

Intercultural Competence in Crisis: An Analysis of the Cultural Content in Palestinian EFL Textbooks

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Abstract

There is hardly anyone in the EFL field who would not agree on the necessity of culture as a core component of any EFL textbook. One of the main benefits of including foreign cultural aspects is the development of intercultural competence, i.e., the ability to successfully interact with people from other cultures. Thus, the aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of teaching the form of culture that would enable students to engage in successful intercultural communication using English as a foreign language. To do so, the paper presents a descriptive analysis of the cultural content of four textbooks that are used to teach the fifth and sixth grades (ages 11 to 12 years) in Palestinian state schools. The findings reveal that all cultural aspects found in the textbooks are elements of surface culture, which include all visible aspects of culture (e.g. food, festivals, monuments, tourist attractions, etc.) with no single reference to any deep cultural aspects which can help students construct attitudes and values towards other international cultures. The study stands out as a call for abandoning the traditional way of presenting shallow cultural information in EFL textbooks by adopting an approach that focuses on promoting deeper intercultural attitudes and values instead.

Keywords: *intercultural competence; culture in EFL; critical thinking; surface culture; deep culture; Palestinian ELT textbooks.*

1. Introduction

The importance of integrating culture in EFL textbooks is taken for granted by almost all scholars in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (forthcoming TEFL). However, the discussion has been going on in relation to the type of culture to be included. More precisely, scholars and educators in the field have discussed the status of the target culture (i.e. the British culture) in EFL textbooks (Kachru 1982; Widdowson 1994), and the cultural form integrated in such coursebooks (Byram 1997; Hames-Garcia 2003; Kramersch 1993). The discussion has been the result of the relatively newly acquired position that English has occupied as an international language, which made the average number of an EFL learner's communicative encounters with non-native speakers of English outnumber that of the expected encounters with native speakers (Kachru 1982). As a result, a new approach to culture teaching has been proposed which looks at culture in the EFL classroom not only as factual information of the target culture, but also as a way of fostering cultural skills and attitudes towards other international cultures. This approach has been referred to as 'intercultural competence' (Byram 1997), a term that will be the focus of this paper.

In light of the significant necessity for EFL textbooks to take intercultural competence seriously, the current paper will attempt to answer the following *research questions*:

1. Do the analysed Palestinian ELT textbooks incorporate shallow cultural aspects or deep forms of culture that could enhance students' intercultural skills and attitudes towards other cultures?
2. Do the *English for Palestine* textbooks (i.e., pupil's books for the fifth and sixth grades) take into consideration other international cultures alongside the source and target cultures (i.e., Palestinian and British cultures)?

2. Literature review

To understand what is meant by the term 'intercultural competence', it is important to trace the key discussions in the field of culture in TEFL which have led to its emergence. One of the most prominent discussions is Lado's (1962) warning against fostering stereotypical views about other cultures by means of presenting shallow factual information in the EFL textbooks, which represent others as homogeneous entities. Instead, he advocates the use of 'activities that lead to an understanding of that part of culture that is not recognized in the general self-image and to the understanding of those elements which appear in the self-image but not in the overt culture itself' (Lado 1962: 125), a process that he calls 'education' and sees it as a replacement for 'enculturation', which serves to strengthen stereotypes. Similarly, Lafayette (1978) has argued that teachers should pay more attention to the type of culture that encourages questioning and critical thinking rather than memorization of factual cultural knowledge (e.g. names of important people and monuments) of the target culture.

Krasnick (1982), on the other hand, has brought up another issue related to the culture which students should be exposed to. He argues that the teaching contexts should always suit students' learning needs, which are as various as the students themselves, stating that 'ESL is always ESP, even if the "special purpose" is as broad as coping with a new sociocultural environment' (47). Kachru (1982) stresses Krasnick's words by stating that 'most ESL/EFL today relates to NNS [non-native speakers] populations requiring English for their internal purposes, or for dealing with other NNS populations, without the presence or intervention of native speakers' (41). This discussion particularly was the beginning of an era during which an international perspective towards culture teaching has been adopted.

Another interesting point relates to the dynamic nature of culture. Unlike the past when culture was viewed as a homogenous entity, culture has started becoming referred to as an ever-changing and dynamic notion (Kramsch 1993 & Atkinson 1999). This has made it

difficult to characterize certain nationalities with certain stereotypes or collective features. As a result, scholars such as Byram (1997), have urged teachers to look at their students as individuals rather than as a homogenous group.

