Culture as an Unsolved Problem in ELT Program in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Comparative Survey of the Attitudes of Teachers at Schools and Language Institutes

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

K E Y W O R D S

A B S T R A C T

While for decades learning English has mostly been accompanied by learning its culture, in recent two decades due to the presence of some critical trends in the field of applied linguistics, the mere integration of target culture in English textbooks has been challenged. Not surprisingly, following this shift, the idea of integrating source culture in English textbooks has caught the researchers' attention. Since the cultural content of English textbooks used in schools and language institutes in Post-revolutionary Iran has always been a controversial issue, in this paper, through a qualitative study, it was attempted to comparatively study the attitudes of Iranian language teachers at schools and language institutes as two contrasting contexts about the issue. In doing so, the attitudes of twenty five teachers in these two sectors, including thirteen school teachers and twelve language institute teachers, selected through convenience sampling, surveyed through semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that while there were some partial differences in the attitudes of these two groups toward the concept of culture and its representation in textbooks, due to the dominance of the mainstream ELT, known as the liberalist approach, that publicizes the inclusion of target culture and rejects the integration of local culture in English textbooks as well as the failure of English education in schools, the participants were mostly in favor of integrating target culture as an indispensable part of English textbooks. These findings may have pedagogical implications for language policy makers, syllabus designers and textbook developers.

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1. Introduction

Culture has been mostly treated as an indispensable part of English language teaching (ELT) and has been used as a source of content for many English textbooks (Akbari, 2008). While generally it has been recognized that language and culture are intimately linked, mostly due to the advent of some critical trends in the field of applied linguistics in general and ELT in specific, which is known as a critical turn (Cook, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006), the former uncontested status of this component in ELT has been challenged (Gray, 2010). In a more specific word, inspired by this critical turn, the conception of culture and its integration in ELT have been accompanied by a shift. While the cultural content of the English textbooks were mainly the representation of the target culture or the western society, following this shift, the idea of integrating source or local culture in English textbooks which are developed in non-western societies emerged (Gray, 2000; Mckay, 2003). Conceiving the importance of this issue on the one hand and considering the fact that the issue of culture has always been the source of controversy in the field of English language education in Iran (Aliakbari, 2002; Borjian, 2013; Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017), the present study attempts to comparatively study the attitude of Iranian EFL teachers at schools and language institutes with regard to the controversial topic of integrating source vs. target culture in English textbooks.

Needless to say, in Iran schools are regarded as a context in which the localized English is centrally developed and managed (Borjian, 2013). On the contrary, the language institutes are known as a context in which the latest Center-produced curricula are adopted; the most recent teaching methods and methodology are followed and the Western cultural load of the teaching materials and course books are explicitly offered and publicized. In a more precise word, native-speakerism is being sought as an ideal situation in this sector (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). Due to the presence of these two contrasting contexts in which two versions of English, namely the localized and globalized ones and their cultures are represented (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018), it was hypothesized that teachers, as one of the most important stakeholders in English language curriculum, have different views toward the issue of culture and its manifestations in English textbooks. In a more precise word, regarding the dichotomy of integrating source culture vs. target culture (see Akbari, 2008), it is supposed that the teachers in schools, influenced by the centralized education system, are in favor of source culture and the teachers in language institutes are in favor of target culture. Based on this hypothesis, this comparative research was formed and followed.

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2. Theoretical Considerations

In this section, first the common classifications of the notion of culture are briefly introduced. In the following, the opposing views on the position of culture in ELT in general and in English textbooks in specific are dealt with and then the theoretical framework that the researchers have adopted in this research is introduced.

Culture: Its Definition and Classifications

While culture is increasingly becoming an unavoidable issue, its concept is wide and fuzzy, and its theories are even more innumerable (Groh, 2020). This abstract, complex and problematic term (Barber & Badre, 1998) has been defined in various ways, but none of them can fully claim to have attained the final definition of culture. However, in the absence of any unanimous consensus with respect to defining and interpreting culture (Gray, 2010), reviewing the literature on the topic reveals that some classifications of the concept are more prominent.

