials/textbooks**

The materials of this study are five ELT textbooks published by Ministry of Education for 4th grade. These textbooks including *Graded English Book* (1972), *Graded English Book* (1976) - had been being taught in the decade before the revolution - *Graded English Book* (1981, after book purging), *Preparatory English Course, Book 1 & 2* (1996) and, finally, *English for Pre-University Students* (2013) being taught recently.

With little difference, the books are designed on a similar pattern and structure. Each lesson starts with the “New Words” section under the title of “Word Study” or “Word Practice”. Then it is followed with the “Reading” section. In Textbooks (1972 & 1976), the order is reverse. In the textbook (1981), there is not separate section for New Words. They are presented inside the reading comprehension and then in the “Word Practice” section. Grammar and writing introduction and exercises compromise the next ones. As being the core sections of the textbooks for presenting the cultural content, reading and new words sections were chosen as the target of present study.

### **Procedure: Model of Text Analysis, Content Analysis and Coding Scheme**

The analysis of textbooks contents was done on the basis of a modified version of Ramirez and Halls' (1990) model (cited in Aliakbari, 2004) by Aliakbari. On the purpose of content analysis, deciding about coding scheme is unavoidable. A basic step in the process of creating a coding scheme is deciding on the definition of basic units for classification. Two different coding schemes were applied throughout this study. Two coding schemes were designed for "New Words" and "Reading" categories. After analyzing the texts, the frequency and percentage for each of the categories were assessed.

#### **Coding Scheme for "New Words"**

In the "New Word" section of the textbooks, each new word is followed one to three sentences being to contextualize different meanings of the word. Throughout the study each single exemplification for the meanings of words was considered as a unit. In textbooks which are not distinct "New Word" section and the "New Word" are introduced inside the reading comprehension section, the sentence in which the "New Word" appears is considered as the unit of study. These sentences or units of studies were classified into four categories labeled from letter J to letter M. The labeling was arbitrary with no symbolic relationship between the letters and the categories. These categories are labeled as following:

- No Reference, Culture Free Statements (**J**)
- No Reference, Culture Specific Statements (**K**)
- Sentences with Culture General References (**L**)
- Sentences with Culture Specific References (**M**)

#### **Coding Scheme for "Reading" Passages**

To get the main idea of the passage, considered as the major objective of the reading comprehension, the whole text was taken as the unit of study for the Reading passages. Reading passages are categorized to 8 categories. They were labeled as A, B, C, D, D, F, G, and H. the labeling is conventional. There is no symbolic relationship between the letters and categories. These categories included references to:

- Reference to English speaking countries (**A**)
- Reference to non-English speaking western countries (**B**)
- Reference to eastern countries (**C**)
- Cross-national comparison (**D**)
- Reference to Iran (**E**)
- Reference to Islam and Islamic traditions (**F**)
- General texts related to science, biographies, of scientific or world figures (**G**)
- Reading passages whose identity has been left out (**H**)

## Results

In this paper we put under the consideration two sections of Iranian ELT textbooks on the bases of Ramirez and Halls' (1990) model of content analysis and Aliakbari's (2004) classifications. The reading sections and new words sections of the total number of units in all five books were examined and their references to different cultural groups were tabulated. The obtained results are discussed in two following sections in detail.

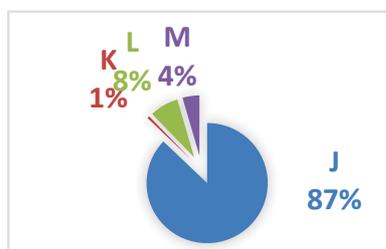
### Results of the "New Words" Analysis

The "New Words" sections of the textbooks were 1126 sentences. 566 sentences of the total sentence belong to pre-revolution textbooks and 560 sentences to post-revolution textbooks. Figures 3-7 represent categorization of the sentences in all lessons of each textbook.

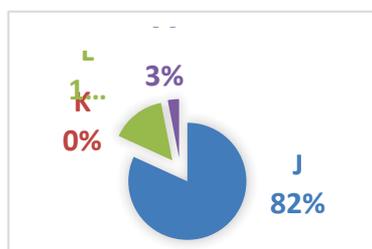
As the data demonstrates, only 7 sentences (four percent) in textbook (2013) refer to culture specific category. Eighty-seven percent of sentences (136 sentences) were found to be general, culture free statements. Twelve sentences (eight percent) were evaluated as culturally (general) loaded items with no representation of clear identity or source. Only one statement referred to particular culture in hidden way.

