



21st-Century Intercultural Understanding: A Comparative Analysis of Capital C/Small C Representations in Chinese and Iranian Senior High School EFL Textbooks

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>Received: 13 March 2024 Revised: 04 October 2024 Accepted: 20 October 2024 Online: 09 March 2025</p> | <p>This study explored and compared intercultural components in the reading passages of Chinese and Iranian secondary high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks through cultural content analysis. To this end, the study utilized Chen's (2004), Lee's (2009), and Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) frameworks to systematically analyze the representations of the Capital 'C' (macro-cultural) and small 'c' (micro-cultural) elements across source (China & Iran), target (English-speaking countries), international (global perspective), and culture-neutral (cultural contexts with no specific source) contexts. The findings revealed both Chinese and Iranian textbooks shared a focus on presenting source culture content; however, there were significant differences in the range and diversity of intercultural elements represented, with the Chinese textbooks representing a much higher frequency of diverse cultural elements compared to Iranian counterparts. The Chinese textbooks consistently depicted a comprehensive range of cultural elements, from micro-cultural details like Daily Life and Customs to macro-cultural insights such as History and Economy, across the four specified contexts. In contrast, the Iranian textbooks not only failed to illuminate any discernible intercultural elements but neglected to provide acceptable macro- and micro-cultural knowledge of their cultural context. The findings suggest that while both sets of textbooks attempt to engage with cultural representations, the Iranian textbooks, in particular, require further development to offer a more inclusive and global perspective. This would guide future curriculum development endeavors to nurture a more globally aware generation of learners.</p> |
| <p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Cultural Content EFL Textbook Intercultural Understanding Macro-cultural Elements Micro-cultural Elements</p> | |

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1. Introduction

The global prevalence of English as an international language necessitates the teaching of this linguistic medium worldwide. The main objective of the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession, especially since the 1960s, has been to integrate culture into foreign-language pedagogy. The word "culture" refers to the common frameworks of knowledge that comprise a group of people's shared beliefs, values, attitudes, and concepts of proper behavior, statuses, and role expectations. Culture is intertwined in all languages and is essential for preserving a sense of community. Therefore, learning a language and culture have an unbreakable connection, and as a result, language textbooks play a critical role in representing diverse cultures (Tüm & Uğuz, 2014). Anthropologists and structural linguists highlighted the close association between language and culture in the 1960s. During this period, a thorough comprehension of culture as the way of life for a society became crucial for teaching and learning foreign and second languages. From the 1990s onward, the primary emphasis in the realm of foreign/second language teaching and learning has shifted toward the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence (Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2017).

The 21st century is characterized by an increasingly interconnected world, in which globalization, international collaboration, and migration trends are crucial. This interconnectedness necessitates effective communication and understanding across cultures. Intercultural understanding is integral in empowering individuals to traverse diverse social settings and promoting productive collaborations. One key concept in this context is cultural capital (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) referring to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions valued within a specific culture. Cultural capital provided the opportunity for individuals to understand and participate effectively in their own culture and those they encounter. Language learning plays a significant role in shaping cultural capital, and English textbooks, as a primary source of cultural information for many learners, can significantly influence how students perceive and understand different cultures (Sobkowiak, 2016). According to Baleghizadeh and Amiri Shayesteh (2020), language learning is inextricably linked to culture and cannot occur without cultural components. As suggested by Kumaravadivelu (2008), mastering the target language culture alone is not enough, and the main objectives of L2 cultural learning should be intercultural citizenship and universal cultural awareness. Contemporary educational paradigms call for growing global students, who can effectively interact with diverse cultures with sensitivity and awareness.

This comparative study aimed to address a gap in the existing research on the representation of cultural capital in EFL textbooks and provided critical insights into how educational materials in

EFL contexts present cultural elements. While there is extensive research on cultural representation in textbooks, a comparative analysis focusing on the portrayal of cultural capital (capital C) in textbooks from geographically and culturally distinct regions, such as China and Iran, is lacking. By examining how Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks represent cultural capital, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural capital is transmitted through language education in diverse cultural contexts. The findings of this comparative study shed light on the cultural perspectives disseminated in EFL teaching materials used across China and Iran. By exploring how the Capital 'C' and small 'c' cultures are manifested across source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts, the present study further contributes to the detection of potential strengths, weaknesses, and imbalances in promoting intercultural understanding.

2- Literature Review

EFL textbooks as the primary instructional materials have the potential to shape students' cultural perceptions and world knowledge in many non-native English-speaking contexts (Gray, 2002; Shin et al., 2011). The representations of culture within these textbooks remarkably affect students' attitudes toward cultural groups and their ability to engage respectfully with diversity (Yuen, 2011). Many researchers (Byram & Escart-Sarries, 1991; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Hatoss, 2004; Kılıçkaya, 2004; Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2017) have introduced and employed different categories and themes to evaluate the cultural content of EFL textbooks. According to Chen (2004), small 'c' cultural themes refer to cultural values such as daily routine, norms/customs, food, greetings, and holidays. Meanwhile, Capital 'C' cultural themes include music, history, education, economy and politics, social system, and geography. According to Peterson (2004), culture can be compared to an iceberg, consisting of visible (tip-of-the-iceberg culture) and invisible ('under-the-water' culture) parts. Food, music, architecture, gestures, art and literature, language, and clothing are examples of visible culture. Meanwhile, values, opinions, attitudes, and viewpoints form the invisible parts of culture. Peterson (2004) also suggests that different themes can be classified into Big 'C' and small 'c' cultures based on their level of importance. History, main beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes are examples of Big 'C' cultures, and opinions, art, clothing, and food are examples of small 'c' cultures. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) categorized cultural content into three distinct groups: source culture, target culture, and international culture. Source culture pertains to cultural elements within the framework of the learners' cultural context. Hardy (2004) proposes incorporating source culture materials to make learners comfortable and familiar with the material

and increase intelligible input. Target culture denotes the cultures of nations where English is the native and primary language, such as England, the USA, and Australia. According to McKay (2002), including target culture in learning textbooks and materials can be utilized constructively to create an interculturality area and inspire some students. Students can also reflect on how their culture compares to the target culture. International culture includes non-English speaking nations like Peru, Egypt, and Indonesia where English is not the primary language. "Approaching information from international culture offers learners opportunities to develop cross-cultural sociolinguistic competence by helping them acquire notions about how to communicate appropriately with people in global settings." (McKay, 2002; p. 5). Yuen (2011) introduced a framework for classifying cultural elements within English textbooks, discerning four distinct categories denoted by the following four Ps: products, practices, perspectives, and persons. Products in this taxonomy refer to material cultural objects such as cuisine, tourism destinations, print media, movies, TV shows, and merchandise. Practices refer to aspects of daily life, societal structures, sports, educational customs, and general cultural practices. Perspectives consist of cultural materials conveying perceptions, values, myths, beliefs, and worldviews, influencing individuals' conduct within cultural contexts. Finally, the category of persons encompasses renowned individuals, both factual and fictional, excluding the latter when depicted within stories or movies as they are considered products rather than individual entities (Yuen, 2011).

