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Visual Representation of Culture in a Locally Developed EFL Series*

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to investigate culture representation in ACT series, a recently developed EFL textbook by Iran Language Institute, with a focus on the visuals. Two models were taken into account for content analysis: Cortazzi and Jin (1990) to investigate the type of culture (i.e., source, target, & international) and Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1999) to investigate the dimension of culture (aesthetic & sociological). Analysis of 1581 visuals indicated that textbook developers have placed a high value on presenting international and source cultures while target culture has received comparatively little attention to fulfill the mission for which the series was developed. Additionally, as of the two dimensions of culture, visuals representing the sociological dimension of culture outnumbered those manifesting the aesthetic dimension. To conclude, it can be claimed that ACT series can be beneficial in promoting intercultural awareness among its audience and providing the learners with an opportunity to communicate their cultural and national identity with other bilingual speakers of English. The study ends with some future lines of research for the interested researcher.

Keywords: ACT series. Culture. Intercultural communicative competence. Materials analysis. Visuals.

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Introduction

The interdependency of culture and language, and the centrality of culture to English language teaching (Baker, 2011, 2012, 2015; Byram, 1997, 2008; Corbett, 2003; Liddicoat, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; McKay, 2012) has altered language teaching contexts into culture instruction venues (Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007). The relationship between culture and language was complexified in the 1990s as the trend of globalization and multilingualism gained momentum (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Consequently, cultural globalization has urged learners of English to be exposed to more cultures besides the Anglophone culture in order to be successful in international communication with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Liu & Fang, 2017). Hence, the interculturality of communication in foreign contexts makes the case for promoting intercultural competence among language users (Sercu, 2004). With the expanding scope of English language and its multiple roles as an additional language (Galloway, 2017; Widodo, Wood, & Gupta, 2017), an international language (Renandya & Widodo, 2016), a global language (Leitner, Hashim, & Wolf, 2016) and a lingua franca (Fang, 2017), the ability to master the language no more implies having the ability to understand its native speakers but to be able to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts. This conceptual shift seems to have gained more significance against the background of globalization, development of modern communication technologies and fading of cultural borders. Concomitantly, intercultural content has been included in educational curricula and syllabi worldwide, further requiring teachers to help their learners develop intercultural competence (Tolosa, Biebricher, East, & Howard, 2018). This gains paramount importance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where the material may serve as the only source of knowledge and the basis for language practice inside and outside of the classroom (Richards, 2005 as cited in Nguyen, 2011). Despite the growth of computers and other modern technologies prevalent in language classes, materials are still considered as the backbone of instruction as they represent the national identity and educational and

cultural properties of the context of learning and teaching (Grant & Wong, 2018). From this perspective, if ELT textbooks tend to accentuate Anglo-American culture, this may endanger local ideologies (Roohani & Molana, 2013).

Additionally, visuals are an indispensable part of everyday communication as they have the potential of bearing multiple layers of meaning. This prevalence renders visuals ideal sources of language learning, developing learners' intercultural communicative competence and cultural awareness (Kiss & Weninger, 2017). Visuals have a significant impact on the appeal, attractiveness, and educational functioning of textbooks, too (Janko & Peskova, 2013). Notwithstanding, their contribution to students' effective language learning and cultural awareness should not be overlooked (Kiss & Weninger, 2017).

Taking into account the significance of EFL materials in transmitting cultural information through different modes of communication, the task of multimodal materials evaluation with a focus on cultural content seems crucial. Scholars and researchers have thus adopted various analytical approaches to analyze and evaluate national and international ELT materials around the world (Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi, 1990; Appleby, 2018; Awayed & Bishara, 2015; Baleghizadeh & Jamali Motahed 2010; Lee, 2009, 2014; McKay, 2003; Perfecto & Paterno, 2018; Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, 2018) and in Iran (Cheng & Biglar Beigi, 2012; Tajeddin & Teirmournezhad, 2014; Taki, 2008; Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2017).