The first classification typically distinguishes between Culture with a 'big C' and culture with a 'little c'. The big C culture refers to that culture which is most overt or visible. Some forms of this culture which is known as formal or surface culture include holidays, traditions, food and clothing. On the contrary, little c culture or deep culture refers to psychological features, assumptions, attitudes, values and needs, often expressed non-verbally or implicitly (Chapelle, 2016; Kovács, 2017). The second classification is known as Iceberg model which was proposed by Hall (1976). This model compares culture with an iceberg. It is maintained that the image of the iceberg with its small visible part on the surface of the water and the much bigger invisible part below the surface illuminates the different layers of culture. The visible elements of culture such as clothing, language, food, music or rituals are represented by the upper portion of the iceberg, while the portion below the surface stands for those elements which are not as obvious such as values, beliefs and attitudes. In this model, most of the cultural elements are classified as invisible. The third model is the Onion model proposed by Hofstede (2001). In the model, the image of an onion is used to describe the different layers of culture. Culture can be broken down into layers: The outer layers are composed of the artifacts and products as well as patterns of behavior. The next layer encompasses the norms, attitudes and beliefs of that culture. The middle of the onion represents the underlying cultural assumptions and values. As the most hidden layer, these aspects of culture

are much harder to recognize and understand, but all of the other layers are built upon the center of the culture onion. (See, Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

From another classification, as Gray (2010) points out, culture is introduced from modernist and constructionist perspectives. In the modernist view, culture is understood to entail a focus on the eating and drinking habits of language speakers, their leisure activities, their institutions and their political system. Contrary to this simplistic base-superstructure model, whereby the realm of the culture is seen as a mere reflection of a society's material and economic foundations, from the constructionist perspective rooted in critical turns in cultural studies, it is suggested that culture creeps into every nook and crevice of contemporary social life, creating a proliferation of secondary environments, mediating everything (Hall, 1997).

Culture in English Language Teaching

As Risager (2012) writes, references to "culture" have become more and more prominent in applied linguistics, especially since the 1980s. The term has typically been used in order to highlight the (supposed) intimate relationship between language and culture in a number of disciplines such as intercultural pragmatics, intercultural communication, and intercultural learning as part of foreign and second language learning. Among these disciplines, according to Risager (2007), the role and position of culture in foreign and second language learning in general and English language teaching in specific are more prominent. In this regard, Mckay (2003) writes that culture in language teaching has traditionally involved providing cultural information. Following Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi, (1990), she introduces the four dimensions of cultural information as follows: a) The aesthetic sense (Culture with a big C) in which the literature, film, and music of a target language country are examined; b) The sociological sense (culture with a small c) in which the customs and institutions of this country are explained; c) The semantic sense in which how a culture's conceptual system embodied in a language is investigated; and d) The pragmatic sense in which how cultural norms influence what language is appropriated for which context is examined.

From another perspective, Holme (2003) maintains that language teachers tend to focus on 'culture' according to a combination of five views: the communicative view, the classical curriculum view, the instrumental or culture-free-language view, the deconstructionist view, and the

competence view. The first three views treat cultural content as marginal or even irrelevant to successful language learning. The last two views treat language and culture as being acquired in dynamic interaction, with one being essential to the full understanding of the other (p. 18). In the presence of these diverse and mostly theoretical discussions and debates, as Chapelle (2016) mentions, what and how students should be taught about culture has been central to the discussion of foreign language teaching for decades. Thus, it is no surprise to see that the questions proposed by Kramsch (1988) - namely what are the cultural topics that should be covered?, and which cultures should be taught?- are still relevant. Among the answers provided for these questions, the three types of cultural information distinguished by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) are revealing. They are as follows:

- − 'source cultural materials' that draw on the learners' own culture as content;
- − 'target culture materials' that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language;
- − 'international target culture materials' that use a great variety of cultures in English- and non-English-speaking countries around the world.

Due to the importance of this classification, especially the first two types (Mckay, 2003), they are specifically dealt with in the following. Needless to say, in Iran, as the main focus of this study, the locally-produced textbooks developed for schools are mostly based on the source culture and the Center-produced textbooks used in language institutes are based on target culture. Thus, the significance of the first two types in the above-mentioned classification becomes more considerable.