The cultural content of the textbook (1996) is nearly similar to the textbook (2013). Thirty-nine of the total 251 items in the "New Words" sections (15 percent) were categorized as No Reference, General Culture statements; although they included particular names, they presented a common culture. Eight cases (3 percent) of culture specific references were observed. Eighty-two percent (212 items) dealt with No Reference, Culture Free statements. There was no case of culturally loaded item in this textbook.

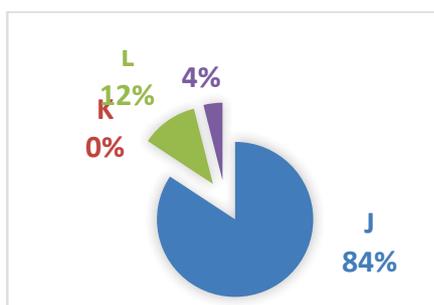
As figure 8 represents, 129 items (84 percent) of total 153 sentences used as "New Words" contexts were considered as No Reference, Culture Free. Like textbook (1996) there was no culturally loaded items. Eighteen items (12 percent) were categorized as No Reference, General Culture without a reference to a particular culture. Only 6 items (4 percent) culture specific references without direct illustration were identified.



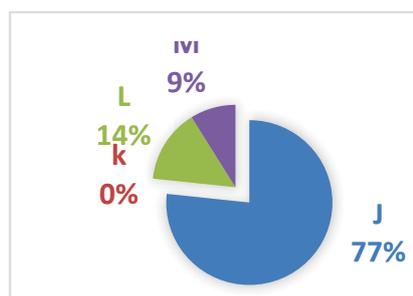
*Figure 3. New Words in Book 2013*



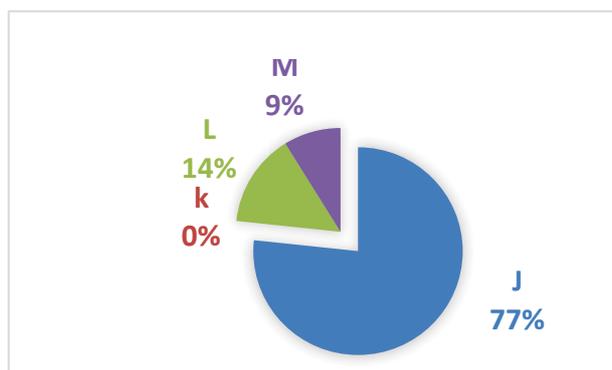
*Figure 4. New Words in Book 1996*



**Figure 5.** New Words in Book 1981



**Figure 6.** New Words in Book 1976



**Figure 7.** New Words in Book 1972

**Direction:**

- J, No Reference, Culture Free statements
- K, Culture Specific (Hidden)
- L, No Reference, General Culture statements
- M, Culture Specific statements

The collected data from Textbook (1976) – a pre-revolution book is a little different but this difference is not so significant. It has twice more lessons (15 lessons). Twenty-five statements (9 percent) of total 283 items were culture specific statements. Forty-one items (14 percent) were classified as culture free statements. Seventy-seven statements (217 items) were found to deal with No Reference, culture free statements. This textbook included no culturally bound items. Considering Textbook (1972), it is mentionable that as figure 10 shows this textbook is exact similar of Textbook (1976). In fact, only its cover pages were changed due to inclusion of imperial calendar and king, queen and prince’s images.