Within the context of Iran, macro policy documents such as the Fundamental Reform Document of Education has urged cultural education through "revision and amendment of school curricula based on a cultural-educational approach" (p. 32) and "revision and reproduction of curriculum, content and educational approaches" (p. 34). The Comprehensive Science Roadmap which sets national level policies in science and technology has also required incorporation of the Islamic perspective in educational syllabi and textbooks (p. 36) and localization and development of foreign language education

syllabi and contents based on Islamic culture (p. 57). Additionally, the National Curriculum Document as another chief policy document has focused on foreign language learning and teaching aiming at developing foreign language skills and strengthening Islamic-Iranian identity (p. 18). According to the National Curriculum Document, foreign language teaching should be viewed as a means of strengthening national culture, beliefs, and values. At elementary levels, educational content should center around local topics and learner needs such as health and hygiene, daily life, the environment, and social values and culture. At higher levels, the selection and organization of content will be based on cultural, scientific, economic, and political function (p. 38). Against this background, evaluation of the ACT series (2016, 2017), developed locally to foster intercultural competence and expose the learners to cultures other than the Western culture, prevalent in Western-oriented coursebooks such as American File, Top Notch, and New Interchange Series (Leather & Motallebzadeh, 2015) might seem in order. Consequently, the present study seeks to analyze culture representation in the aforementioned series with a focus on the visuals.

Review of the Related Literature

Early studies of culture transpired in the middle of 1950s and the early 1960s during which culture was treated as an object and body of facts about the target language culture (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). The second wave was transient but very influential. In this period, the emphasis on cultural artifacts was replaced by culture with small c (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993). Additionally, the significance of culture to successful language acquisition was acknowledged in this era (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Consequently, a growing body of research was developed focusing on concepts such as intercultural, cross-cultural, and transcultural issues to develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997). The last and contemporary period, beginning from 2000 (Weninger & Kiss, 2013) is characterized by themes such as “critical citizenship” (Guilherme, 2002, p. 50-51), “intercultural competence of the world citizen”

(Risager, 2007, p. 222), “global cultural consciousness” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 164), and “intercultural citizenship” (Byram, 2008, p. 157).

In tandem with the trend of globalization (Liu & Fang, 2017) and in line with the sociocultural paradigm shift (Baker, 2015), scholars have attempted to operationalize and concretize culture and intercultural competence, particularly in materials and textbooks. According to Byram’s (1997) frequently cited definition of intercultural competence, the construct is conceptualized as the “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role” (p. 24). Additionally, to Deardorff (2004, as cited in Deardorff, 2006), intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on the individual’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Piątkowska (2015) also maintains that language learners are expected to be able to extend their communicative abilities to encompass the boundaries of cultural territories. For a comprehensive review on models of intercultural competence see Spitzberg and Changnon (2009).

As Ndura (2004) posits, the content of instructional materials notably influences students’ attitudes and dispositions towards themselves, other people, and society. Thus, textbooks and other teaching materials are cultural artifacts and their contribution to promoting the dominant culture and reproducing the value systems of a society should not go unheeded (Kubota, 2001). Inclusion of visuals, histories, and perspectives of other cultures, raced, classed, and gendered groups can provide the learners with required cultural literacy (Grant & Wong, 2018). In fact, as Kumaravadivelu (2008) holds, promoting cultural awareness in classrooms may not even be achieved in the absence of materials which would encourage learners to face cultural beliefs about the self and the other. In light of the mediating functionality of textbooks, materials can be considered as

cultural vehicles presenting students with legitimized knowledge, authorized voices, and pre-established values (Canale, 2016). EFL textbooks bear an even more essential role in the context of Iran where EFL students may not be exposed to high amounts of cultural content. Thus, EFL textbooks should incorporate diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and empower learners to identify diverse voices and perspectives (Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011).

Considering the significance of EFL textbooks in promoting cultural values, a good number of researchers have explored various dimensions of culturality in EFL materials (Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi, 1990; Appleby, 2018; Aawayed & Bishara, 2015; Baleghizadeh & Jamali Motahed, 2010; Cheng & Biglar Beigi, 2012; Lee 2009, 2014; McKay, 2003; Perfecto & Paterno, 2018; Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2017; Sidhu, Kaur, & Fook, 2018; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014; Taki, 2008). Within the context of Iran, for instance, Majdzadeh (2002) carried out a content analysis of eighth and ninth grade public school textbooks and the same level textbooks in a private language school in Iran. The findings indicated that the textbooks advocated Islamic traditions and culture. Additionally, he furthered that the textbooks need more Western cultural content if they are to prepare interculturally-competent learners. Baleghizadeh and Jamali Motahed (2010) examined the ideological content of American and British textbooks. The researchers concluded that while the analyzed corpora are oriented toward the target culture, the American part of the corpora is more culturally-laden. Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014) carried out a comparative investigative study to analyze culture representation in international and local series. Their findings revealed that most of the cultural elements available in the localized textbooks were culturally neutral in that they did not refer to any particular culture. Moreover, sociological values presented in the local series outnumbered the aesthetic aspect of culture. On the contrary, the main interest in the international textbooks was intercultural elements with a special focus on the aesthetic aspect. Target language cultural

elements were comparatively more evident in the international textbook.