To switch from a more theoretical description of the intercultural representations to the empirical studies domain, it is worth noting that several researchers in Iran have also analyzed global and localized textbooks used for language education in terms of content (Alimorad, 2015; Derakhshan, 2024; Soodmand Afshar & Sohrabi, 2021), task types (Alemi & Hesami, 2014; Papi, 2015), objectives (Mallahi & Afraz, 2018), students and teachers' attitudes and perspectives (Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2017), gender representation (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020), and development of language skills (Asakereh et al., 2019). Derakhshan (2024) explored how culture is represented in language textbooks using a semiotic approach. The research focuses on the Iranian national EFL textbook, *Vision 1*, exploring its potential for constructing cultural meanings through the text-image-task relationship, as perceived by Iranian EFL students, teachers, and educators. The qualitative analysis revealed three main themes: the co-instantiation of text and image was indexical, with limited cultural awareness; the textual and visual components did not align with the tasks for promoting intercultural meanings; and participants suggested more engaging alternative images. Moreover, the findings indicate that *Vision 1* offers little opportunity for fostering cultural awareness, leading to the proposal of a dynamic model for evaluating cultural representations in

textbooks to improve their effectiveness in educational settings. Soodmand Afshar and Sohrabi (2021) critically examined the Iranian twelfth-grade English textbook, *Vision 3*, through a mixed-methods approach involving 200 teachers and 200 students nationwide. Despite claims of a communicative design, the findings reveal significant shortcomings, including neglect of students' needs, disregard for the rights of teachers and students, a producer-consumer mentality, and an excessive focus on localization of the target culture. The authors recommend that policymakers incorporate feedback from both teachers and students to improve future editions of the textbook. Ahmadi Safa et al. (2015) explored the perspectives of both EFL teachers and learners regarding the intercultural competence potential of the *Top Notch textbook series*, a resource widely utilized in Iranian private language institutes. Specifically, the study focused on teachers and advanced learners from Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Hamadan provinces. According to their findings, both EFL teachers and learners were satisfied with the overall intercultural competence potentiality of the textbook. In their study on cultural representation in dialogues and reading passages, Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014) explored international and localized textbooks used in Iran. They detected aesthetic and/or sociocultural aspects of culture presented in source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts. According to their research, the majority of cultural aspects included in the localized textbooks were sociological values that were culturally neutral and did not specifically allude to any one culture. Moreover, the first language/local culture was not represented in the localized textbook corpus. On the flip side, intercultural aspects were more commonly included in their related international textbooks—of which two-thirds fell into the aesthetic category. Kiss and Weninger (2013) analyzed the cultural content of EFL textbook materials. They argue that while traditional content analyses provide valuable insights, they fail to present a comprehensive picture of the cultural potential of textbooks. This limitation arises from their neglect of how learners perceive and engage with texts and the visuals framed within pedagogical tasks. The authors demonstrated that cultural meanings can emerge through unguided semiosis, facilitated by thinking and collaboration within a complex, nonlinear, and dynamic instructional context. Kafi et al. (2013) examined the relationship between English textbooks and the cultural outlook of Iranian EFL learners, focusing on the *Top Notch* and *Interchange* series. Their findings indicated a significant correlation between the textbooks and the cultural perspectives of EFL learners. Additionally, the study revealed that these texts notably influenced students' cultural attitudes. The results highlighted that learners with higher English proficiency were more affected than those with lower proficiency. Specifically, learners who demonstrated greater English proficiency and were better equipped to move beyond the linguistic aspects of the

language to engage with cultural elements exhibited more substantial changes in their attitudes. Razmjoo (2007) investigated the representation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles in Iranian high school and private institute textbooks. It highlights the origins of CLT in the goal of developing communicative competence, as articulated by Hymes (1972), and expands upon by Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990). The study reveals that the extent to which CLT principles are incorporated in EFL/ESL textbooks varies based on the designers' interpretations. Through descriptive and inferential analysis of the textbooks, the findings indicate that high school textbooks are not conducive to CLT implementation, whereas private institute textbooks align more closely with CLT principles, suggesting a significant difference in how these educational materials support effective language learning. This researcher recommended further research on the components of CLT, including culture.

Intercultural representations and culture, in general, have also been a hotbed of research in other countries (e.g., Azimova & Johnston, 2012; Chapelle, 2016; Risager, 2020; Thompson, 2013; Vinall & Shin, 2019). Keles and Yazan (2023) investigated the portrayal of cultures and communities in five editions of the *New Headway* elementary level textbook (NHE) from its initial publication in 1993. Using a diachronic content analysis approach informed by Kachru's concentric circles model and Yuen's adaptation of ACTFL's standards, the researchers examined the categories of persons, perspectives, products, and practices within the textbook. The findings reveal that the Inner Circle, particularly Western, European, and Anglo-American cultures, dominates the content across all editions, while the Expanding Circle and Outer Circle cultures are significantly underrepresented, comprising only about 10% of the material. This imbalance suggests that the textbook does not adequately promote global cultural awareness among English learners and lacks engagement with the multicultural aspects of English language varieties. The authors encourage teachers, learners, and material developers to critically analyze and adapt textbook content to foster a more inclusive representation of cultures and communities. In their study, Prihatiningsih et al. (2021) analyzed the types of cultures represented in EFL textbooks for seventh graders, specifically analyzing the books *When English Rings a Bell* and *English on Sky 1*. Employing qualitative content analysis and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal social semiotic approach, the researchers noticed significant imbalances in cultural representation. It finds that source culture is more dominantly featured compared to target and international cultures, indicating that the authors and publishers prioritize the construction of learners' identities and character education over the use of language as a lingua franca. This focus may limit learners' opportunities to acquire international cultural knowledge and develop as effective intercultural communicators. Therefore,

it is recommended that English teachers actively select appropriate textbooks and incorporate supplementary materials or activities to address these shortcomings. Focusing on English as an International Language (EIL), Yuen (2011) analyzed the depiction of foreign cultures in two English language textbooks used in Hong Kong secondary schools. Utilizing the term from Paige et al. (2003, p. 209), the researcher determined that these textbooks adopted a 'tourist's perspective' regarding non-Western cultures. Consequently, they included much less representation of cultures from Asian and African countries compared to those from English-speaking Western countries. Xiong and Peng (2021) analyzed the representation of cultural values in two Chinese as a second language textbooks: *New Practical Chinese Reader* (NPCR) from mainland China and *Integrated Chinese* (IC) from the US. Using a critical social semiotic approach, the study explores image-text relationships and their cultural meanings, particularly regarding education. Findings reveal three types of image-text relations, with IC promoting guided semiosis through pedagogic activities and encouraging critical engagement with Chinese cultural values. In contrast, NPCR's cultural representations are primarily denotational, limiting opportunities for deeper interpretation. The paper discusses implications for enhancing cultural content in language textbooks.