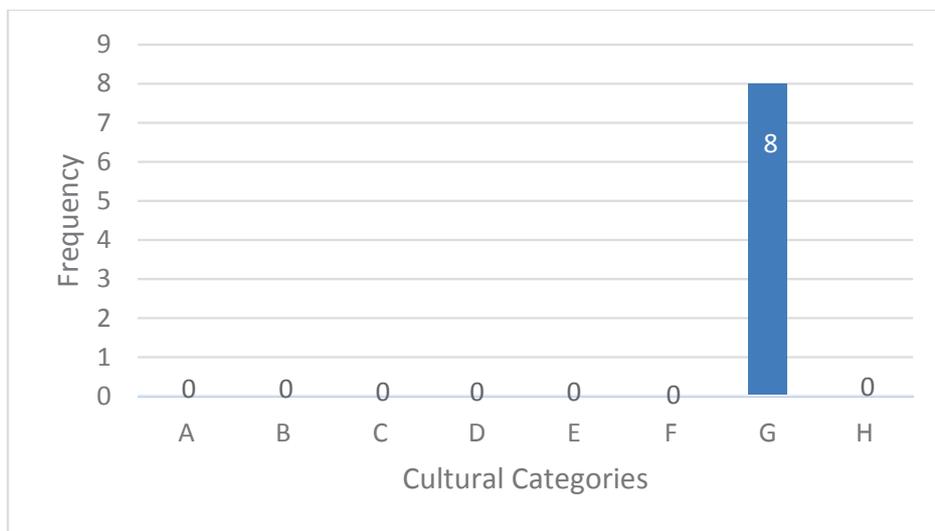
**Results of “Reading” Analysis**

There were 56 main reading passages in the five textbooks. Each reading in the lessons has been classified into one of the eight categories on the bases of explained coding scheme. The categorization of the “Reading” passages are represented

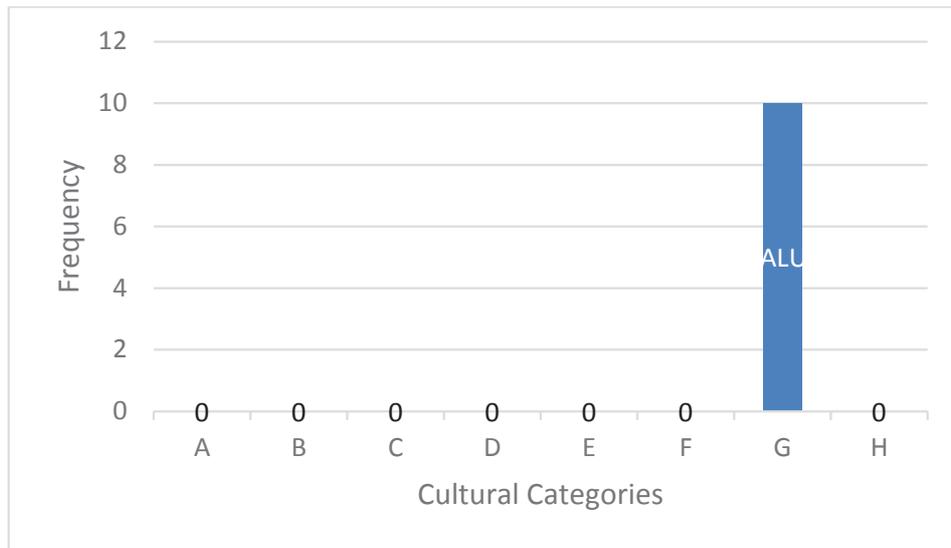
through figures 8-12. The height of the bars indicates the frequency of the texts in each category. There is no difference in the extent of the culture content of the readings in the post-revolutionary textbooks, the difference is only due to the number of lessons in each textbook. About pre-revolutionary textbooks, as is mentioned in the section of “New Words” analysis, both textbooks are similar and textbook (1976) is an exact copy of textbook (1972) only with difference in their first pages due to political decision changes. As is seen in the charts, there are differences between pre- and post-revolutionary textbooks on the perspective of cultural content, but it is not so weighty. Throughout the textbooks, the category “G” (general culture-neutral texts) covered the greater parts in pre-revolutionary textbooks and the only part in post-revolutionary ones.

