Investigating Intercultural Pragmatics in International and Local English Textbooks: a Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Given its transformative impact on learners' language proficiency and intercultural competence, cross-cultural communication has become an indispensable aspect of language teaching. However, successful cross-cultural communication is a complex endeavor that requires understanding intercultural pragmatics—the study of interactions between interlocutors from diverse cultures through the lens of pragmatics [Kecskes 2014]. As a result, this study investigates the cross-cultural knowledge embedded in international English textbooks' content compared to the local ones. In this sequential exploratory study, two sets of English teaching textbooks, including *Prospect English books 2, 3, Vision 1* (local textbooks), and *American English File Starter and Book 1* (international textbooks), were subjected to rigorous scrutiny regarding cross-cultural knowledge. Cross-cultural knowledge in internationally and locally developed textbooks was examined with five levels: famous names, names of cities and countries, names of famous places and buildings, customs, and ceremonies. A chi-squared test of independence indicated a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) among these categories regarding the type of textbooks. The findings highlighted the American English File series's superiority in emphasizing international cultures. This study's findings will assist curriculum developers, teachers, students, and policymakers in enhancing the adequacy of current textbooks' cross-cultural knowledge required for successful interaction.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, English textbooks, intercultural pragmatics, language teaching.

Introduction:

Various materials can be used for second language learners in ELT classrooms. However, textbooks play a pivotal role; learning another language seems implausible without their assistance. Recently, a copious amount of research has been conducted to assess and analyze well-published textbooks from various viewpoints, including pragmatic competence reflected in English textbooks [Vellenga 2004; Soozandehfar and Sahragard 2011; Kohandani et al. 2014, Jalilian and Roohani 2016]. Pragmatic competence was initially defined by Crystal [1985] as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" [Crystal 1985: 240]. As a result of globalization, English is generally accepted as an international language, used by roughly 427 million native speakers and 750 second or foreign language speakers [Crystal 1997]. However, all these culturally different societies do not share the same culture.

On the other hand, ever-increasing cross-cultural communication is why different people with different cultures and first languages can live in the same society. One way to sustain successful cross-cultural communication is to acquire intercultural pragmatics [Putz, Neff-van Aertselaer 2008]. As a relatively new field of inquiry, intercultural pragmatics delves into how language is employed during social interactions among individuals with diverse native languages and distinct cultural backgrounds engaging in communication through a shared language [Kecskes 2013].

Kasper and Blum-Kulka [1993] believed cross-cultural pragmatics to be the study of linguistic acts used by users with different cultural backgrounds. Within the purview of pragmatics, culture is indefinable without a user [Mey 2008]. Language user's values, beliefs, cultural assumptions, and communication strategies demonstrate clearly in cross-cultural pragmatics [Locastro 2003].

One way to enhance student's ability to communicate cross-culturally is closely related to the amount of intercultural pragmatic knowledge incorporated in the textbooks. So, English textbooks developed recently in Iran should be analyzed regarding intercultural pragmatics to see whether they can prepare students for successful cross-cultural communication. Limited studies investigating pragmatics knowledge exist in these books. Gholami [2015] explored pragmatic knowledge incorporation into Iranian EFL textbooks by analyzing specifically based on speech acts, four politeness strategies, lexical, syntactic classification, tense in temporal deixis, adjacency pairs, and hesitation marks. Besides, Gholami and Ghasemi [2018] examined the recently introduced English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks in Iranian junior high schools. Their investigation focused on assessing the representation of cultural elements within these textbooks and evaluating the extent to which they contribute to developing intercultural competence in learners. Jamshidian [2023] also attempted to discover the extent to which pragmatic knowledge was considered in Iranian high school English textbooks (*Vision Series*) by analyzing the subcategories of functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Culture reflected in these books was investigated to some extent; however, more in-depth investigation is needed to ascertain how intercultural pragmatic knowledge is incorporated into Iranian EFL textbooks. Besides, comparing them

with well-published English textbooks designed for ESL learners worldwide can give us more profound insight into the efficiency of intercultural pragmatic knowledge reflected in Iranian English textbooks.

Methodology:

This study follows a sequential exploratory design. "The sequential exploratory strategy involves the first phase of qualitative data collection and analysis followed by a second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis that builds on the results of the first qualitative phase" [Creswell 2009: 211].

Procedure:

Firstly, *Prospect English Books 2, 3, and Vision 1,* taught in Iranian schools, and *American English File Starter and Book 1,* taught in English institutes worldwide, were examined based on intercultural pragmatics. John's [2005] framework was adopted to analyze the cultural knowledge in the textbooks. Based on that, the cultural knowledge was divided into different categories with two levels for local textbooks: source culture and target international culture, and five levels for both local and international textbooks: names of famous people, names of cities, names of places, customs, and ceremonies.