This study is underpinned by several research bodies, including intercultural education, EFL textbook analysis, and materials development for global citizenship education. A thorough review of the literature shows the significant impact of cultural representations in textbooks on learners' worldviews and intercultural sensitivity (Gray, 2002; Yuen, 2011), the analysis of which reveals strengths and shortcomings in how societies conceive cultural education. Although EFL textbooks should introduce learners to the diversity of world cultures, tendencies for cultural stereotyping, imbalance, and superficiality in materials from diverse contexts are well-documented in relevant studies (Shin et al., 2011). There have been calls for EFL textbooks to nurture "intercultural citizenship" through more profound engagement with multiple cultures (Guilherme, 2002). This study answers such a call through a detailed comparative analysis of cultural representations of the Capital 'C' and small 'c' elements across four contexts in the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks. Thus, this study focused on a relatively neglected subject by first examining the cultural content of the Chinese and Iranian textbooks and then analyzing and contrasting their respective cultural loads. To accomplish these objectives, the following research questions were put forth:

- How do the manifestations of the Capital 'C' and small 'c' elements differ in the reading passages of the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks, particularly concerning the source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts?

- How do cultural representations in the reading passages of the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks differ and coincide in terms of the Capital 'C' and small 'c' cultural elements across the source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts?

3. Research Method

Textbook Corpus

In this study, six EFL textbooks from China (n=3) and Iran (n=3) developed for secondary high schoolers, were purposively selected for analysis regarding their widespread national adoption and use. The secondary high school level was chosen since it is assumed that cultural components are more common at this level (Shin et al., 2011); the primary high school textbooks mainly deal with basic language knowledge. Moreover, elementary textbooks are limited to introducing surface cultural conceptions and knowledge-oriented contents due to the limited English language skills and young cognitive capacity of elementary school students. According to Shin et al. (2011), the intermediate or higher intermediate proficiency levels are suitable for introducing profound cultural concepts with intercultural communication characteristics. Furthermore, as these books included diverse language inputs and tasks, only the input delivered through reading passages was addressed in each book.

China and Iran present particularly compelling cases for this study as both are countries with rich cultural legacies that have engaged distinctly with the global spread of the English language (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Wu et al., 2018). In China, following the policy of reform in the late 1970s, teaching and learning English has been of greater interest. Since 2001, the English language has been taught to students aged 8-9 years and older using a variety of EFL textbooks from different publications across the country. This study investigated the cultural content in the reading sections of three English textbooks intended for Chinese senior high school students: *Compulsory I*, *Compulsory II*, and *Compulsory III*. These textbooks were published by People's Education Press (PEP) (Liu, 2019) and constitute the initial three volumes in *the General Senior English Textbook series*, comprising a total of eleven textbooks (Li & Deocampo, 2022). Published in 2019, this series marks the initial release by PEP and was created through collaboration between the Curriculum Textbook Research Institute and the English Curriculum Textbook Research and Development Center. The rationale for selecting these textbooks lies in their widespread usage within China (Li & Deocampo, 2022), signifying their role as representatives of the larger educational materials landscape across the country (Li, 2021). In the prefaces of all three textbooks, it is explicitly noted that the new editions are designed to address the requirements of the contemporary era, aligning with the New Curriculum Standards for teaching English in secondary high schools (Lei & Medwell,

2022; Ministry of Education, 2018). In this regard, the objectives are to emphasize cultural awareness to foster students' sense of identity and Chinese cultural inheritance through the exhibition of vibrant Chinese and foreign cultures, broaden their appreciation of the human cultural heritage by enabling students to analyze how China and foreign cultures are different and improve their students' intercultural understanding and communication skills.

The high school ELT textbooks for Iranian students were marketed in Iran in 1938, for the development of which there was a collaborative effort by Iranian and American educational specialists. Before this initiative, high school materials were selected from a diverse range of EFL textbooks primarily published in English-speaking countries, and this "pre-Revolution" period lasted from 1939 to 1979. In 1939, a team of Iranian and native ELT experts collaborated to develop the first official English textbooks tailored to the Iranian context (Gholami & Ghasemi, 2018), which primarily reflected the dominant pedagogical trends of the time, namely the Direct Method and the Reading Method. However, with the gradual evolution of general teaching methodologies, there were concurrent adaptations in textbook development. The emergence of Situational Language Teaching (SLT) motivated a revision of the existing textbooks, incorporating its principles (Foroozandeh, 2011). Following the Islamic Revolution, the post-Revolution era of English textbooks can be categorized into three distinct phases: 1982–1990, 1991–2010, and the current *English for Schools series* introduced in 2015. The first post-Revolution textbook revision took place in 1982 and lasted until 1990. In 1991, a significant change was made following introducing a new "Pre-University" level for students intending to pursue higher education. This specific textbook, encompassing *Book I* and *Book II* within a single volume, drew upon the principles of RM and SLT. Notably, *the English for Schools series*, encompassing *Vision I* (2016), *Vision II* (2017), and *Vision III* (2018) for secondary high school students, is grounded in the CLT principles. *Vision Textbooks I-III* have been adopted in secondary high schools since the 2016 academic year.

Instrument

After an extensive literature review, the frameworks proposed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Chen (2004), and Lee (2009) were identified as suitable for the objectives of the current study. Subsequently, we formulated a comprehensive checklist for textbook analysis, drawing on elements from these frameworks. The checklist includes six Capital 'C' cultural themes (Music, History, Geography, Economy, Art, and Government/Politics) and four small 'c' cultural themes (Value and Belief, Daily Life, Food, and Customs/Norms). Table 1 provides precise definitions and examples of these themes to guide the coding procedure.

