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Cultural Integration in the National Examinations for Preparatory Schools in Iraq

A B S T R A C T

Cultural integration has obtained a considerable importance in the research literature of English language teaching and learning. Since testing, as an assessment instrument, is an essential part of ELT it can also be exposed to analysis for cultural integration. In Iraq, Ministry of Education yearly conducts two national examinations (NEs) for both the third intermediate and sixth preparatory classes. To the knowledge of the researcher, culture incorporation in the NEs of Iraq has scarcely addressed in the available literature. The aim of this paper is to discover the cultural bias through finding out the dominant cultural type(s) in a sample of national exams for the sixth preparatory classes. A qualitative research method based on quantifying the frequency occurrences of the cultural representations is followed. Deductive content analysis is employed to work on a primary data of questions' papers of the NEs. The occurrences are classified in accordance to Aliakbari's (2004) typology in terms of source, target, international and neutral types of culture. Results indicate that the local culture predominates showing an obvious bias. The study is significant since it is an evaluative study in the Iraqi EFT context, as evaluation is supposed to be an on-going process necessary in any ELT context, providing recommendations to the test designers in relation to integrating culture in language testing.

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التكامل الثقافي في اختبارات اللغة الانكليزية للمرحلة الاعدادية في العراق

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الخلاصة

يحظى التكامل الثقافي بأهمية بالغة في بحوث تعلم وتعليم اللغة الانكليزية . بما ان الاختبارات التي هي ادوات للتقويم تعد جزءا جوهريا في تعليم اللغة الانكليزية فأنها ايضا معرضة للتحليل في جانب التكامل الثقافي . حيث تقوم وزارة التربية في العراق بأجراء اختبارين مركزيين (بكلوريا) للصفوف المتوسطة والاعدادية ، وعلى حد علم الباحث فإن التكامل الثقافي في هذه الاختبارات لم يدرس الا نادرا. يهدف هذا البحث الى كشف التحيز(الانحياز) الثقافي في هذه الاختبارات من خلال اكتشاف نوع الثقافة السائدة في عينة من اسئلة السادس الاعدادي في العراق . طريقة البحث هي طريقة نوعية لتحليل محتوى الاسئلة الامتحانية مبني على تحديد كمي لتكرار انواع الثقافات التي يتم تمثيلها في الاختبارات حيث تم اتباع تحليل المحتوى الاستنتاجي. أما تكرار تمثيل الثقافات فتم على اساس نموذج (Aliakbari's (2004) والذي يقسم الثقافة الى اربعة انواع ثقافة المصدر (المحلية) وثقافة الهدف والثقافة العالمية والثقافة المحايدة . واطهرت النتائج عدم توازن الثقافات وان ثقافة المصدر او المحلية تسود بشكل كبير مما يشير الى ان هناك تحيزا واضحا لهذه الثقافة. تأتي اهمية الدراسة كونها من الدراسات التقييمية في تعليم اللغة الانكليزية في العراق حيث ان التقويم هو عملية ضرورية ومستمرة في حقل تعليم اللغة الانكليزية ، كما وتزود الدراسة مصممي الاختبارات بتوصيات تتعلق بالتكامل الثقافي في اختبارات اللغة.

Introduction

The issue of cultural integration has obtained a considerable importance in the research literature of English language teaching and learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), human learning in general implies socio-cultural orientations; culture is then to be prioritized. In relation to language, culture is an integral and inseparable part as language is not only looked at as culture carrier but the two (language and culture) can be interwoven together to “represent two sides of the same coin” (Nault, 2006: 314). Other writers extended Vygotsky’s theory and focused on language learning and teaching from this socio-cultural perspective (e.g. Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015; Hall & Verplaets, 2000) particularly as related to “scaffolding” (see Greening (1998); Dongyu et.al. 2013). Cultural incorporation has then taken a wide range in the scholars’ efforts exploring the cultural representations in the stakeholders of the educational process for teaching and learning a language. In English language teaching, for example, authors started to discover the hidden curriculum in terms of the cultural categories included in the EFL learning materials or teachers’ practices in

classrooms. Tests, as instruments of assessment or evaluation, are not an exception to undergo analyses in terms of culture incorporation since they are in most cases given as a printed material manifesting cultural elements to which students are inevitably exposed.