In the same vein, Sadeghi and Sepahi (2017) analyzed the cultural content of three EFL textbooks drawing on the representations of small c and capital C cultures. A frequency analysis of the Top Notch, Summit, and Passages series indicated that in Top Notch series, small c cultural themes of daily life, food, customs and capital C theme of geography were the most frequent. However, in Summit and Passages, the most recurring theme was small c cultural theme of values and beliefs.

The bulk of studies analyzing culture representation in textbooks, a limited number of which explained above, points to the importance of this issue as a rather recent topic of concern (McConachy & Hata, 2013). Considering ACT as a new generation of EFL series in Iran adopting a multicultural approach to materials development in order to minimize the impact of Anglo-Saxon western culture and taking into account the necessity of fostering intercultural competence and the contribution of textbooks, visuals in particular, analysis of these books can be of help. In doing so, the present study sought to investigate culture representation in the aforementioned series by means of addressing the following research questions:

1. Which types of culture (source, target, & international) and dimensions of culture (aesthetic & sociocultural) are manifested in the visuals presented in ACT series?
2. How are the types and dimensions of culture quantitatively distributed in the ACT series?

Methodology

To reiterate an earlier point, the purpose of the current study was to investigate culture representation in the ACT series with a focus on visuals. In doing so, a mixed methods study was conducted adopting a sequential (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) approach.

Data Source

ACT series (2016-2017) is a ten-level course, focusing on developing communicative language skills for adult students ranging from elementary to advanced levels. Developed by Iran language Institute, each unit is based on a single theme presented in two parts. The units involve sections on language functions, language development (i.e., vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), and skills development centering on developing listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The units end with a section entitled 'Culture Flash' aiming to promote cultural awareness. The course package includes the student's book, workbook, class and student's audio CDs, and teacher's manual. The visuals in the first four student's books have been analyzed. The four books contained a total number of 1581 of frames, with 298, 404, 443, and 436 images appearing in books one to four respectively.

Analytical Framework

Two frameworks were utilized to identify and analyze the cultural elements in the aforementioned data source. Firstly, to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), three types of ELT materials in terms of cultural content can be enlisted namely source/L1, target/L2, and international. As the labels imply, source culture is affiliated with the learners' own culture, which is Islamic and Iranian culture, in the context of the present study. Target culture deals with the culture of the country in which English is spoken as a first language. Finally, international culture encompasses the variety of cultures in English and non-English speaking countries. According to McKay (2006), this model can be beneficial since it provides the learner with the opportunity to learn about his or her own culture while having the chance to explain those cultural elements in English by including the term 'source culture'. Also, it draws on the term 'international culture' which places a bilingual English language user in a position to interact interculturally.

Additionally, Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) classify the cultural elements of textbooks based on four areas of meaning namely the aesthetic, sociological, semantic, and pragmatic senses. In this study, the focus of investigation was on the first two senses as the visuals tended to lend themselves more conveniently to the analysis in

light of these two categories. In other words, the visuals had little potentiality of semantic and pragmatic cultural analysis. Moreover, as Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014) argued, aesthetic and sociological categories can be more culturally laden. To Adaskou et al. (1990), culture in its aesthetic sense refers to some cultural forms such as the media, cinema, music, and literature. Moreover, according to the same source, culture in its sociological sense, includes the organization of family and home life, interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs, and institutions. Following Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014), the scope of culture in its aesthetic sense was extended to include geographical and historical dimensions. It should be noted that whenever assigning a given visual to each of these categories was rather problematic, the text to which the image belonged was consulted for more information.

Reliability Argument

So as to establish the reliability of the analysis, Kappa's measurement of intercoder agreement was calculated. Thus, a second coder who was an MA graduate of applied linguistics was familiarized with the models and then analyzed about half of the data independently. The result of Cohen's Kappa was reported to be .75 which according to Pallant (2011) indicates a satisfactory agreement between the coders.

Results

The investigation of culture representation in ACT series was conducted in light of two analytical frameworks namely Adaskou et al. (1990) and Cortazzi and Jin (1999). Although both aesthetic and sociological dimensions of the source, target, and international cultures were embedded in the four books, the analysis revealed that the international and source culture had received a considerable attention by material developers. Moreover, the themes through which both dimensions of culture were represented covered a varied range of topics. The following sections would provide a brief explanation on types and dimensions of culture depicted in the visuals drawing on the themes represented in the corpus. In addition, some sample images

extracted from the books have been provided to add to the depth of discussion.