Table 1
Definition and Examples of Capital 'C' and Small 'c' Cultural Themes

| Theme | Definition | Example |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Capital 'C' | | |
| History | The study of past events, particularly in human affairs. | History of the Islamic Republic of Iran |
| Music | Vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion. | Classic music, pop, rock |
| Art | The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. | Drawing, photography, carpet weaving |
| Economy | The state of a country or region in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services and the supply of money. | Capital market, capitalism, stock exchange |
| Geography | The study of the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere, and of human activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities. | Volcanoes, populations, earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, floods, rivers |
| Government/Politics | The group of people with the authority to govern a country or state; a particular ministry in office. | Micro-policies, macro-policies, political issues |
| small 'c' | | |
| Value and Belief | Belief: An acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof. Value: Principles or standards of behavior. | Murder is wrong; Love is good; Courage, balance, compassion, fitness, professionalism, |
| Daily Life | The activities and experiences that constitute a person's normal existence. | Commuting, conversation, cooking, dinner |
| Food | Any nutritious substance to maintain life and growth. | Meat, fruit, milk, vegetables, types of food |
| Customs/Norms | Custom: a traditional and widely accepted way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a particular society, place, or time. Norm: something that is usual, typical, or standard. | Greeting customs such as bowing or shaking hands Greeting people when you see them; Speaking quietly in public places. |

Source: Oxford English Dictionary

In addition to the small 'c' and Capital 'C' elements, the checklist also incorporates aspects from Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) framework. In line with their classification, ELT materials can be grouped into three categories according to their cultural content: (1) materials emphasizing the source culture (L1), (2) materials highlighting the target culture (L2), and (3) materials focusing on international culture. Building upon Tajeddin and Teimournezhad's (2014) study, we introduced a fourth category named culture-neutral materials to the checklist. This category addresses elements devoid of cultural specificity, avoiding explicit reference to any particular culture.

Procedure

The present study employed a content analysis approach to explore the representations of the Capital 'C' and small 'c' elements embedded in the reading passages of the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks. The approach helped us to obtain more in-depth insights into how cultures are portrayed in EFL educational materials. To analyze cultural representations in the textbooks, the researchers reviewed all reading passages in the student books, which were centered around a specific topic in each unit. *Compulsory I* consisted of a welcome unit and five units, each containing two reading passages; *Compulsory II* and *Compulsory III* only contained five units, with two reading passages in each. *Vision Textbooks I-III* contained 10 reading passages, with four passages included in four units of *Vision I*, three in three units of *Vision II*, and three in four units of *Vision III*. Two coders were involved in data analysis, and the estimated inter-coder reliability for two coders was 0.83, indicating the acceptable agreement between the coders and the high consistency of the findings. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and a third person, an expert in the field of content analysis, was involved if no agreement was reached. Quantitative results (e.g., number of instances of each code) extracted from four contexts embedded in the reading passages of the two sets of textbooks were analyzed. Comparisons were then drawn between the Chinese and Iranian textbooks, revealing the dominant and the disregarded cultural representations from a critical intercultural perspective.

4. Findings

The first research question sought to identify the manifestation of the Capital 'C' and small 'c' elements in the reading passages of the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks. This investigation explored how these cultural elements are represented across the source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts. To answer this question, the occurrence and percentage of the cultural themes obtained from the reading passages in the textbooks of these

two countries were calculated (Tables 2-5). Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the Capital 'C' cultural themes included in the *Compulsory Textbooks I-III* reading passages across different contexts. In this table, the frequency and percentages of each volume are tabulated separately.

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Capital 'C' Themes in Reading Passages of Compulsory Textbooks I-III Across Different Contexts

| Theme | Source | Target | International | Culture-neutral | Total No. (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>Compulsory I</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| History | 21 | 2 | 11 | 0 | 34(66.6) |
| Geography | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 10(19.6) |
| Economy | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Art | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4(7.8) |
| Politics/Government | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3(5.8) |
| Total No. (%) | 31(60.7) | 2(3.9) | 18(35.2) | 0(0) | 51(100*) |
| <i>Compulsory II</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4(6.2) |
| History | 8 | 7 | 10 | 1 | 26(40.6) |
| Geography | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 7(10.9) |
| Economy | 2 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 7(10.9) |
| Art | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4(6.2) |
| Politics/Government | 2 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 16(25) |
| Total No. (%) | 19(29.6) | 20(31.2) | 17(26.5) | 8(12.5) | 64(100*) |
| <i>Compulsory III</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3(7.5) |
| History | 10 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 19(47.5) |
| Geography | 4 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 9(22.5) |
| Economy | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4(10) |
| Art | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3(7.5) |
| Politics/Government | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2(5) |
| Total No. (%) | 16(40) | 13(32.5) | 7(17.5) | 4(10) | 40(100) |
| <i>Compulsory Textbooks I-III</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 7(4.5) |
| History | 39 | 15 | 24 | 1 | 79(50.9) |
| Geography | 13 | 6 | 6 | 1 | 26(16.7) |
| Economy | 2 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 11(7) |
| Art | 7 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 11(7) |
| Politics/Government | 5 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 21(13.5) |
| Total No. (%) | 66(42.5) | 35(22.5) | 42(27) | 12(7.7) | 155(100*) |

*Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

The table above presents the highest (n=64) and lowest (n=40) frequencies of the Capital 'C' themes in the second and third volumes of *Compulsory*. Regarding the four cultural contexts, the frequencies of these cultural elements are remarkably higher (n=66) in the source context and lower (n=12) in the culture-neutral context, indicating the greater focus of the reading passages on the History and Geography of China as the source country. Regarding intercultural understanding, the textbooks encompassed more frequent instances (n=42) of the international Capital 'C' themes

compared to the target and culture-neutral contexts. The frequency and percentage of the small 'c' cultural themes extracted from the reading passages of the Chinese textbooks are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency and Percentage of Small 'C' Themes in Reading Passages of Compulsory Textbooks I-III Across Different Contexts