Tests are usually conducted to make evaluations and assessments which are expected to be done in any EFL context. Evaluation is used with a broader sense than an assessment or a test; it is normally part of any activity and “is not restricted to the context of education; it is part of our everyday lives” (Rea-Dickins & Germaine 1992, p: 3). The two words “examination” and “test” are often overlap in their meanings but generally an examination is more ominous than a test for students who may have weekly test but a semester examination (Gultom, 2016: 190). The most common tests, as Brown (2004, 9 -12) stated, are achievement tests, diagnostic tests, placement tests, proficiency tests, and aptitude tests.

The national examinations in Iraq are achievement tests conducted by Ministry of Education for the purposes of formal assessment and summative valuation to mainly specify a student’s level after having taken the program. Every year, there are two national examinations for secondary schools which cover three-year intermediate and three-year preparatory classes. One of the national examinations is for the third-grade intermediate and the other is for the sixth-grade preparatory. All the Iraqi English language teaching context, including testing, is textbook-driven. The intermediate textbooks have undergone so many adaptations and changes during the recent years but the preparatory textbooks have been stable for more than ten years. Therefore, this study is limited to the national examinations in the preparatory schools only. In addition, due to Covid-19 the EFL study in Iraq has turned to be on-line classes with a lot of adaptations to the materials. Accordingly, this study will also be limited to preparatory examinations before this exceptional circumstance tackling the two terms of examination (first and second) in each of the years 2014 to 2017. Total yearly question papers to be investigated are eight.

Culture incorporation in the NEs in Iraq, to the knowledge of the researcher, has not thoroughly addressed in the available literature. The aim of this paper is to discover the cultural bias through finding out the dominant cultural type among the four source (local), target, international and neutral cultural types. The overemphasis of a cultural type over the others may lead to negative consequences such as acculturation if a local cultural is over-stressed or alienation if a target or even an international type of culture is over-emphasized.

The main research question is then:

- Can any cultural bias be detected in the national examinations for preparatory schools in Iraq?

which can imply a main secondary research questions that can be answered through the researching process:

- What is the dominant cultural type in the preparatory NEs in Iraq?

Significance

The significance of this paper stems for the fact that it will be one of the few studies in TESL literature investigating culture as related to testing English in the Iraqi context. Most importantly, this paper can be recognized as part of supposedly on-going evaluation process in any ELT context.

Culture and Language Teaching

culture is a complicated term with a lot of definitions and with no consensus about a certain definition to it in literature (Moran, 2001: 13). But one of the comprehensive definitions is Liddicoat and his colleagues' (2003: 45) which refers to culture as a complex system that include all, beliefs, lifestyle, rituals, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, concepts, and conventions of a group with their products added to their creations in their artifacts and institutions. This holistic definition provides a conception for culture to cover all cultural manifestations that are tackled in this research.

Although investigating culture in ELT literature is not a recent endeavor particularly in relation to both textbooks including culture corners in these textbooks, and EFL teachers' practices for teaching culture in classrooms, the available research about culture in EFL testing seems to a large extent scarce.

Textbooks are paramount in ELT as being the most familiar teaching tool in secondary schools. The culture-related materials in these EFL textbooks then become "a clearly determining element, since it marks the type and extent of the cultural knowledge students are likely to gain in the classroom" (García, 2005: 59). The educators' task is to discover the cultural values and ideology, i.e. the hidden curriculum, behind the explicit topics presented to the learners who may be influenced by these materials (Asgari, 2011: 890).

As for teachers' practices to activate the cultural contents of EFL textbooks, it seems, according to Reid (2015), urgent for them to know the techniques as they are often perplexed when faced with the heavy flow of the (intercultural) materials in the curricula in order not to "find it difficult to identify themselves with and apply intercultural aspects of the target language" (Reid, 2015: 939).

But it remains a fact that any language test is also supposed to be sensitive to culture and then it can be liable to cultural integration and influence, in a way similar to that of the learning materials; though during a language test a focus would also be on how participants group objects in conformity with their reasoning style, Ji et. al (2004) assured that regardless of the location of any test or the language used to conduct it, culture has "a substantial effect on the way participants grouped objects" (P: 63) as part of their strategy when taking part in a language test. In conclusion they also affirm that in addition to the cultural impact "the language of testing may also effect thinking, depending on when and how the language is learned" (P: 65).