Source Culture vs. Target Culture

For decades, the cultural content of the textbooks especially those developed in the Center, namely the English-speaking countries was mostly devoted to the target culture. In a more specific word, integrating target culture as the only choice in English textbook development, has been known as one of the tenets of the mainstream ELT. But in three recent decades, due to the advent of some new concepts including English as an international language, English as a lingua franca, etc. as well as especially following the formation of a significant critical trend in the field of applied linguistics in general and ELT in specific, the monopoly of the mainstream ELT has been broken. Regarding the dominance of target culture in English textbooks, Sercu (2002) asserts that most cultural content in such textbooks merely represent the information about different dimensions of the target culture, such as geography, education, food and drink, tourist highlights, politics, the economy, etc. In his

words, they are mostly based on models of American Culture and develop a very limited, and inappropriate sort of cultural awareness (Fenner, 2001). Norton (2000) writes that in teaching culture, there is a continuous interaction of the target language culture and the local culture. Imported English textbooks include cultural global values which may not be in line with the learners' local identity as demonstrated in his/her beliefs, attitudes, and self. Identity processes basically happen in the interaction of individuals with the society. Respecting the mere inclusion of target culture in English textbooks, Mckay (2003) writes that some of the cultural content relating to the target culture, or cultures, is largely irrelevant or uninteresting to some of the students, or even presents cultural conflicts. For example, in her words, a discussion of garage sales may be irrelevant to students who do not have such sales in their own country; shoes placed inside western homes may be puzzling to students who come from cultures where shoes stay outside of the home (p. 89). Akbari (2008) also writes that most cultural content has been from the target language, since the justification has been that those who want to learn a new language want to communicate with the users of that language, and successful communication would be impossible without familiarity with the cultural norms of the society with whose speakers the learner is trying to forge bonds. In his words, this assumption, of course, holds true for those groups of learners who want to migrate to countries such as the US or UK for work or study (p. 278). He maintains that since English has now turned into an international language, and due to the scope of its application both geographically and communicatively, it has developed certain features which are not part of any specific national character. In this regard, he maintains that in this international situation, most of the communication carried out in English is between people who are themselves the so-called non-native speakers of English and with a distinct cultural identity of their own. There is little need in this context for the Anglo-American culture since neither party is a native with whom the other interlocutor is going to identify.

From this critical perspective, rooted in the tradition of critical pedagogy, Gray (2010) points out that in the dominant paradigm in English language teaching, textbooks are mostly carriers of target culture. Thus, Akbari (2008) attempts to make the position of integrating source culture in English textbooks more significant. In this regard, he writes:

> In most communicative settings, people try to communicate their own cultural values and conceptualizations, not those of the target language. Typically, people involved in communication want to express who they are and what kind of cultural background they represent, and as a result, an emphasis on target language is misplaced; what is needed more is for the learners to be

able to develop the competence to talk about their own culture and cultural identity (p. 279).

According to Gray (2000 & 2010), using target culture in the mainstream ELT books seems to uphold the Center values and living standards, leading to the perception that the target culture is superior to the student's. Avoiding this influence, Akbari (2008) maintains that reliance on one's own local culture has the added value of enabling learners to think about the different aspects of the culture in which they live and find ways to bring about changes in the society where change is needed.

On the other hand, with respect to the importance of target culture in language learning, Bennett (1997) introduces culture as a vital part of the communication process. In his words, learning a language without its culture is a recipe for becoming a "fluent fool". A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well, but does not understand the social or philosophical content of that language" (p. 16). Verifying the significance of target culture, Wijaya (2018 as cited in Nambiar et al., 2020) introduces local culture as important as target culture. In this regard, he points out that the local culture awareness is just as important as target culture awareness as the familiarity with local content will serve as a motivator and identity for students to "construct their own meanings and reflect on their own culture as well as the culture of the target language" (p. 3).

In all, conceiving the importance of this controversy about the cultural content of English textbooks both internationally and nationally, in this research, the researchers adopted Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) model which has been elaborated in Gray (2002), McKay (2003) and Akbari (2008). Insisting on the significance of this issue, McKay (2003) has provided this classification regarding the advantages and disadvantages of this dichotomy as follows:

Table 1: McKay's (2003) classification of source vs. target cultures

Target culture materials	Source culture materials
Advantages − students may be interested in learning more about English-speaking cultures.	Advantages − the opportunity to learn more about topics they know something about; − gain English vocabulary to discuss the topics about their culture with others even when the teachers are from another culture, they can become an interested listener; − creating a real context for students to tell others about their culture in English.
Disadvantages − largely irrelevant or uninteresting to some of students − cultural conflicts for students − few resources to draw on to help students	Disadvantages − as students are already familiar with such topics and so they may not be not motivating.