| Theme | Source | Target | International | Culture-neutral | Total No. (%) |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| <i>Compulsory I</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 2 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 19(39.5) |
| Daily life | 0 | 0 | 3 | 13 | 16(33.3) |
| Food | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3(6.2) |
| Customs/Norms | 4 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 10(20.8) |
| Total No. (%) | 6(12.5) | 2(4.1) | 4(8.3) | 36(75) | 48(100*) |
| <i>Compulsory II</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 1 | 1 | 3 | 26 | 31(56.3) |
| Daily life | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 7(12.7) |
| Food | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1(1.8) |
| Customs/Norms | 1 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 16(29) |
| Total No. (%) | 6(10.9) | 7(12.7) | 7(12.7) | 35(63.6) | 55(100*) |
| <i>Compulsory III</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 6 | 0 | 5 | 23 | 34(46.5) |
| Daily life | 5 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 16(21.9) |
| Food | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6(8.2) |
| Customs/Norms | 4 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 17(23.2) |
| Total No. (%) | 19(26) | 5(6.8) | 17(23.2) | 32(43.8) | 73(100*) |
| <i>Compulsory Textbooks I-III</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 9 | 1 | 8 | 66 | 84(47.7) |
| Daily life | 9 | 1 | 7 | 22 | 39(22.1) |
| Food | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 10(5.6) |
| Customs/Norms | 9 | 11 | 11 | 12 | 43(24.4) |
| Total No. (%) | 31(17.6) | 14(7.9) | 28(15.9) | 103(58.5) | 176(100*) |

*Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

The table illustrates an upward trend in the frequencies of the small 'c' themes within the reading passages of *Compulsory Textbooks I-III*. The smallest frequency, $n=48$, is observed in the first volume, while the highest frequency, denoted as $n=73$, is recorded in the third volume of the textbook. Concerning the four cultural contexts, a noteworthy observation is that the frequencies of the small 'c' elements were notably higher, with a count of $n=103$, in the culture-neutral context. This suggests that in the development of EFL materials in this country, there is a greater emphasis on the Capital 'C' elements of the Chinese context. Culturally context-free materials are designed when dealing with Value and Belief ($n=84$) with the highest frequency or the other elements. Regarding intercultural understanding, the textbooks encompassed more frequent instances ($n=28$) of the international small 'c' themes when only compared to the target context.

The identical analytical process was applied to assess the Iranian textbooks. Tables 4 and 5 display the occurrence and percentage of Capital 'C' and small 'c' representations in *Vision Textbooks I-III*.

Table 4
Frequency and Percentage of Capital 'C' Themes in Reading Passages of Vision Textbooks I-III Across Different Contexts

| Theme | Source | Target | International | Culture-neutral | Total No. (%) |
|-------------------------------|----------|---------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| <i>Vision I</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| History | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4(36.3) |
| Geography | 4 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 7(63.6) |
| Economy | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Art | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Politics/Government | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Total No. (%) | 4(36.3) | 2(18.1) | 5(45.4) | 0(0) | 11(100*) |
| <i>Vision II</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| History | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2(15.3) |
| Geography | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Economy | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3(23) |
| Art | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8(61.5) |
| Politics/Government | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Total No. (%) | 7(53.8) | 0(0) | 1(7.6) | 5(38.4) | 13(100*) |
| <i>Vision III</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| History | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1(50) |
| Geography | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Economy | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1(50) |
| Art | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Politics/Government | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Total No. (%) | 1(50) | 0(0) | 0(0) | 1(50) | 2(100) |
| <i>Vision Textbooks I-III</i> | | | | | |
| Music | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| History | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 7(26.9) |
| Geography | 4 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 7(26.9) |
| Economy | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4(15.3) |
| Art | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8(30.7) |
| Politics/Government | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Total No. (%) | 12(46.1) | 2(7.6) | 6(23) | 6(23) | 26(100*) |

*Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 4 illustrates a disheartening trend with low frequencies and percentages observed for the Capital 'C' elements in the reading passages of *Vision I* (n=11), *Vision II* (n=13), and *Vision III* (n=2). Concerning cultural contexts, the textbooks lacked sufficient depth across all contexts, with the highest frequency, albeit notably small (n=12), found in the source context. Unfortunately, the notable absence of any Capital 'C' element in the reading passages was a noteworthy observation. In intercultural understanding, the reported percentages suggest a lack of success in the textbooks in

cultivating students' awareness and sensitivity to intercultural aspects related to all Capital 'C' themes.

Table 5

Frequency and Percentage of Small 'C' Themes in Reading Passages of Vision Textbooks I-III Across Different Contexts

| Theme | Source | Target | International | Culture-neutral | Total No. (%) |
|-------------------------------|----------|--------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| <i>Vision I</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 5 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 13(41.9) |
| Daily life | 1 | 1 | 0 | 14 | 16(51.6) |
| Food | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1(3.2) |
| Customs/Norms | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1(3.2) |
| Total No. (%) | 7(22.5) | 1(3.2) | 2(6.4) | 21(67.7) | 31(100*) |
| <i>Vision II</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 2 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 20(74) |
| Daily life | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4(14.8) |
| Food | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3(11) |
| Customs/Norms | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Total No. (%) | 2(7.4) | 1(3.7) | 1(3.7) | 24(88.8) | 27(100*) |
| <i>Vision III</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 10(76.9) |
| Daily life | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2(15.3) |
| Food | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0(0) |
| Customs/Norms | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1(7.6) |
| Total No. (%) | 2(15.3) | 0(0) | 0(0) | 11(84.6) | 13(100*) |
| <i>Vision Textbooks I-III</i> | | | | | |
| Value and Belief | 7 | 0 | 2 | 34 | 43(60.5) |
| Daily life | 2 | 1 | 1 | 18 | 22(30.9) |
| Food | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4(5.6) |
| Customs/Norms | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2(2.8) |
| Total No. (%) | 11(15.4) | 1(1.4) | 3(4.2) | 56(78.8) | 71(100*) |

*Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

As presented in Table 5, *Vision Textbooks I-III* show a heightened focus on depicting the small 'c' elements, with Value and Belief registering the highest frequencies, followed by Daily Life. However, Customs/Norms (n=2) and Food (n=4) are of less concern to be presented culturally in each of the contexts. More surprisingly, although the small 'c' elements are more frequent than the Capital 'C' ones in the Iranian textbooks, they are more frequently (78.8) presented in culture-neutral materials, thereby failing to promote either the Iranian Islamic- (i.e., the source culture) or inter-cultural understanding. According to Tables 3-5, it can be inferred that the Chinese material developers are more concerned with representing the Capital 'C' elements than the small 'c' elements. In contrast, their Iranian counterparts show more interest in representing the latter group elements, particularly Value and Belief and Daily Life. In the second research question, the examination focused on identifying similarities and differences in cultural representations within the reading passages of the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks. This analysis

specifically examined the Capital 'C' and small 'c' cultural elements across the source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts. The findings are graphically depicted in Figures 1-4.