The sociological aspect of source culture (i.e., Persian) was manifested in the visuals through the images of greetings (ACT 1, p. 17), family-related words (ACT 1, Unit 2), gift giving (ACT 1, unit 3), spare-time activities (ACT 1, p. 79), national sports (ACT 2, p. 27), home remedies (ACT 2, p. 35), special days and celebrations (ACT 2, pp. 80-81), traditional costumes (ACT 3, p. 15), bargaining tips (ACT 3, p. 17), the educational system (ACT 3, pp. 44 & 47), and unusual markets around the world (ACT 4, p. 69) to mention only a few instances.

Moreover, the sociological aspect of target culture, though rather limited, was represented in themes of work and leisure in the related visuals (ACT 1, p. 79), organization of family in a whole unit teaching family-related words (ACT 1, unit 2), customs and special celebrations (ACT 2, pp. 80-81), and body language across cultures (ACT 4, p. 37). Finally, material conditions were represented in the visuals of a reading passage about environmental problems across the globe (ACT 3, p. 89).

The sociological aspect of the international culture received the highest number of occurrences in the textbooks. A wide range of topics such as countries and nationalities (ACT 1, p. 12), greetings (ACT 1, p. 17), family-related words (ACT 1, unit 2), gift giving customs (ACT 1, unit 3), meals (ACT 1, p. 69), and spare-time activities (ACT 1, p. 79) were embedded in the first book to cover the aforementioned themes. Areas such as national sports (p. 27), home remedies (p. 35), and special days and celebrations (pp. 80-81) were represented in ACT 2. Additionally, traditional costumes (p. 15), bargaining tips (p. 17), and information on educational systems in various countries (unit 4) were represented in ACT 3. Finally, visuals on shopping-related issues, and unusual markets around the world appearing in the sixth unit of ACT 4 can point to the material dimension of international culture. In fact, provision of content on a single topic about the source, target, and international type of culture

in most cases can foster a productive situation for gaining cultural awareness from a comparative approach.

For instance, Figure 1 indicates how different forms of greeting as an instance of interpersonal relations performed by source, target, and international cultural inhabitants represent the sociological dimension of culture. The image, adapted from ACT 1 (p. 17) illustrates how people in the UK and North America, Brazil, China, Japan, Korea, Iran, Morocco, and Indonesia as representatives of the three types of culture greet each other.

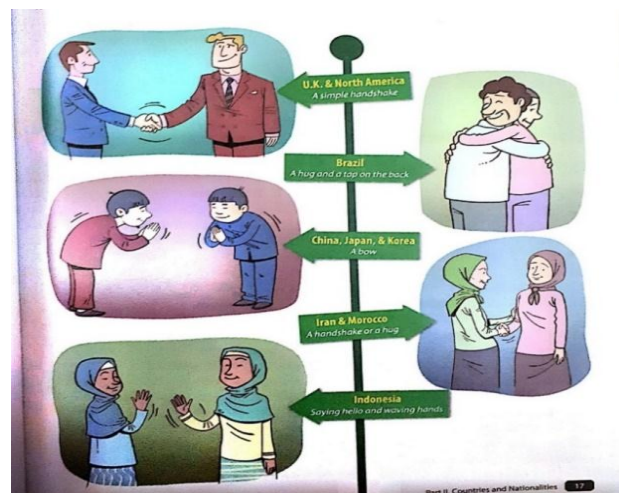


Figure 1. An extract from ACT 1 illustrating the sociological dimension of source, target and international cultures

Furthermore, the material dimension of culture represented by individuals from target and international cultures are illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. An extract from ACT 1 illustrating the sociological dimension of target and international cultures

Additionally, family – a subcomponent of sociological dimension of culture – is represented in three frames indicating source, target, and international cultures. Figure 3 shows the aforementioned visual.