3. English Language Education in Iran: A Snapshot

The story of English language education in Iran has been documented and analyzed in some recent works including Dahmardeh (2009), Farhady, Sajadi-Hezaveh, and Hedayati (2010), Atai and Mazlum (2013), Borjian (2013), Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015), Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017), Davari and Iranmehr (2019), Morady-Moghaddam and Murray (2019) and Goodrich (2020). Despite the difference in their points of view, the point in common in these works is the belief that culture in English education has always been the source of controversy in the process of English textbook development and selection in both public and private sectors in Post-revolutionary Iran. Setting the scene, in the following, a brief story of English education is provided. Needless to say that presenting a vivid picture of the ups and downs of this story firstly involves describing English education in Pre-revolutionary Iran.

According to Aghagolzadeh & Davari (2017), due to Pre-revolutionary Iran's extensive collaboration with the West, new aims for education were formulated in a way that English and English education received much more attention, and the emergence of this language's status as Iran's number one foreign language dates back to this period (Borjian 2013; Farhady et al. 2010). As Tollefson (1991) writes, between the mid-1950s and late 1978, English steadily expanded to

become the most common second language in Iran and became the major language of business, military, higher education and the media. Thus, it was no surprise to see that much value was assigned to English and English language education. In Aghagolzadeh & Davari's (2017) words, with the growing attention given to English, private English institutes came also into existence. Expanding their operations, they established growing number of branches in large cities and shouldered the responsibility of English expansion, especially in provincial cities and among well-off families. The use of Center-produced ELT textbooks with its special Anglo-American cultural content provided the enthusiastic learners with new interesting sources (p. 51). In schools also, the gap between English and French became much wider in favor of English, and finally English replaced French, becoming the primary foreign language.

In this situation in which the idea of English as a precondition for prosperity and development gradually gained support, the advent of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 changed the scene. In such a situation, it was not surprising to see that in the first years of the revolution, as Aliakbari (2002) writes, due to the perception of parallelism between the English language and the United States, this language encountered waves of hostility. In this regard, Aliakbari (2004) writes that Post-revolutionary reactions to ELT involved a movement, generally referred to as 'book purging', which aimed at 'de-culturalization' of English-teaching textbooks. He describes the movement in this way: "As an urgent reaction, certain words and concepts were replaced by 'proper' a-cultural or neutral ones. Replacing the national course-books and designing new materials were the next steps. The materials developed, then, generally represented the concepts, topics and ideas that Iranian students might learn in other courses including history and divinity" (p. 2).

Within such a climate, as Aghagolzadeh & Davari (2017) point out, the negative attitude toward English led to closing the private English institutes, as well as purging the ELT textbooks. As Borjian (2013) notes, during the early years of the Revolution, the questions as what to do with English and whether it should stay in school and university curricula or be entirely banned were at the center stage of a heated debate among the politicians. In fact, in such a situation, as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) write, debates around "to teach or not to teach English" finally led to teaching English, but mostly in its localized and homegrown form (see Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015).

However, due to the significant deficiency of the public education system, which could not meet the learners' needs, the private language institutes have attracted an increasing number of

learners and become a lucrative industry and big business. In this regard, Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) write that "the majority of institutes mushrooming all over the country, even in small towns and some villages, adopt commercially Center-produced, but pirated textbooks; there has also been a major shift of emphasis from the traditional teacher-centered approach such as audiolingualism to the common communicative approaches" (p. 53). They also write:

> With respect to textbooks, curricula and methodology, they keep an eye open for the Center-produced ones. In this regard, the latest Center-produced curricula are adopted; the most recent teaching methods and methodology are followed and the Western cultural load of the teaching materials and course books are explicitly offered and publicized. In a more precise word, native-speakerism is being sought as an ideal situation in this sector (p. 54).

At the same time, in the public school system, considerable dissatisfaction among students as well as teachers, especially regarding the textbooks, were recorded (Haddad-Narafshan & Yamini, 2011). Due to the rising criticism of the inflexible and outdated structure of the textbooks, in spite of the officials' ambivalence, finally as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) write, the picture has begun to change. In this phase, following the approval and implementation of two important educational documents, the English language education in the Iranian formal system has experienced its most fundamental, and of course, controversial reform. On the basis of one of these documents, English teaching is subject to certain ideological conditions in a way that its teaching has been conditioned on stabilizing and strengthening the Islamic and Iranian identity (see Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015). Thus, influenced by this condition, we can see that the new textbooks have been developed on the basis of the principles of critical pedagogy including the integration of source culture in textbook development. In this regard, as Leather and Motallebzadeh (2015) write, blending communicative language teaching with local topics and culture is going to enrich the learners' cultural attachment and local identity. Thus, English presented in such books is devoid of western culture and a representation of Persian culture and ideology as well as Islamic values (Mohammadian-Haghighi & Norton, 2017).