Culture has been explored for different research purposes in conformity to different typologies and checklists for analysis processes. Examples of typologies are Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) four senses (or meanings), Kachru (1992) three (geographical)

circles, and Catrozzi & Jin (1999) three categories, to mention only a few; as for the checklists there are, for instance, Olajide (2010), and Kilichaya (2004), *inter alia*.

Aliakbari (2004) analyzed the cultural content in a number of Iranian EFL high school textbooks into three types (source-culture-based, target-culture-based and international-culture-based). The materials of the textbooks were analyzed with an adapted content analysis model based on Ramirez and Halls' (1990) study in which an amount (how often) and type (visual and written) of the target culture aspects are considered. Conclusions reveal that these textbooks are inadequate for teaching culture in the Iranian EFL context as they treat culture in a superficial and shallow way neglecting both the deep culture concerned with norms, values and beliefs, and the culture-general category of culture related to the intercultural understanding. In this study, he proposed a fourth category to the three Catrozzi & Jil's (1999) categories of culture (source, target, and international) and termed it as "neutral" borrowing Brumfit's (1996) term; he wrote "To the above [Catrozzi & Jil's] classification, I should add another category, text with little interest in culture. In Brumfit's terminology they are considered as neutral". Thus, the first (source culture) category refers to the local culture representations (home country e.g. Iraq for the purpose of this research), the second (target culture) culture category covers the cultural representations of the English-speaking countries such as united states of America, Britain and Australia, the third (international culture) category includes the representations of any country in the world other than the those in the first and second categories, the fourth (neutral culture) is for the representations that do not have direct relation to culture like items that refer to scientific subjects. For the purpose of this research, this model is used to categorize the cultural representations in the selected national examinations' selected question papers to answer the research question.

The balanced representation, if any, shows the sense that there is no sharp difference in occurrences among the items of all the cultural types. Finding out such a balance is not only necessary for avoiding the cultural bias but also for raising the learners' cultural awareness through providing a platform of different cultures with no focus on a particular dominant culture.

Methodology

The research design of the current study is an evaluative document analysis study of EFL testing in the ELT context of Iraq. It follows a qualitative research method with a deductive content analysis technique to work on a primary data taken from a purposeful sample consisting of eight questions' papers of the national examinations for the six preparatory classes in Iraq. The instrument used for the analysis is a theory-based, researcher-designed checklist with coding schemes relying on the available literature. The qualitative analysis is based on quantifying the frequency occurrences of the cultural representations in accordance to Aliakbari's (2004) conception of the four cultural types which are source (SC), target (TC), international (INTC), and neutral (NC) culture. The purpose is to find out any cultural bias through discovering the representations of the cultural categories or types in the national Examinations.

A qualitative method is followed because it best fits the purpose of this paper through analyzing the explicit forms or documents to find out the hidden meanings as it is usually used for detecting meanings behind texts to obtain a holistic view for the phenomenon under study through adopting a technique such as an observation, document analysis, or an interview (Laws & McLeod, 2004: 2). This is also stressed by Merriam (2009) who stated that “Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (P: 2).

The years of the national examinations to be securitized constructing the sample of this research are four years from 2014 to 2017; two terms of an examination in each year were covered. The total national examination papers are then eight (see the table below) starting with 2014 because it is the first year in which the new “English for Iraq” textbook for the sixth preparatory classes was settled down with no more expected big changes or alternations due to in-use and post-use evaluations since the textbook had been used in 2012. The sample ends with 2017 questions’ papers after which many adaptations and changes started to be imposed on the whole ELT context of Iraq, due to the beginning of covid-19 restrictions particularly on textbooks and accordingly on assessment process including the national examinations. Such a non-probable purposive (or judgmental) sample is always described as covering information-rich data fitting to the objective of the conducted research (Patton, 2002: 230).

Table (1)
Question papers’ distribution on years and terms

No	Sixth preparatory	
	Year	Term
1	2014	First
2	2014	Second
3	2015	First
4	2015	Second
5	2016	First
6	2016	Second
7	2017	First
8	2017	Second

For the validity of the checklist, a panel of three jurors, university professors in ELT, are consulted but no amendments made. For reliability of the checklist, an inter-rater was trained and asked to analyze a sample question paper from the data to be investigated. Her (inter-rater’s) results were then compared to the researcher’s trail of coding the same sample. Results are completely consistent. For more trustworthiness required in qualitative

researches, other procedures and strategies were followed such as full description, full engagement of the researcher ensuring self-monitoring and continuous evaluation (see Dornyei, 2007; Duff, 2008; Yin, 2011).