**Direction:**

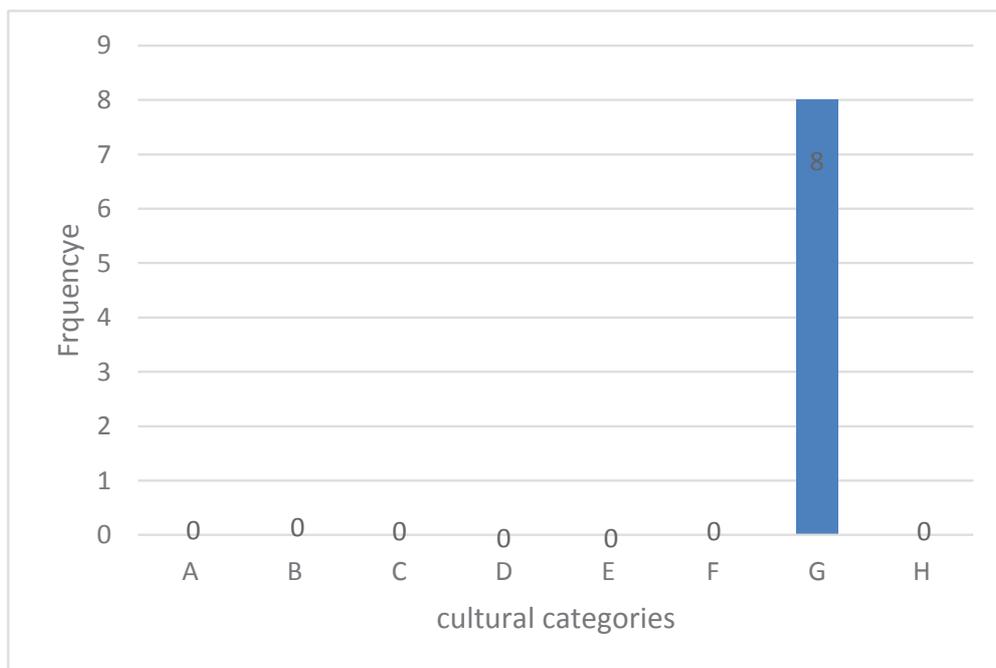
- A, Reference to English speaking countries
- B, Reference to non-English speaking western countries
- C, Reference to eastern countries
- D, Cross-national comparison
- E, Reference to Iran
- F, Reference to Islam or Islamic traditions
- G, general texts related to science, biographies of scientific or world figures
- H, Reading passages whose identity has been left out.



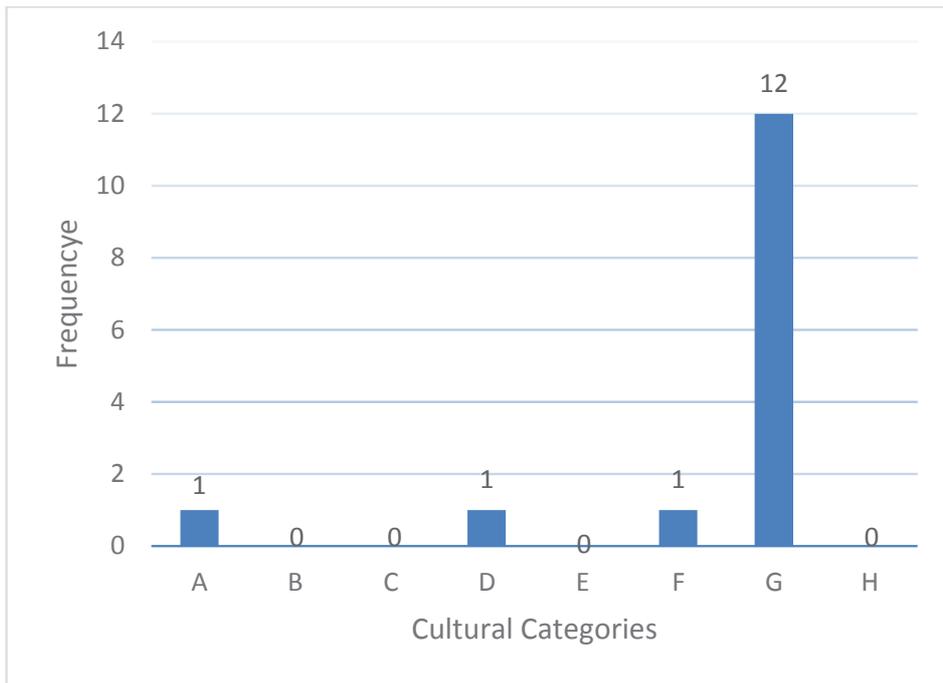
**Figure 8.** Representation of Cultural Reference in Reading Section of ELT Textbook (2013)