In all, through reviewing such ups and downs, it can be concluded that two versions of English, namely the localized version in schools and the globalized version in language institutes, have been rivals in Iran (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018). Undoubtedly, in this rivalry, the issue of culture in textbook development and selection, as pointed out, has had a controversial position.

4. Research Method

The sampling method used in this study was that of criterion-based selection. In this form of sampling, as LeCompte and Preissle (1993) note, the researcher creates a list of attributes essential to the study and then seeks out participants to match these criteria. The criteria in this research were: a) Having BA or MA in English; b) Having English teaching experience either at schools or at private English institutes for at least five years and c) Being familiar with the textbooks used in schools and institutes. Then, forty seven teachers with such criteria were contacted, out of which twenty five accepted to take part as participants in the research. Thirteen school English language teachers and twelve institute English language teachers were interviewed. The participants were from five provinces and their age ranges were from 28 to 46 years old. In the first group, there were seven male and six female teachers and in the second group, there were five male and seven female teachers. Nine teachers in the first group were BA and four were MA and in the second group there were eight BA and four MA. The years of teaching experience of the participants were from five to twenty-three. Among the different types of the interviews, the semi-structured one was selected which was mostly developed and provided through reviewing the literature on the topic by the researchers. Regarding the selection of this type of interview, it is noteworthy that as Dörnyei (2007, p.136) writes, in most applied linguistic research most interviews conducted belong to the semi-structured interview type, which offers a compromise between the two extremes, namely the structured and unstructured ones.

In this phase, an interview protocol was developed by the researchers. This schedule was a set of open-ended questions and a range of topics and issues to be covered. Then, some appointments were made with the participants of the study. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers. Among them, sixteen were phone interview and nine were face-to-face; the shortest interview took about 30 minutes and the longest was about 45 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Persian and were recorded with the permission of the participants. They continued until the researchers sensed that they have reached saturation. At the end, the interviews were transcribed by the researchers to thematically be analyzed.

5. Results

Analysis Making use of the growing literature and theoretical considerations on the topic as well as having an eye on two contrasting contexts of English education in Iran, namely the schools and the language institutes, the researchers attempted to provide the most important questions on the topic. In doing so, on the basis of the literature on the topic especially Davari's (2013) mixed-methods survey, eight questions which were directly related to the issue of culture and the controversial issue of source vs. target culture in textbooks, were finally elicited. In the following, the findings from these questions are reported.

The researchers firstly attempted to find the participants' perceptions of the concept of culture. So, the first two questions were as follows:

- What is your definition of culture?
- Name some examples or instances of culture?

Reviewing the answers provided by the participants in both groups revealed that their perceptions were mostly confined to everyday life aspects including clothes, food, customs, behaviors, traditions, etc. or the culture in its surface meaning or culture with a big C. Even, while some of them defined culture in its deep meaning or culture with a small c, their examples of the concept were related to visible instances. The following answers are good examples of the perception common among the teachers in both groups:

> Culture is the common traditions, customs and behaviors in a society. It is the clothing, the food, the social relationships, the music... It is everything that makes a society different from another society (Participant 3).

> Culture, in simple words, is our lifestyle. The way we live, the way we speak, the way we contact others, and especially the way we behave....we can see culture in everyday life... the dress I wear, the meal I eat, the way I greet, all are instances of culture (Participant 15).

> Culture is our behavior, our customs, or our traditions. Since they are different from a society to another, we see different cultures. I believe they are rooted in our history and geography....because we can see that the social behaviors of the people live in northern Iran are different from those living in a central province. We can see that their clothes are different, or their music are different... we can see people in some regions are more hospitable than others. These are good examples of culture or cultural differences (Participant 22).

Of course, three participants (two school teachers and one institute teacher) not only defined culture both in its surface and deep meanings, but provided good examples of the concept. Two answers are as follows:

> Culture has two manifestations: visible and invisible. While the visible cases are important, I believe the invisible ones are more important. In fact, these invisible ones make the societies different from or similar to each other. Identity, social values, religious beliefs, are examples of invisible culture (Participant 7).