In the data analysis phase of researching, the unit of analysis used is any word, sentence or a phrase or any complete text unit expressed in the items of the questions' papers; frequency occurrence of the cultural types implied within the unit of analysis are considered to attain the research objective, i.e. the basis is "how often" a cultural type occurs each of the national examination's papers.

Results

The results of national examinations of each year are first reported then all the years together to be analyzed with some indicative examples.

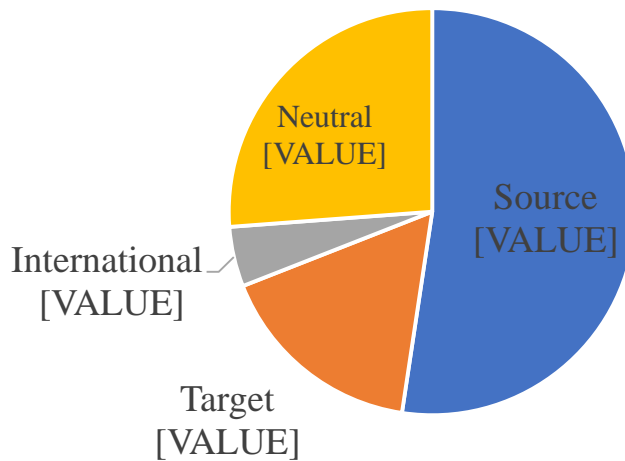


Fig No. 1
Cultural Representations in the National Examinations for 2014

It is clear, as figure No. 1 shows, that both the source and neutral types of culture dominates the cultural content of the exams' papers in the two terms of 2014. The most dominant type is the source or local Iraqi culture constructing approximately half of the cultural content of the exams; then comes next in sequence is the neutral type of culture which constructs with the source culture more than two thirds of the whole cultural content of the items of 2014 examinations.

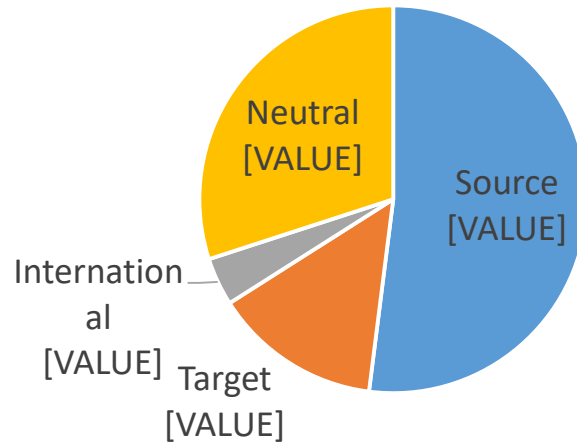


Fig. No. 2
Cultural Representations in the National Examinations for 2015

Figure No. 2 reveals that both the source and neutral types of culture dominates the cultural content of the exam papers in the two terms of 2015. Source or local Iraqi culture is the most dominant type of culture constructing more than half of the cultural content of the exams; next is the neutral culture which also constructs with the source culture more than two thirds of the total cultural content of the items of 2015 examinations.

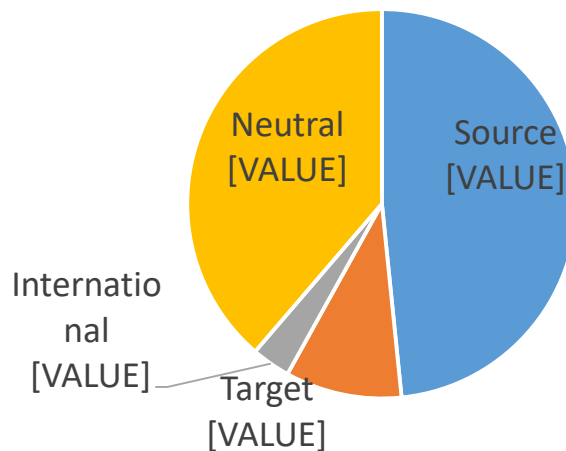


Fig. No. 3
Cultural Representations in the National Examinations for 2016

In the figure No. 3 above which is for 2016 national examinations in the two terms. The source and neutral types of culture dominate the cultural content of the exam papers. Source or local Iraqi culture is the most dominant type of culture. Both the source and neutral types of culture clearly prevail the whole cultural content constructing the majority of the cultural presentations.