Figure 1

Comparison of the Frequencies of Capital 'C' Themes in Compulsory Textbooks I-III and Vision Textbooks I-III Across Each Context

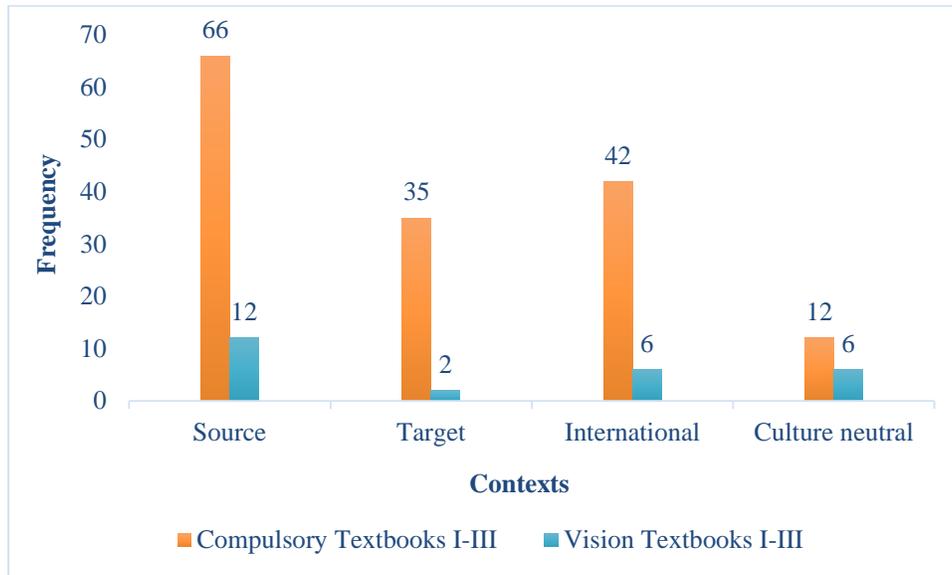
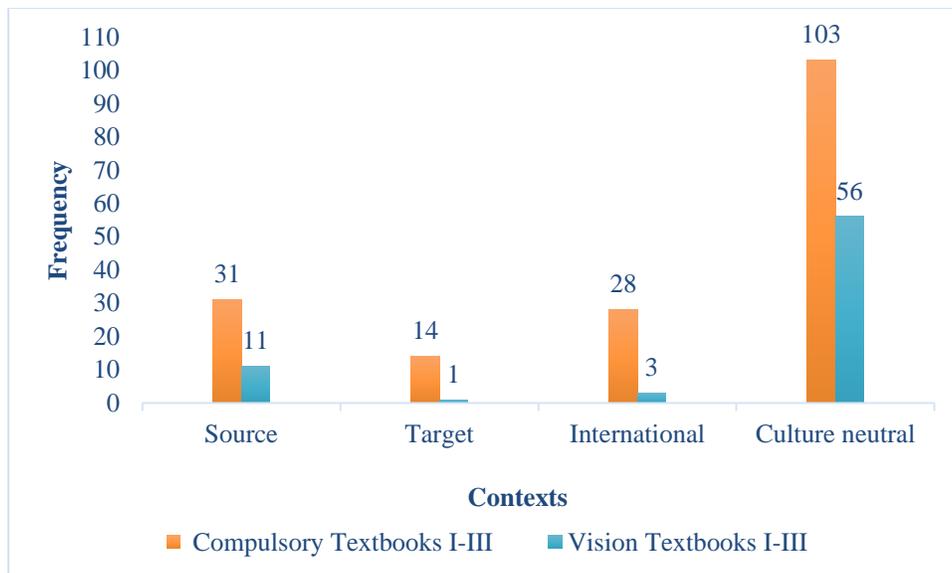


Figure 2

Comparison of the Frequencies of Small 'c' Themes in Compulsory Textbooks I-III and Vision Textbooks I-III Across Each Context



In an illustrative comparison of thematic content in the reading passages of the two sets of textbooks, Figure 1 shows the frequency of the Capital 'C' themes within *Compulsory Textbooks I-III* and *Vision Textbooks I-III*. The data reveals a significant difference, with the Chinese textbooks demonstrating remarkably higher frequencies across most themes: 66 instances in the source, 35 in the target, and 42 in the international contexts, as opposed to the Iranian textbooks with 12, 2, and 6 instances in these respective contexts. When examining the Capital 'C' themes, the highest frequency is observed in the source context, followed by the international context. Notably, both sets of textbooks exhibit approximately low frequencies for the culture-neutral context, suggesting a comparable emphasis in this area.

Figure 2 depicts a comparative analysis of the frequency of the small 'c' themes within the Chinese and Iranian textbooks. The chart shows a marked difference in thematic emphasis, with *Compulsory Textbooks I-III* featuring higher frequencies across all contexts: n=31 in the source, n=14 in the target, n=28 in the international, and n=103 in the culture-neutral contexts. Conversely, *Vision Textbooks I-III* contain lower frequencies, comprising 11 instances in the source, 1 in the target, 3 in the international, and 56 in the culture-neutral contexts. It is observed that the highest frequency of the small 'c' cultural elements is reported for the culture-neutral context.

Figure 3

Comparison of the Frequencies of Capital 'C' Themes in *Compulsory Textbooks I-III* and *Vision Textbooks I-III*