These discussions have paved the way to the emergence of the term 'intercultural competence' by Byram and Zarate (1994), which has been proposed in lieu of the so-called socio-cultural competence. A few years later, the term 'intercultural communicative competence' (forthcoming ICC) was fully developed by Byram (1997) and it can be fully understood by following his ICC model. The model, as shown in Figure 1 below, illustrates the process through which ICC is shaped. It all starts with the 'locations of learning' where the learning of culture takes place. These locations are classroom, fieldwork (i.e., organized activities that take place outside the classroom) and 'independent learning' which is the accumulation of independent personal experiences in relation to the target culture. The learning that takes place in these locations must contribute to the formulation of intercultural competence which is a mixture of 'knowledge (*savoirs*), skills (*savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre/faire*), attitudes (*savoir être*) and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*)' (Byram, 1997: 88). The skills, knowledge, attitudes and critical awareness are all defined in relation to not only the target culture, but also students' native culture and other international cultures. Thus, the inclusion of the British target culture in the TEFL materials, according to the ICC model, works mainly as a model through which students can acquire intercultural competence which will prepare them to deal with English speakers from around the world (Byram 1997). The model ends with the formulation of intercultural communicative competence, which is accumulatively formed as a result of a combination of intercultural competence and a number of other competences (i.e., discourse, linguistic and sociolinguistic competences).

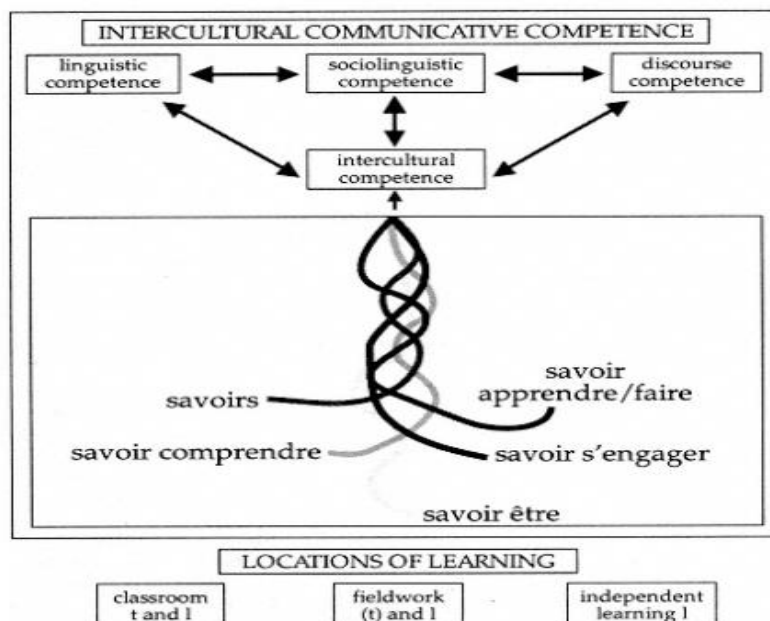


Figure 1: *Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence*
(Adapted from Byram 1997: 88)

As for the practical side of culture teaching in the EFL classroom, various approaches have been proposed for this purpose. These approaches have considered culture as either a secondary component of a specific English course, or a core component according to which the other linguistic components are geared to fit in with. As an example, Lafayette (1978) states that teachers can choose to allocate certain days, or they can use the end of some of their classes, to teach culture. Alternatively, some teachers might choose to treat culture as a main component of the TEFL course by 'integrating language into a culture-based course' (Lafayette 1978: 12). Rather than going through an elaborate explanation of culture teaching approaches, this paper intends to list the main techniques used to enhance students'

intercultural competence. To this end, we will go through some of the proposed techniques to teaching culture in the EFL classroom.

First, Kramsch (1993) has proposed the use of what she calls 'interactive narratives' and 'interactive documentaries'. She explains that while interactive narratives tackle a social misunderstanding, interactive documentaries help students get to know about a specific cultural phenomenon that can be a place, person, or even a habit in the target culture. Both techniques take the form of a video that can be shown to the students and then they will be asked to follow certain instructions to give their opinions. This will surely help students to acquire new cultural knowledge as well as enhance their critical thinking.

Second, Kramsch (1993) draws attention to another interesting technique which makes use of 'film remakes' to enhance students understanding of their own culture and the target one. This technique can be implemented in two or three separate sessions, during which students watch the original version and the remake of the film. Then students can have an additional session to discuss the similarities and difference between the two versions of the film. This can provide students with insights into their own culture and the target culture, which will surely make them more interculturally competent.

Last but not least, exposure to the other culture by means of hosting international speakers known as 'native informants' can have an immense effect on enhancing understanding of self and other (Oxford 1995). Byram (1997) has also stressed the importance of a similar technique that he calls 'fieldwork', which refers to any organized activity that is done outside the classroom to help students experience the other culture first hand.