> While culture is mostly limited to the customs of everyday life, it has some deep roots. A society's view to life, to other people from different ages or genders, to some concepts such as respect others, cleanliness, protection of nature and the environment, ... are examples of culture (Participant 19).

In all, through reviewing the answers provided for these two questions, we can conclude that their attitude to this concept and its examples tend to the visible aspects or surface meaning of culture and there is no significant difference between the attitudes of these two sectors. The third question was posed as follows:

- Is it possible to teach a language such as English without teaching its culture?

Regarding this question, the responses can be classified in two categories: a) Teaching English without its culture is impossible and b) Teaching English as an international language can be accompanied with integrating other important cultures along with its culture. Regarding this question, the responses were mostly in favor of the tenet that a language and its culture are inseparable (see, Brown, 2007). On the basis of this tendency, we saw that most of the teachers especially in the second group, maintained that teaching English without teaching its culture is not only impossible, but ridiculous. Some of their views are as follows:

> Culture is an inseparable part of a language. They cannot be separated. When we learn English, we must learn its culture; when we teach English, we must teach its culture. When we use a language, we show its cultural features, so teaching English without its culture is not possible (Participant 1).

> Sometimes we hear that the culture of English language is dangerous, so it is said that we must teach it without its culture! It is really funny. Language and culture are not separated. When we know a language, we must know its culture (Participant 18).

> Any language carries with itself some important social and cultural features. And English is not an exception. Learning English without learning these

> features not only is impossible, but ridiculous. I always say that the main reason for the failure of English education in schools in Iran is its inattention to culture (Participant 22).

With regard to the second classification, it was found that five teachers (three school teachers and two institute teachers) maintained that along with integrating English culture, due to the status of English as an international language, teaching English can include teaching other important cultures in the world today. In a more specific word, gaining intercultural competence through teaching English (Byram, 1997) was emphasized. Some of their views are as follows:

> Today it is said that English is not a foreign language, but an international language. When it is an international language, it is used in various contexts with various cultures. Since it is not possible to teach all cultures, we can teach the most important ones (Participant 2).

> English is used both in English-speaking countries and in many contexts around the world. So, besides teaching its culture, we can choose the cultural features which are mostly used in international contexts (Participant 20).

The fourth question was presented as follows:

- Could you specify some manifestations of culture in English textbooks?

Conceiving more tangibly the perception of the teachers from the manifestations of culture in textbooks, they were asked to name some instances of culture in English textbooks. The answers again confirmed the findings of the first and second questions. While only seven participants presented some instances of invisible aspects of culture, other examples were limited to some clichéd instances of surface culture. In the following, some views are presented as follows:

> The texts and the pictures are full of cultural elements or manifestations. The way the greet each other, the way they call each other, the way they dress, their hobbies, their leisure, all of them are manifestations of culture (Participant 4).

> The topics of the lessons are the best manifestations of culture. When the lesson about music, we see that it is about pop or jazz; when the topic about cinema, we see that the Hollywood catches our eyes (Participant 18).

Of course, some of the participants (three school teachers and two institute teachers) provided the researchers with some instances of deep culture. The following answers which show the invisible manifestations of culture in such textbooks might be considerable:

> As I said, the books are filled with the cases of culture. From visible ones to invisible ones. From dress, food, hobby as visible ones to for example consumerism as an invisible one (Participant 6).

> I believe that in famous books, the western society is manifested as an ideal society for the learners. In such books, beside some positive points such as punctuality of the western people, we see that some negative points of their life such as unusual social relationships or social problems such as family, alcoholism, crimes and violence are neglected. (Participant 16).

This view is in line with the critical tendency that criticizes the cultural content of the Center-produced textbooks (see Akbari, 2008; Gray, 2010). The fifth question was posed as follows:

- Is it possible to teach source culture (i.e. Iranian culture) in teaching English?

The answers to this question were really challenging. It was noticeable that all institute language teachers except participant No. 19 maintained that the integration of Iranian culture in English textbooks is illogical, unnatural or ridiculous. Some of their answers are as follows:

> As I said, a language and its culture are interwoven. We are going to teach English, not Persian! Such teaching is not natural or normal. It must be avoided. I think English is not learned in schools because it is taught unnaturally (Participant 20).