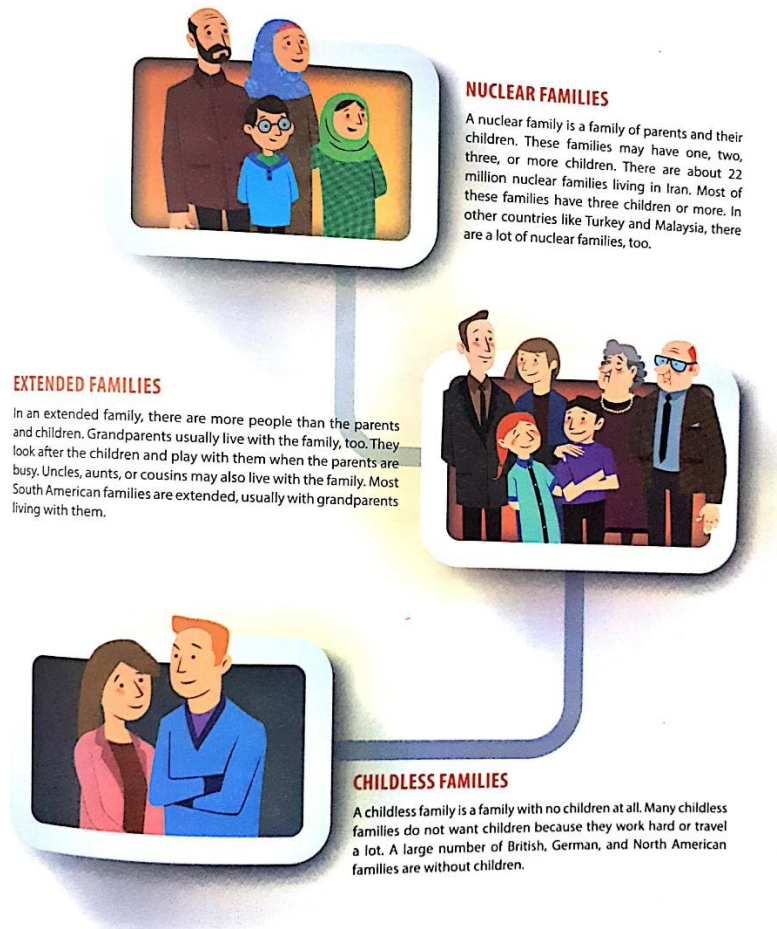


Figure 3. An extract from ACT 1 illustrating the sociological dimension of source, target and international cultures

Another visual which represents the sociological dimension of Iranian culture taken from ACT 1 (p. 79) is the image below in which spending time with family is shown as a leisure-time activity rather common in the Iranian culture. As evident in Figure 4, the style of clothing and the calligraphy photos on the wall can manifest the Iranian culture. It should also be noted that the text available for this photo ruled out the possibility of its belonging to some other Islamic culture (because of the clothing style) or an international culture interested in calligraphy (because of the photos on the wall).



Figure 4. An extract from ACT 1 illustrating the sociological dimension of source culture

Furthermore, an image showing a group of colleagues from the Iranian culture represents the sociological dimension of source culture. The excerpt below from ACT 2 (p. 8) illustrates the visual.

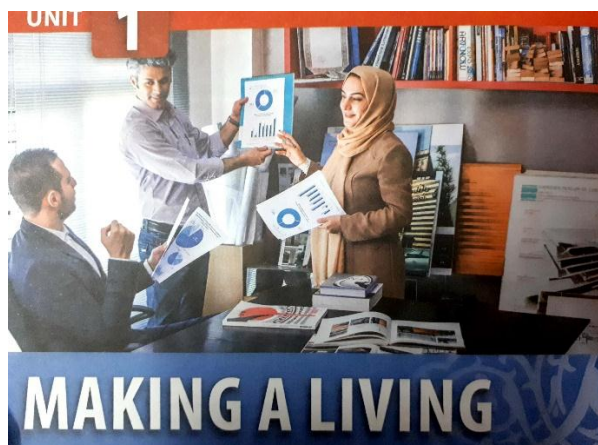


Figure 5. An extract from ACT 2 illustrating the sociological dimension of source culture

Customs and special occasion of the three types of culture are also illustrated in an image in ACT 2 (pp. 80-81). Thus, occasions such as baby shower, Christmas, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, engagement party,

going-away party, graduation party, housewarming party, Mother's Day, Nowruz, retirement party, surprise party, etc. are illustrated in two pages of the book, as presented in Figure 6.



Figure 6. An extract from ACT 2 illustrating the sociological dimension of source, target, and international cultures

Finally, the figure below taken from ACT 3 (p. 8) further indicates the sociological dimension of source culture in manifesting local Iranian costumes.