3. EFL textbooks analysis

Having outlined the main discussions in relation to culture in the EFL classroom we decided to look into the cultural content incorporated in the textbooks in terms of whether it represents the traditional way of viewing culture (i.e., static, homogeneous, neutral,

and superficial), or the up-to-date view which seeks a dynamic, heterogeneous and deep representation of culture. Consequently, we carried out a descriptive analysis of the textbooks' cultural content according to which we classified all the cultural aspects found in the books into surface or deep culture. All cultural aspects that include food, geographical sites, celebrities, literature, arts, holidays, events, traditional dances, monuments, tourist sites and the like were considered as surface culture. On the other hand, those cultural aspects that reflect attitudes, beliefs and values associated with certain elements 'such as the definition of sin, concept of justice, word ethic, eye behavior, definition of insanity, approaches to problem solving, fiscal expression, and approach to interpersonal relationships' (Hanley 1999: 2) were classified as deep culture.

4. Description of materials

The English school textbooks which were chosen to be analysed are used in all state schools in Palestine (i.e., Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank). The books are part of a series called *English for Palestine* (published by Macmillan in 2018) that covers all school levels, from the first to the twelfth grade. As the name suggests, the textbooks were designed to be used by Palestinian students. With regard to the specific textbooks chosen for analysis, they are created to be used at the fifth and sixth grades (11 to 12 years old pupils). Two textbooks are used at each level, referred to as Pupil's book A and Pupil's Book B. Thus, the four textbooks analysed in the current paper are *Pupil's Book 5A*, *Pupil's Book 5B*, *Pupil's Book 6A* and *Pupil's Book 6B*. The textbooks start with a syllabus that can be described as a pure grammatical syllabus. All units in the Pupil's books are organized in the same way: they start with a short dialogue between Palestinian twins named Omar and Rania, on the one hand, and two British siblings named Amy and Ben, on the other, followed by comprehension and vocabulary exercises. Then, grammar explanation is provided along with some reinforcement exercises. The last third of

each unit has some listening and speaking activities which lead to a writing production about the topic of the unit.

5. Analysis of the *English for Palestine Pupil's* books 5A and 5B

Table 1 below shows that the fifth-grade textbooks referred to as Pupil's books 5A and 5B contain mainly references to Palestinian and British cultures except for two occasions where references have been made to an American celebrity (i.e., Dwight Howard), and some limited geographical information about Scotland. This might be related to the fact that the units of the books were built around four main characters (i.e., Palestinian twins Omar and Rania, and British siblings Amy and Ben).

As for the form of their cultural content, the textbooks only include aspects of surface culture without any reference to any cultural content that can be described as deep culture (See Appendix 1 for examples). Thus, the main topics that were touched on in the books were Palestinian and British tourist sites such as the Church of the Nativity and the London Eye, two celebrities (i.e., Mahmoud Darwish and Dwight Howard), events and holidays such as the olive-picking season in Palestine, four fairy tales were also used in the textbooks, and some general information about the weather in Palestine and the UK.

All in all, we can say that the cultural aspects referred to previously were treated superficially without any focus on enhancing students' critical thinking or attitudes towards other cultures, which makes the books inadequate for promoting intercultural competence. They also lacked any reference to other countries where English is not the first language. As a result, it is clear that the textbooks only represented static, neutral and superficial forms of culture.

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Table 1: *Cultural Content of Pupil's Books 5A and 5B*

Aspect	Type of Culture	Surface Culture	Deep Culture
Tourist sites/ interesting things to do	Palestinian and British	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Palestinian tourist sites (the Dome of the Rock, Jericho cable cars and Wadi al-Qilt Valley, Church of the Nativity, the Old Market in Jerusalem and the Dead Sea) ▪ British tourist attractions (the Olympic Stadium, the London Eye and the Duck Tours) ▪ Qalqilya zoo, Gaza city, Wadi al Badan ▪ British tourists going on a tour of Palestine ▪ Manchester football club 	None
Celebrities	Palestinian	Mahmoud Darwish	None
	American	Dwight Howard	
Events/ holidays/ celebrations	Unspecified	Mini-Olympics	None
	Palestinian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Olive-picking season ▪ Summer and winter holidays ▪ Reference to main crops in Palestine (bananas, olives, figs, etc.) 	
	Scottish	Wedding Boat race	
Literature/ fairy tales	Unspecified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Rabbit and Tortoise ▪ The Cats and the Monkey ▪ The Wolf's Shoes ▪ The Princess and the Three Friends 	None
Birds and animals	Palestinian	Green bee-eater	None
General information	Unspecified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Talking about What will happen in the future ▪ Brochures of sports and food ▪ TV programs and sports 	None

6. Analysis of the *English for Palestine Pupil's* books 6A and 6B

The analysis of the sixth grade textbooks (Pupil's books 6A and 6B) has resulted in similar outcomes to the findings of the fifth grade textbooks. The textbooks have been found to only contain surface culture without any single reference to deep culture elements (see Table 2 below). However, there was some progress in the number of celebrities from non-English speaking countries which have been mentioned in the textbooks (i.e., Jacques Cousteau from France, Valentina Tereshkova from Russia, and Ibn Battuta from North Africa). However, the cultural context in which these celebrities were incorporated was no more than mere facts about the celebrities' journeys without any attempt at promoting critical thinking or encouraging certain intercultural values or attitudes.