> Whether teaching English as a foreign language or as an international language, we must not include our culture in the books or classrooms. It is not a natural way of teaching English, but a mechanical and of course a ridiculous way of teaching English! (Participant 15).

Among school teachers, the answers were to some extent different. Their views can be classified into three categories: a) Teaching Iranian culture through English teaching is wrong (six participants); b) Teaching Iranian culture along with English culture is possible, but not desirable (four participants); c) Teaching Iranian culture in teaching English is productive (three participants).

Regarding the first category, some of their views are as follows:

> My experience says that one of the reasons of failure of English education in schools is its artificial context. We want to teach English without its culture. It is not possible (Participant 5).

See... this policy has been defeated. We should not repeat it again and again. It is really senseless and meaningless to teach English with Iranian culture (Participant 10).

Regarding the second category, some of their views are as follows:

I do not reject it totally, it is possible to teach this way, but I believe that it is not favorable. It lacks any attraction (Participant 11).

In theory, it may be possible to add any culture to English teaching, but what about the result? If we accept this statement that culture is the fifth skill in any language learning, we in fact, ignore this skill (Participant 13).

Regarding the third category, some of their views are as follows:

I strongly believe that not only it is possible, but necessary. Of course it must not be solely based on Iranian culture, but both of them should be included: Iranian culture and English culture, because we should be able to express ourselves, our culture, our values... (Participant 6).

Along with English culture, the inclusion of Iranian culture might be helpful for Iranian learners. I heard that it has been experienced in different countries including Japan or South Korea. Our learners should be able to convey their culture or communicate it (Participant 19).

The sixth question was presented as follows:

- If we agree that today's English is an international language, should its teaching be confined to target culture?

Regarding this question, some contradictions arose. While some of the teachers firstly maintained that integrating culture in textbooks must be confined to English culture, facing this question changed their views and maintained that the inclusion of other cultures or in their terms, international cultures might be inevitable. Some of the answers to the question are as follows:

Yes...if we accept that English has become an international language, then it means that an important part of its usage takes place in international contexts... so knowing some international cultures along with English culture as the most important culture seems necessary (Participant 1)

You are right... I haven't thought about this point so far... of course I think that the main content of the books should be based on English culture and part of it is devoted to international culture (Participant 23).

Of course some teachers in both groups rejected this view. In their opinions, when English is an international or global language, for better or worse, its culture has become international. One participant's response is as follows:

> I cannot accept this view. Teaching various cultures is not possible in classrooms. It is not necessary or even logical. English is gaining an unprecedented status in the world and I think when a language finds this position, we should accept its culture as a norm (Participant 25).

The seventh question was posed as follows:

- You accepted that English is an international language; now this question is raised that our interlocutors are not necessarily English native speakers, so we do not need to know merely English culture. What's your idea about this point?

In response to this question, while all participants agreed on the point, only three (two school teachers and one institute teacher) accepted that in the current situation, in which most of the interlocutors that we face are not native English speakers, the emphasis on mere inclusion of target culture is not justifiable. In this regard, this response might be revealing:

> In person, I agree. I suppose that interlocutors for most of the Iranian learners at present or in future are not native speakers of English. So, it is logical not to confine ourselves to only English culture (Participant 7).

However, most of them again insisted on the necessity and importance of integrating target culture in English textbooks. The following answer which was repeatedly pointed out by at least half of the participants might show their tendency:

> Nobody can deny the international position of English today... but even this claim be right, I believe that we can neither teach English without its culture nor we can teach some international cultures in classrooms (Participant 24).

The last question was presented as follows:

- In communication with interlocutors from other societies, it is believed that everyone wants to be able to develop the competence to talk about their own culture and cultural identity. If you agree with this view, is teaching source culture necessary?

The responses to this question showed that it was a challenging question. Some participants totally rejected such a situation and introduced it as an unnatural context. One of the participants' responses is as follows:

> In communication with foreigners, we mostly attempt to meet our needs, solve our problems, and so on. It is a rare situation in which a person wants to talk about his cultural identity (Participant 14).

Some participants agreed that this is an important point, but they mentioned that to meet this need, we should not weaken the cultural content of the textbooks through decreasing the weight of the target culture and integrating Iranian culture instead. This attitude is represented in this response:

> That might be right... but instead of including Iranian culture in textbooks, we can improve their communicative abilities in classrooms and provide them with cultural information about their country in other lessons such as history, literature, etc. In this situation, on the basis of this knowledge, they can use English in communication with others (Participant 22).