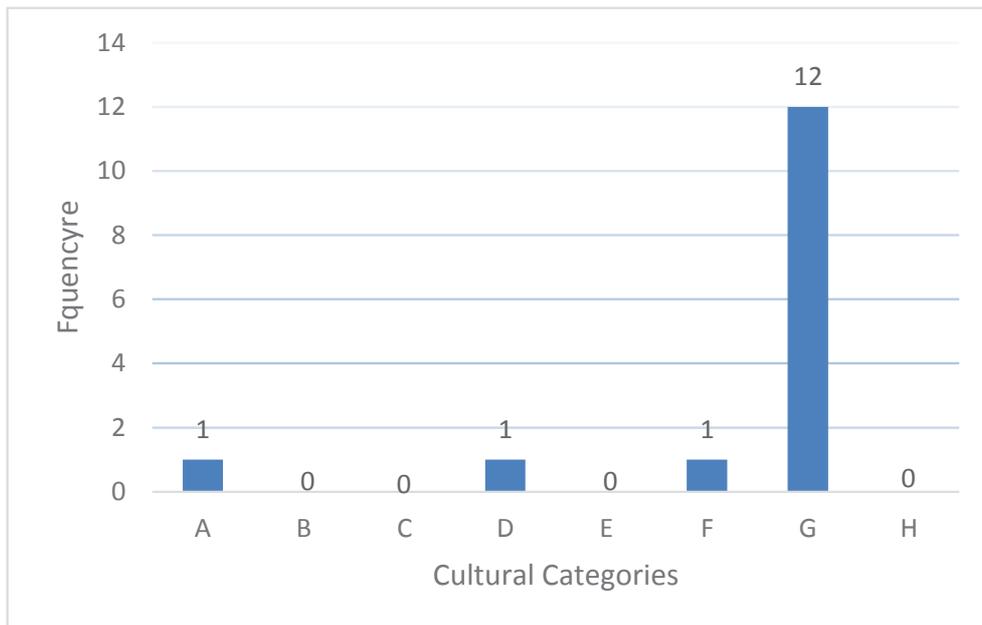
**Figure 9.** Representation of Cultural Reference in Reading Section of ELT Textbook (1996)



**Figure 10.** Representation of Cultural Reference in Reading Section of ELT Textbook (1981)



**Figure 11.** Representation of Cultural Reference in Reading Section of ELT Textbook (1976)



**Figure 12.** Representation of Cultural Reference in Reading Section of ELT Textbook (1972)

### **Data Analysis / Discussion**

The obtained checklists from textbook analysis provided us with the percentage and frequency of references to eight categories in “Reading” comprehension sections and four categories in “New Words” sections of textbooks. As the results of the study illustrates, both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary, with insignificant

differences, followed a similar orientation. With ranges of 77 to 87 percent, the No Reference, Culture Free statements formed the larger part of the books. Sentences with Culture General Reference (L) with values of 8 to 15 % and sentences with culture specific References (M) with varying values of 3 to 9 percent made up the remaining parts of the books. The frequency of the culture specific sentences is more in post-revolutionary textbook. However this occurrence is low.

Regarding the answer to research questions 2 and 4 – Whose cultures are represented in the in the cultural content of Iranian fourth grade English text books before and after Islamic Revolution? And to what extent? – it is mentionable that 82% of new words and 50 reading texts out of 56 are culturally neutral. So, it can be concluded that both native and target culture are underrepresented in the analyzed texts. The designer and authors of these books, intentionally or unintentionally have avoided cultural issues.

### **Conclusion**

The major aim at the analysis of the textbooks was an investigation of their contribution to the improvement of students' intercultural competence and their awareness of the intercultural differences. In a transition from grammar translation method to much talked about CLT, and being in globalization era, the intercultural contents used in the textbooks could be interesting and fruitful to Iranian learners as for other learners with different background culture. As Siddiqi (2011) points out, the intercultural contents used in the textbooks open new possibilities to contribute to learners' awareness about the world around them and enable them to target language in the real life situation with the hope of developing a sense of global citizenship. But, the results of the textbooks analysis indicate the shortage of such contents.

The results of the study showed that ELT textbooks taught for senior high school students – designed both pre- and post-revolution – did not include cultural contents proved to be helpful in developing intercultural competence and cultural understanding. The evidence obtained from the results of this study and other studies (Aliakbari, 2004; Sharif & Yarmohammadi, 2013) indicates that the cultural contents, deliberately or not, ignored and, in the case of inclusion, are extremely limited and basic. Due to social or political considerations, mostly, all of the ELT textbooks designed by the Iranian education ministry are one-dimensional. The limited cultural contents of the ELT textbooks designed before the revolution were purged in the course of Iranian Cultural Revolution, although this limitation and shortcoming could be compensated by the presence of native speaking teachers at schools and universities to make learners more familiar with target culture. But in this communication and globalization era, it seems necessary to include cultural contents in the ELT textbooks to improve learners' intercultural competence and to help them avoid stereotyping which results in misunderstanding and consequently breaking down the communications.

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