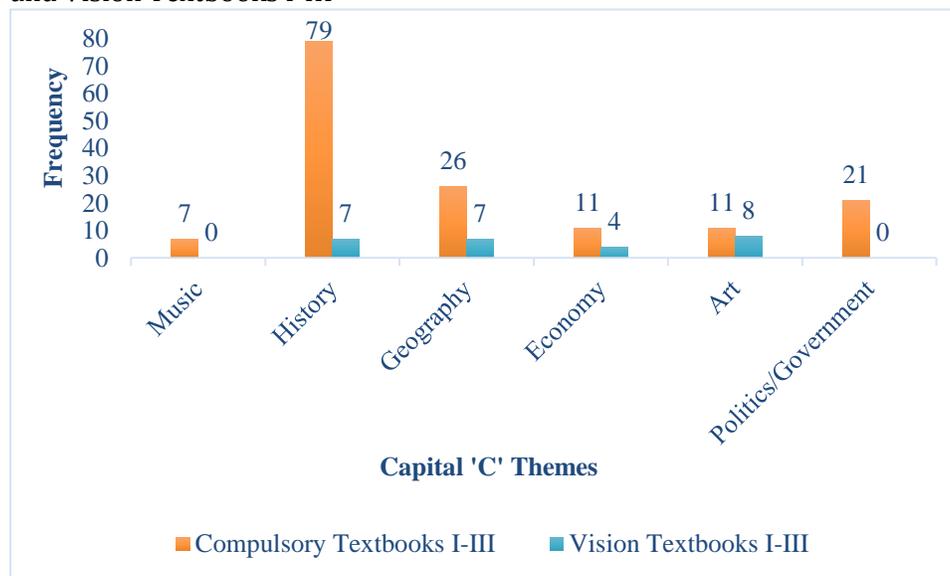
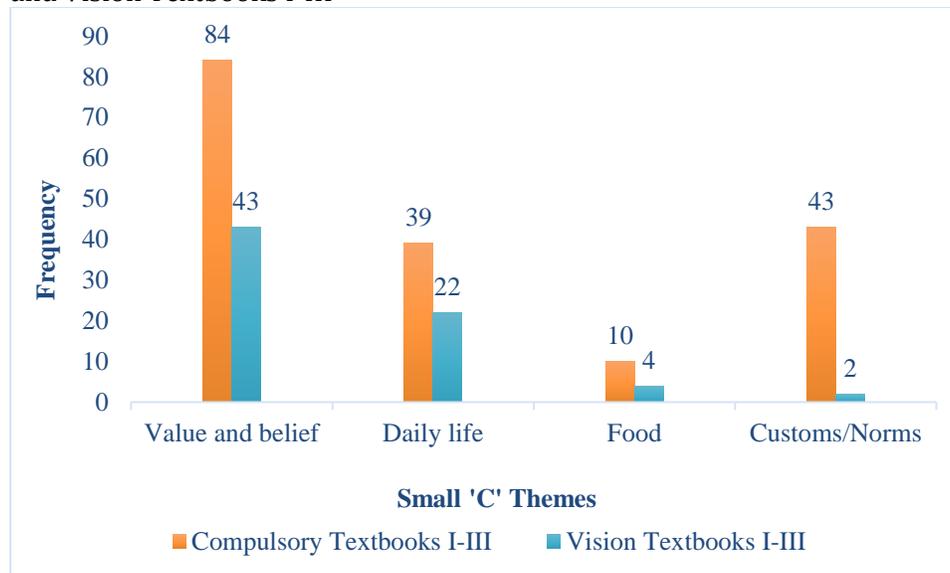


Figure 3 is the comparative illustration of the frequency of the Capital 'C' cultural themes between *Compulsory Textbooks I-III* and *Vision Textbooks I-III*. As indicated, Music (n=7) and Politics/Government (n=21) were exclusively featured in the Chinese textbooks, whereas they did not appear in their Iranian counterparts. There is a significant contrast in the representation of History, with n=79 representations in the Chinese textbooks, significantly overshadowing the 7 instances in the Iranian textbooks. Geography and Economy also displayed a higher frequency in *Compulsory Textbooks I-III*, with 26 and 11 occurrences, respectively, compared to 7 and 4 in *Vision Textbooks I-III*. Art was comparably featured in both sets of textbooks, with a slightly higher frequency observed in *Compulsory Textbooks I-III* (n=11). According to Figures 1 and 3, it can be deduced that the Chinese textbooks mainly focus on History and Geography in the source culture.

Figure 4
Comparison of the Frequencies of Small 'C' Themes in Compulsory Textbooks I-III and Vision Textbooks I-III



The frequencies of the small 'c' themes in the reading passages of the two sets of textbooks are illustrated in Figure 4. The chart reveals that Value and Belief is a more prevalent theme in both sets of textbooks, with 84 and 43 instances in the Chinese and Iranian textbooks, respectively. However, the second most frequent theme is Daily Life (n=22) in *Vision Textbooks I-III* and Customs/Norms (n=43) in *Compulsory Textbooks I-III*. Similarly, Food was less frequent, with 10 and 4 occurrences in the Chinese and Iranian textbooks, respectively.

5. Discussion

In an attempt to contribute to this growing body of literature on EFL textbook evaluation, the present study compared the reading passages of the Chinese and Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks to systematically detect the representations of the Capital 'C' (macro-cultural) and small 'c' (micro-cultural) elements across source, target, international, and culture-neutral contexts. The findings confirmed that the two sets of textbooks, particularly their reading passages, functioned as cultural input in both EFL contexts. Despite English being included as a foreign language in the official education systems of China and Iran, the frequency analysis revealed a meaningful difference between the textbooks used in the two countries, with the Chinese textbooks representing a higher frequency of diverse cultural elements than their Iranian counterparts. As well-documented in relevant studies (e.g., Soodmand Afshar & Sohrabi, 2021), the Iranian textbooks have little to share when culture and cultural issues are of concern. In more detail, when addressing the representations of the small 'c' elements in reading passages, both sets of textbooks acted similarly, paid little attention to the target culture, and were primarily concerned with the source and culture-neutral materials. This finding is not in a similar vein to the viewpoint of those researchers (Byram & Flemming, 1998; Zeiss & Isabelli-García, 2005) appreciating the inclusion of the target culture in teaching English in language classes. In light of English's role as lingua franca, the exclusive association of English language with native speakers is no longer upheld (Kachru, 2011). As a result, the language is now recognized as belonging to numerous cultures, emphasizing the imperative role of intercultural comprehension for English language learners (Baker, 2017).

Regarding quality, the Chinese textbooks portrayed cultural elements more complexly and authentically. Both Chinese and Western cultures were presented in a balanced, multi-faceted way. The textbooks highlighted cultural diversity within society and cultural change in modern China. In the Iranian textbooks, few cultural references to target Western cultures were noticed, and there was no representation of diversity within or across cultures.