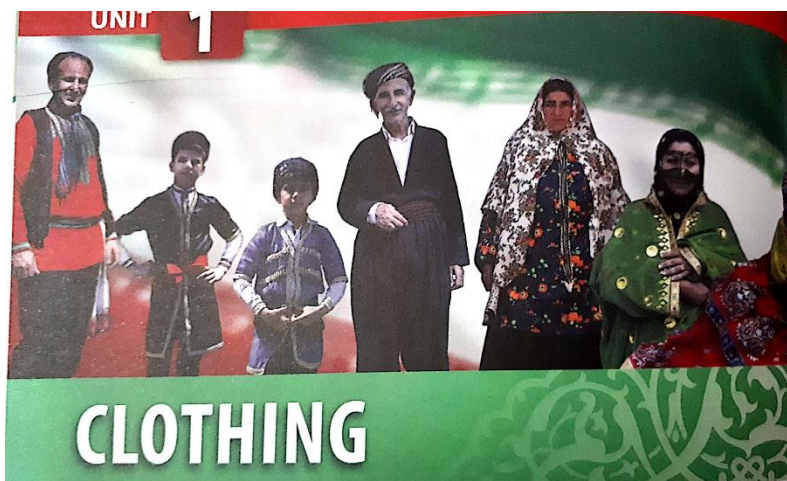


Figure 7. An extract from ACT 3 illustrating the sociological dimension of source culture

As mentioned earlier, the second dimension of Adaskou et al. 's (1990) model was concerned with the aesthetic dimension of culture including media, cinema, music, and literature. Following Tajeddin and Teimournezhad, geographical and historical content was also added to this category. As the analysis indicated, the aesthetic dimension of the Persian culture was represented in the visuals of topics such as tourist attractions and sightseeing places (ACT 1, p. 13; ACT 2, p. 59), postcards (ACT 1, p. 44), and wonders of the natural world (ACT 3. P. 25). Moreover, Iranian media were represented in visuals concerning types of movies (ACT 4, unit 1), filmmaking careers (ACT 4, p. 13), and popular movie genres by country (ACT 4, p. 17).

On the contrary, rather quick references were made to the aesthetic aspect of target language culture under topics such as tourist attractions (ACT 1, p. 13), sightseeing places (ACT 1, p. 87), types of movies (ACT 4, unit 1), and popular movie genres by country (ACT 4, p. 17).

For instance, a Persian Iranian painter and Austrian music composer in ACT 2 (p. 62) represent the aesthetic dimension of source

and international culture respectively. Figure 8 Shows the aforementioned visual.

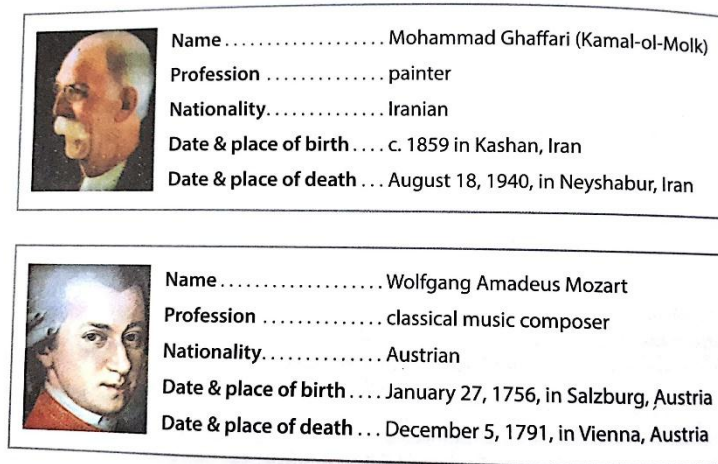


Figure 8. An extract from ACT 2 illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source culture

The following visuals taken from ACT 4 (p. 13) indicate how various Iranian artists (e.g., Reza Kianian, Soraya Ghasemi, Mani Haghghi, Sirous Moghadam, Abdollah Eskandari, etc), as well as artistic organizations (e.g., Farabi Cinema Foundation) are shown in the form of providing the learners with filmmaking career vocabulary items. Also, as shown in Figure 9, some representations of international culture were available in the aforementioned visual.

Vocabulary Focus

A Listen and practice.

1. animator
2. cinematographer
3. composer
4. costume designer
5. director
6. distributor
7. editor
8. extra
9. leading actor/actress
10. make-up artist
11. producer
12. screenwriter
13. set designer
14. sound recordist
15. special effects designer
16. stunt person
17. supporting actor/actress

Figure 9. An extract from ACT 4 illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source and international cultures

Similarly, another group of visuals from ACT 4 (pp. 8-9) represent the aesthetic dimension of source, target, and international cultures. As shown in Figure 10, source culture is manifested in frames 1 to 6.