Data analysis:

Having done the qualitative analysis of the material regarding the intercultural pragmatic content, the frequency of different areas of intercultural pragmatic knowledge at each level was counted. Then, a series of chi-squared tests were conducted. Two coders (two M.A. students of TEFL) independently reviewed and coded a randomly selected portion of the dataset. The Kappa statistic measures the level of agreement between two raters be-

Table 1

**The frequency of cultural knowledge
in locally developed textbooks regarding content**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Source culture	109	58.9	58.9	58.9
International culture	76	41.1	41.1	100.0
Total	185	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

**The Frequency of Cultural Knowledge in Locally
Developed Textbooks Regarding Content**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Names of Famous People	29	15.7	15.7	15.7
Names of Cities	57	30.8	30.8	46.5
Names of Famous Places	48	25.9	25.9	72.4
Customs	46	24.9	24.9	97.3
Ceremonies	5	2.7	2.7	100.0
Total	185	100.0	100.0	

yond what would be expected by chance; the Cohen's Kappa co-efficient obtained for this study was 0.76, showing substantial agreement between the coders according to established guidelines [Landis, Koch 1977].

Table 3

**The Frequency of Cultural Knowledge
in Internationally Developed Textbook Content**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Famous People	91	33.2	33.2	33.2
Names of Cities	54	19.7	19.7	52.9
Names of Places	31	11.3	11.3	64.2
Customs	84	30.7	30.7	94.9
Ceremonies	14	5.1	5.1	100.0
Total	274	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

**The Relation Between Local and International Textbooks
Regarding Cultural Knowledge**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-square Test	85.453[a]	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	82.333	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.017	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	1105		

Results:

The data shown in Table 1 demonstrates that in locally developed textbooks *Prospect1, Prospect2, and Vision1*, source culture (N = 109, 58.9%) gained a higher proportion than international target culture (N = 76, 41.1%).

As shown in Table 2, cultural knowledge involved in locally developed textbooks was investigated from another viewpoint in which categories would be of five types, namely, names of famous people (N = 29, 15%), names of cities all around the world (N = 57, 30.8%), names of famous places (N = 48, 25.9%), customs (N = 46, 24.9%), and ceremonies (N = 5, 2.7%).

Then, all lessons of *American English File Starter* and *American English File 1* were examined regarding cultural knowledge. As highlighted in Table 3, the highest cultural knowledge embedded in the textbook content goes for presenting information about famous people (N = 91, 33.2%) and customs (N = 84, 30.7%.), followed by names of cities all around the world, and names of famous places (N = 31, 11.3%) while ceremonies (N = 14, 5.1%) received less attention than other cultural categories.

As illustrated in Table 4, a chi-square test of independence was carried out to explore the relation between locally developed and internationally developed textbooks considering the frequency of cultural knowledge in each category to see whether there was a significant difference. Results indicated a significant difference among these categories regarding the type of textbooks, x^2= (4, n = 1105) = 85.45, p = 0.000.

Discussion and Conclusion:

This study attempts to investigate the cross-cultural knowledge represented in *American English File Starter and Book 1* as international textbooks compared to *Prospect English Books 2, 3, and Vision 1* as the local ones. To this end, content analysis was done on these books, and results were compared to better understand the cross-cultural knowledge embedded in these books.

Our findings revealed that limited attention has been paid to incorporating cultural knowledge, especially the target culture. *Prospect English books 2, 3, and Vision 1* mainly contain the source

culture. However, students must be culturally aware to communicate cross-culturally [Byram 2008]. Without efficient cultural insight, students may gain a one-sided and biased worldview in which some communities, genders, nationalities, and races are superior to others [Kobia 2009]. This finding is consistent with Gholami and Ghasemi's [2018] findings, which reported that the series is rather limited in incorporating different cultural topics and issues. They also pointed out that the *Prospect series* lacks a comprehensive coverage of elements related to the target language culture or international cultures, aligning with the present study results. Lack of sufficient cultural knowledge can be due to the textbook writers' perspectives, political limitations forced on publishers, or cultural constraints of the society [Hamiloğlu, Mendi 2010]. However, being interculturally competent requires some degree of target or international culture [Tajeddin, Teimourizadeh 2014].

The results of examining the international English textbooks revealed that international cultural knowledge seems indispensable in these textbooks since information about famous people, customs, names of cities all around the world, and names of places received enough attention. It is worth mentioning that cultural knowledge about ceremonies receives the least attention in both types of books. It may be due to the unbiased perspective of the writer and publisher about religion.

Comparing locally and internationally developed textbooks has shown a significant difference between these two books regarding the amount of cultural knowledge reflected in them. It indicates that the American English File series are more concerned about raising students' cultural awareness. As Byram [1989] stated, language awareness and cultural awareness are inseparable; language is connected to culture.

In conclusion, the paucity of intercultural pragmatics knowledge in Iranian ELT textbooks compared to international ones

gives us a better understanding of why students fail to communicate cross-culturally after finishing their education. It seems indispensable to foster a more balanced perspective toward developing textbooks involving more information about other countries and their culture. Such an approach can give students a more comprehensive and authentic insight into life that extends beyond their own nation, broadening their perspectives to encompass diverse global cultures and lifestyles.

The findings of this study hold significance for curriculum developers in revising curriculum, for teachers to use additional materials to compensate for the lack of cultural knowledge in the local books, for policymakers and publishers to develop textbooks or revise the current ones to meet the student's need for having cultural awareness which leads to successful communication.

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