In comparison, *Vision Textbooks I-III* provided much lower frequencies of source culture representation in the reading passages. Tajeddin and Teimournezhad's (2014) findings on the localized textbooks taught in Iran are consistent with those of this study, as they also noticed no cultural representation of the first language/local culture in the textbooks and reported the higher frequency of culture-neutral content referring to no specific culture. Similarly, Zhang and Su (2021), in an examination of cultural representations in Chinese and German English textbooks across national boundaries, concluded that there is a balance among different cultures in China's English textbooks; however, they reported underestimating the underlying value orientations in their

content. Oppositely, Sadeghi and Sepahi (2017) denied such a balance in EFL textbooks and suggested identifying teachers' and students' preferences for cultural themes in the pre-use phase of adopting such course materials. Although the importance of nurturing Iranian-Islamic culture (the source culture) is frequently reminded in the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (Supreme Council of Cultural Revaluation, 2011) and notified to the concerned authorities for implementation, the Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks have partially addressed the goal. This document presents the formal education system, particularly the Ministry of Education, as a social, cultural, and organized institution. It is crucial in edifying, disseminating, and transferring culture within Iranian Islamic society. The primary objective is to prepare students to attain certain levels of *Hayate Tayyebah*, representing the ideal Islamic life in all its facets. Acquiring such a lifestyle is considered both a necessity and a recommendation. In this regard, the system is supposed to preserve Islamic-Iranian culture through a conscious assessment and critical interaction with other cultures based on an Islamic norm system (i.e., promoting intercultural understanding). The present study's findings are inconsistent with this objective, and further modification and revisions of EFL textbooks are mandatory to provide high school students with in-depth knowledge of their own culture and other cultures to arouse inter- and intra-culture awareness. In Chapter 7 of the document, entitled operational objectives and strategies, one of the objectives referring to the term 'cross-culture' is to educate individuals who "acquire the required capabilities to create cultural and artistic works by appreciating and aesthetic understanding of God's creations and the man's artistic works by understanding the cultural and cross-cultural concepts, and by using their own imagination power; and those who make efforts to preserve and promote the cultural, artistic and civilization heritage of the country at national and global levels, based on the Islamic norm system" (Goals 1, 4, 5, 2, 8, Supreme Council of Cultural Revaluation, 2011; pp. 30-31). Moreover, establishing a network of learning environments such as culture clubs is also suggested as a strategy, which should be beyond the culturally rich content of EFL textbooks.

As another upper-hand document, the Iran National Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2013) lists 'culture' as one of the fields of education and an integral, rich resource to construct and preserve national identity. This curriculum introduces culture as encompassing elements such as value and belief, history, customs, regulations and rules, monuments and ancient works, art, and literature, the semantic, aesthetic, and sociological aspects of which should be acknowledged and appreciated. The present study's findings do not align with the national curriculum, indicating that the Iranian secondary high school EFL textbooks provide little directly transferred cultural knowledge, as prescribed in this document for the non-elementary levels. Teaching and learning

foreign languages are also introduced as another field of education, which is considered a suitable platform for understanding and receiving cultural interactions and transferring the achievements of human knowledge in various linguistic formats. In other words, this field has unique potential waiting to be fully realized; nevertheless, the developers of these textbooks have not fully capitalized on this potential. It is worth noting that the stated policy of *the English for Schools series*, articulated in the preface of *Vision Textbooks I-III*, is to facilitate active global interactions with a focus on the cultural values and elements inherent in the rich Iranian-Islamic culture. Supporting the incorporation of the source culture into language teaching materials, the inclusion of contexts that resonate with learners' daily lives enhances motivation for both learning and teaching the language among students and educators (Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990).

Compulsory Textbooks I-III utilized readings as a means to introduce predominantly culture-neutral themes, followed by international and source cultural elements. The textbooks frequently showcased nearly all Capital 'C' elements, particularly History and Geography, and the small 'c' elements, including Value and Belief, Customs/Norms, and Daily Life. Despite the similarity of these books with the Iranian ones in terms of representing all small 'c' elements, *Vision Textbooks I-III* contained much fewer instances of those cultural elements. In contrast to their Chinese counterparts, Music is completely ignored in the Iranian textbooks, and high schoolers receive no knowledge of music across any of the four concerned contexts. This deficiency could distance learners from genuine, real-world cultural contexts, diminishing their understanding of cultural subtleties. To enhance cross-cultural interaction effectively, learners should be prepared to engage in conversations about their everyday experiences, ways of living, and traditions (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2010). Similarly, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) announce the priority of the small 'c' cultural themes in culture learning. This comparative study highlights the need for developing EFL materials representing Culture and culture in a culturally sensitive, critically informed manner. Education systems need to be cautious of how the cultural values and worldviews they include in their textbooks will prepare students with the intercultural understandings require for proceeding in today's globalized world. It should be noted that intercultural competency is as much about understanding one's own culture as understanding others.

6. Conclusion

One This study detected the differences in cultural representations for four contexts (i.e., source, target, international, and culture-neutral) in the secondary high school EFL textbooks from China and Iran. The findings indicated significant differences in how these two sets of textbooks

portrayed cultural elements, with the Chinese textbooks promoting and facilitating intercultural understandings and the Iranian textbooks adopting non-culture-pregnant contents. The inconsistencies between the two countries reflect the varying cultural ideologies underpinning English language education in each context. Accordingly, there is a call for developing EFL materials representing source, target, and international cultures in an authentic, balanced manner. While exploratory, the present research highlights the remarkable role EFL education can play in promoting intercultural understanding when textbooks are explicitly developed for that purpose; however, it also depends on how they portray and engage learners with cultural diversity.

In the context of global intercultural communication, where English is the primary lingua franca, the importance of intercultural competence cannot be overstated. In addition to developing intercultural knowledge, English textbooks should lay the grounds for EFL learners to further dig into their own Islamic culture by embedding Capital 'C' and small 'c' representations in their receptive/input content. This mandates the adaption and adoption of solid materials and the enrichment of teacher training programs to promote intercultural learning effectively. This study encounters several limitations, and a significant one is that, despite the prevalent use of *Vision Textbooks I-III* as secondary high school EFL materials in Iran, there exists a diverse array of EFL textbooks in Chinese secondary high schools. The focus of this research was specifically on three commonly used textbooks across multiple regions in China. While these selected textbooks enjoy widespread usage, they might not comprehensively represent the entire spectrum of EFL materials employed in China. A more inclusive analysis, incorporating additional textbooks, would contribute to a more thorough understanding of intercultural content in the context of Chinese secondary high school EFL education.

In the EFL context of Iran, policymakers and material developers should prioritize the development of EFL textbooks authentically representing diverse cultural contexts, including source, target, and international cultures, to enhance students' intercultural competence. They are also recommended to integrate elements of Iranian culture into the curriculum, encouraging students to appreciate their heritage while engaging with global cultures. Comprehensive teacher training programs should be scheduled to equip educators with effective strategies for teaching both global and local cultural content. Collaborating with cultural experts and educators during the textbook development process can ensure that materials are relevant and pedagogically sound. Moreover, expanding the range of EFL textbooks used in schools, particularly high schools, and incorporating supplementary resources can deepen cultural insights, while ongoing research into the impact of these materials can help identify best practices.

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