Figure 10. An extract from ACT 4 illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source and international cultures

Furthermore, as to Figure 11, while source culture is represented in frames 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 17, frames 9, and 13 also represent target culture. Finally, frame 15 shows the international culture (i.e., India).

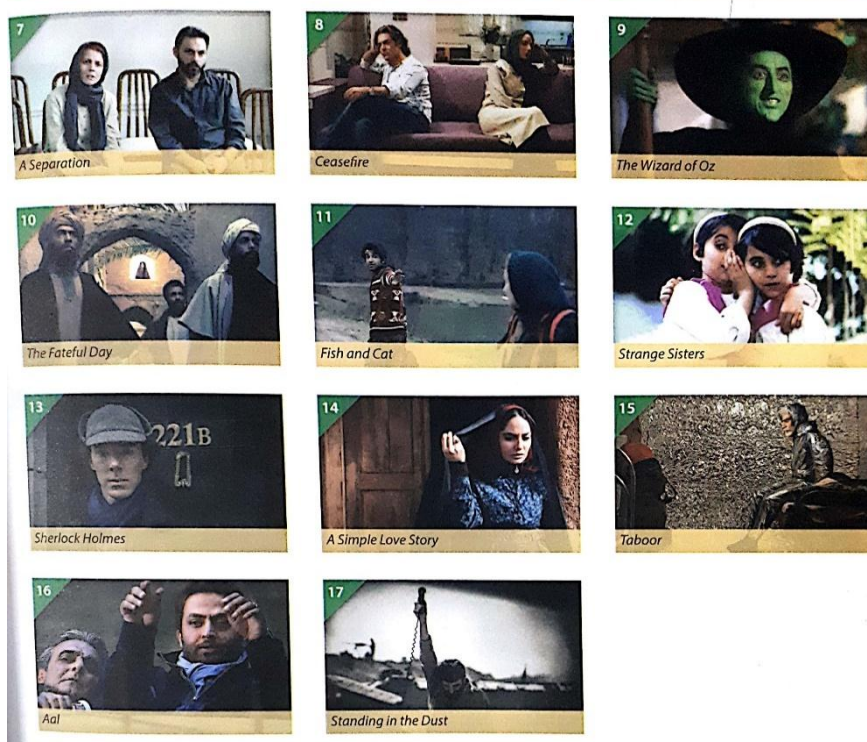


Figure 11. An extract from ACT 4 illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source, target and international cultures

Also, featuring Abbas Kiarostami, Masoud Kimiai, Rowan Atkinson, and Bruce Lee, Figure 12 extracted from ACT 4 (p. 17) illustrates the aesthetic dimension of source, target, and international cultures respectively.



Figure 12. An extract from ACT illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source, target, and international cultures

Tourist attractions subsumed under the aesthetic dimension of culture are also manifested in target, international, and source culture landmarks as shown in Figure 13, taken from ACT 1 (p. 13).



Figure 13. An extract from ACT 1 illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source, target, and international cultures

In addition, media as another component of the aesthetic dimension of culture is manifested in a unit teaching vocabulary items about TV programs in Act 3 (p. 29). As shown in Figure 14, source culture is represented in TV programs featuring Iranian artists such as Shahab Hosseini and Taraneh Alidusti (in frame 7, a shot from ‘Death of a Salesman’ movie), Alireza Khamseh (in frame 11, a shot from a quiz show), Azita Hajian (in frame 18, from a TV series) among many others. Moreover, instances of international culture are depicted in frames 8 (a shot from a nature program), 16 (a shot from a sports program), and 15 (a shot from a Korean soap opera).



Figure 14. An extract from ACT 3 illustrating the aesthetic dimension of source, target, and international cultures

It should be noted that there are numerous visuals indicating dimensions and types of culture. However, a limited number of them which were more revealing were selected for presentation in this section. In order to gain an overall insight into the type (source, target, international) and the dimension of culture (sociological, aesthetic) a frequency count was also conducted. The number of visuals representing types and dimensions of culture appearing in each student book is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The frequency of occurrence of types and dimensions of culture in the first four books

	ACT 1	ACT 2	ACT 3	ACT 4	Total
SLS	93	38	19	25	175
TLS	24	17	4	4	49
INS	157	319	311	343	1130
SLA	9	12	26	25	72
TLA	2	1	3	4	10
INA	13	17	80	35	145

Note: SL, TL, and IN refer to source language, target language and international culture respectively. Moreover, S and A represent the sociological and aesthetic dimensions of culture respectively.