Although they cannot be considered as deep culture elements, the cultural aspects mentioned in the last row in Table 2 below under the category 'general information' sound promising as they approached some topics such as friendship in a slightly different way. For the first time, we see the book characters mentioning not only the bright side of friendship but also the challenges that can be faced throughout such relations. Unfortunately, this did not go any further to support the formulation of any other aspects of deep culture, which makes the cultural aspects still static, neutral, superficial and descriptive.

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Table 2: *Cultural Content of Pupil's Books 6A and 6B*

Aspect	Type of Culture	Surface Culture	Deep Culture
Tourist sites/ interesting things to do	Unspecified	Diving under water, camping, horse and camel riding	None
	Palestinian	The Dead Sea	
Celebrities	Multinational	Great explorers: Valentina Tereshkova, Russia; Ibn Battuta, Morocco; Jacques Cousteau, French; David Livingstone, Scottish; Neil Armstrong, American; Emma Stokes, American	None
Events/ holidays/ celebrations	British	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Summer camping ▪ Summer adventures: (camping, horse riding, bike racing, living in a farm) 	None
Literature/ fairy tales	Unspecified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Oxen and the Lion ▪ Stone Soup ▪ The Farmer and the Donkey 	None
Birds and animals	Palestinian	Desert animals in Palestine (Gazelle and Jerboa)	None
General information	Unspecified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Friendship (problems and advantages) ▪ Discussing TV. Programs ▪ Healthy vs. unhealthy food ▪ Signs around us ▪ Talking about illnesses ▪ The water cycle ▪ Good manners at a restaurant, library and school 	None
	Palestinian	Information about olive trees of Palestine (uses of olive oil, soap making, olive pressing)	

7. Discussion and conclusions

The findings reflect a cultural pattern that can be referred to as descriptive. In other words, all the cultural aspects analysed have been presented as fixed information about the source and target cultures which do not promote the acquisition of intercultural competence. It can also be noticed that both the source and target cultures have received equal attention throughout the textbooks. However, other international cultures have hardly been referred to. As a result, the textbooks have been found to adopt an outdated approach which considers English as the native language of Britain without taking into consideration its new status as a *lingua franca*.

However, it must be remembered that it has not been our aim in this paper to generalize our findings to the rest of the *English for Palestine* textbooks but to emphasize the importance of ICC as a core component of any EFL textbook. Besides, the study could have been improved if other research tools had been used. Other tools may include interviews with teachers, classroom observations and teachers' journals. Using such research tools can reveal whether English teachers use any supplementary materials to compensate for the lack of adequate deep cultural elements. It can also reveal teachers' perspectives and preparation in relation to culture in the EFL class.

Finally, we hope that this study would urge EFL curriculum designers to incorporate deeper cultural aspects in the EFL textbooks, and encourage EFL teachers as well to compensate for the lack of such materials by using their own cultural supplementary materials.

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Selected publications:

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Appendix 1 - Aspects of surface culture in the analysed textbooks

1. Tourist sites (Illustrations taken from *English for Palestine Pupil's Book 5A*, Macmillan, 2018, p. 17)



London: old



London: new



The duck bus



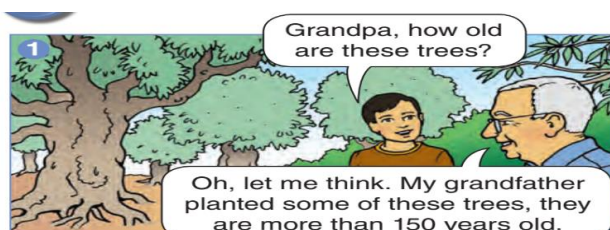
The Olympic Stadium

2. Celebrities (Illustrations taken from *English for Palestine Pupil's Book 5A*, Macmillan, 2018, p. 40)



This is Dwight Howard. He is American. He is over 2 metres tall and is 120 kilos. He has wide shoulders and very strong arms. He is clever at playing basketball. He can throw the ball low and high.

3. Events and holidays (Illustrations taken from *English for Palestine Pupil's Book 6A*, Macmillan, 2018, p. 48)



Omar and Rania are visiting their grandfather's olive farm. Some olive trees are very old but you can harvest olives from them.