However four participants agreed that meeting this requirement involves teaching Iranian culture in English textbooks. Two responses are as follows:

> I totally agree with you. Repeatedly I have faced students in language classrooms whose language skills is good, but they cannot talk about some topics related to their culture... for example, they can talk about Christmas, but cannot talk about Nowrooz, they can talk about or write about some festivals in western countries, but cannot talk about our religious or cultural ceremonies or events in Iran. Certainly it is a weak point (Participant 6)

> Due to this need, I have said repeatedly that the development of new books for schools can fill this gap. I think that through teaching such books, students can gain this ability to talk about their culture (Participant 19).

While four teachers agreed with one of the principles of critical pedagogy (see Akbari, 2008), again we found that most of the participants were against this idea. In some participants' opinion, integrating local culture weakens the cultural content or the social and educational prestige of such books. Facing these findings, it can be asserted that while at first it might be supposed that due to the differences between two contrasting contexts of English education, namely the schools in which English education is centrally managed and language institutes in which the Center-produced curricula are adopted, the attitudes of the participants must have been different, we see that they perceive the issue of culture in textbook development similarly. In all, we can assert that such findings are in line with Kumaravadivelu's (2012) views on the dominance of the mainstream ELT in many EFL contexts around the world. According to Gray (2010) in this dominant paradigm, the native speaker model is the norm and the textbooks are the carriers of target culture. In this regard, the findings of Ghaffar-Samar and Davari (2011) are also approved.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that through the interviews, the researchers found that the failure of English education at schools in recent decades is an important reason for the formation of skeptical or even hostile attitudes toward the state's English curriculum among the teachers. Since, from the attitudes of the participants in this survey, the most prominent feature of textbooks taught at schools are their local cultural content, it seems that the failure of English education at schools has been attributed to them.

Due to the fact that today English is known as means of international communication, there is no doubt that it should not only prepare learners to use English with native speakers, but also with non-native speakers of English. Thus, as Matsuda (2002) points out, by using the books which are limited to solely the target or local culture, learners are learning about "a limited section of the world" and are receiving "incomplete exposure to the English language". Thus, to achieve the goal of international communication, instead of providing learners with a particular standard or model, the textbooks should expose learners to many types of language-based interactions and engage learners through different types of speakers and texts (Tomlinson, 2005). Findings from the present research also reveal that this significant issue is absent among the teachers in both groups.

5. Conclusion

Due to the importance of cultural content of English textbooks, in this research, the authors attempted to comparatively survey it in two contrasting contexts in Iranian education system in which it is known a controversial issue. Doing so, the attitudes of language teachers at schools and language institutes were qualitatively studied and compared. In short, it can be concluded that despite some partial differences between school teachers and institute teachers on the definition of culture, their responses revealed that most of them perceive culture in its surface meaning and are in favor of integrating target culture in textbook development. Thus, influenced by this tendency, most of them in both groups did not have a deep perception of the representation of culture in textbooks. In a more precise word, their attitude toward cultural manifestations in such books was confined to the modernist view. However, the failure in English education in schools in recent decades has aggravated the situation.

In addition, lack of familiarity with some important concepts such as critical pedagogy, intercultural competence, etc. was obvious among teachers in both groups. It is believed that such deficiency has led to some misconception toward the issue. In spite of the fact that the newly-developed textbooks in Iranian education system have been principally changed both in terms of

structure and content, it seems that teachers, as an important stakeholder in such a reform, are not aware of the rationale for such changes. Because of this unfamiliarity, the changes in the cultural content of the books have not been tangible and rational for school teachers. In fact, this change has been conceived as publicizing the localized English which is in favor of the policymakers and in reality is in sharp contrast to real English. Undoubtedly, integrating intercultural content including both source, target and international cultures in such textbooks as well as holding regular in-service training courses can help teachers become more aware of the significance of the role of culture in ELT and understand more about some key concepts including cultural competence, intercultural competence, etc.

On the basis of the findings, we can conclude that despite some differences between the teachers in two groups which are in fact the representatives of two important sectors in the field of English teaching in contemporary Iran, the dominance of the mainstream ELT tenets and principles is clearly obvious. In all, due to the fact that culture in ELT is a controversial issue, such findings not only can provide language policy makers and language planners with worthwhile data, but also can prove to be beneficial to textbook developers.

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