As indicated in Table 1, both aesthetic and sociological dimensions of source culture were represented in a total number of 274 frames (17.33%). Moreover, international and target cultures were manifested in 1275 and 59 frames, 80.64% and 3.73% of the visuals in the four books respectively. In other words, the findings indicated that materials developers placed a high value on exposing learners to and familiarizing them with the international culture, defined by Cortazzi and Yin (1999) as the culture of English and non-English speaking countries, thus contributing to their intercultural awareness. The findings also indicated that target culture was not the priority of

materials developers as only about 4% of the visuals were allocated to the target culture. Moreover, drawing on Adaskou et al.'s (1990) model, the analysis indicated that 1354 frames (85.64%) were dedicated to the sociological dimension of culture and 227 frames (14.35%) to the aesthetic dimension.

Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate culture representation in ACT series with a focus on the visuals embedded in the textbooks. Hence, the visuals appearing in the first four books were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively for types and dimensions of culture representation drawing on the frameworks presented by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) and Adaskou et al. (1990) respectively.

As the analyses indicated, representation of international culture defined as the culture of English and non-English speaking countries was more dominant in the visuals in comparison to those of source and target cultures. As Majdzadeh (2002) had concluded, locally Iranian produced ELT textbooks focused exclusively on Iranian culture and religion and argued that this lack of cultural perspectives could be challenging to those students who are seeking to improve interculturality. The findings of this study revealed that the ACT series could be considered as a breakthrough in Iranian ELT/EFL textbook development since the target culture and more importantly international cultural elements are embedded in the textbooks to a great extent. Furthermore, contrary to Tajeddin and Teimournezhad's (2014) findings which revealed that previously localized textbooks also developed by Iran Language Institute were culturally neutral, the findings of the present study indicated the recently developed textbooks by the same institute have improved from an intercultural perspective. As Gray (2016) purported, when materials are not produced locally, they have the tendency to be methodologically and culturally inappropriate. Taking into account some other factors such as effective implementation of the textbooks by teachers, it can be cautiously claimed that the locally developed ACT series is not culturally inappropriate.

Additionally, similar to Tajeddin and Teimournezhad's (2014) findings where the sociological sense of culture was found to be more dominant in the localized series, the findings of the present study indicated that sociological dimension of culture was more recurrent in comparison to the aesthetic sense.

It is usually expected that foreign language teaching materials should include elements of the target language culture (Skopinskaja, 2003) and this study concluded that although ACT series includes elements of the target culture, the books do not revolve around the target culture. As the analyses indicated, the ACT materials developers seem to have fulfilled the mission based on the macro policies reflected in higher order documents such as the fundamental reform document of education (FRDE), as well as the general approaches defined by the ministry of education. Hence, it can be concluded that they have been successful in promoting intercultural awareness as their product is in line with a goal of foreign language instruction namely developing an insight into the foreign culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Provided that other conditions of successful foreign language learning are met, it can be concluded that the materials can contribute to the learners' intercultural awareness. Recalling definitions of intercultural communicative competence, it can be argued that ACT series have exposed its learners to a range of cultures. Researchers such as Majdzadeh (2002) and Victor (1999) have recommended that while textbooks need to be localized, they should also take into account target and global cultures so as to facilitate students' developing intercultural competence. Based on the present analyses, it can be claimed that implementing ACT series can positively contribute to students' developing intercultural awareness. Lastly, Cogo (2018) highlights the necessity of incorporating representations of both native speakers and non-native speakers of English in EFL materials, a mission which seems to be accomplished in ACT series.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate a locally developed material namely ACT series from an intercultural

perspective. As the analyses indicated, given that other conditions are met, the series has the potentiality to promote the learners' intercultural competence since it provides the learners with both aesthetic and sociological dimensions of source, target, and international cultures.

Hopefully, this study is one of the many studies which can be conducted with regards to the ACT series. Quantitative studies could be carried out with a focus on intercultural assessment to investigate intercultural communicative competence of the learners being exposed to these books. Qualitative studies can also elicit learners' and teachers' views on different dimensions of the series. Critical multimodal analysis drawing on models such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) can also be conducted to uncover the hidden agendas underlying the texts, as well as the visuals.

To the best of the present researchers' knowledge, this research was one of the first studies to analyze ACT series. Thus, the findings of this study can be helpful in gaining a general understanding of the type and dimensionality of culture present in the first four books. However, as some scholars argue, culture is not an easily objectifiable construct (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Alternatively, a semiotic approach to the study of culture in foreign language textbooks, ACT series included, is recommended as another possible line of inquiry.

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