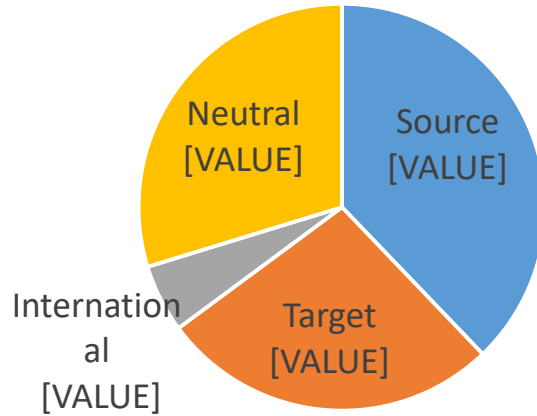


Fig. No. 4
Cultural Representations in the National Examinations for 2017

The two terms of national examinations in 2017 are a not that different i.e. the source or the Iraqi type of culture is also the prevailing one and followed by the neutral culture type, too. But the difference in this year’s examinations is that there is to a great extent resemblance in the number of occurrences of both the target and the neutral culture. The target culture seemed to have a little more focus than that of the previous years.

In a nutshell, the cultural types in all the questions for the four years, of two terms each, can be indicated in the following diagram:

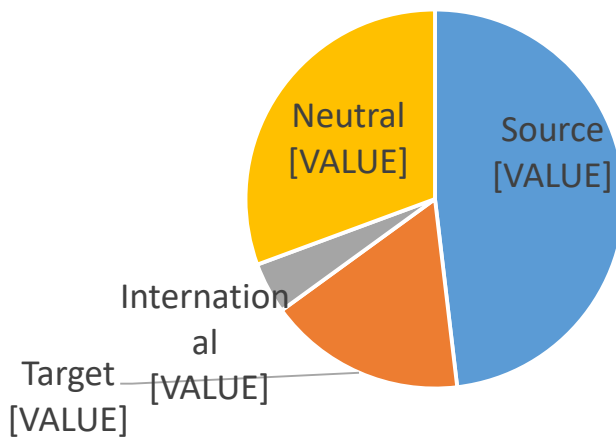


Fig. No. 5
Cultural Representations in the National Examinations for 2014 - 2017

Both the source and neutral types of culture dominates the cultural content of the exam papers. The most dominant type is the source or local Iraqi culture constructing approximately more than half of the cultural content of the exams; then comes next in sequence the neutral type of culture which constructs with the source culture more than two thirds of the whole cultural content of the textbooks. The third type that follows is the target culture and the last type which is least-represented is the international culture.

Source culture takes many manifestations in the exams' papers. For instance, in a question asking the examinees to answer using the information from the textbook there are items like:

Why was the mother proud of Mustafa?

What does "The Swing" tell about?

Samira Al Mahmoud is (an interpreter, a banker).

Why did Zaid Tariq scream?

The Tigris Hotel has a fabulous pool.

The neutral cultural items are various but mainly are related to science topics; for example, the main themes of the reading passages in various question papers for different years are about *Diabetes*, *a professor of Medicine*, *smoking*, and the like. Also, subjects in the textbook are always focused on such as "*the radar*", "*wind power*" or a sentence like "*Mustafa's blood pressure dropped too low*"; another sentence is "*The internet connection will be working again soon*"; in a context of a writing skill there is a composition question "*write 100 to 200 words about ways people can help to improve the environment.*"

The target culture representations are also available in some items such as a reading passage about an *English family*, or in the literature focus part questions there is the following examples:

In "The Canary" what were the people carried away by?

In Britain, the number of diabetics every year.

As for the international culture, there is low representation i.e. only a few items are available; an example is a reading passage about a famous writer *visiting Japan*, or "*Souhaib (who's / whose) brother lives in California, is planning a trip to the USA soon*"

These results are similar to Chen & Henning's (2015) findings based on a conception that cultural predominance in a test is originated from a particular prevalence of a cultural type; they investigated ESL placement tests used in University of California in relation to the cultural aspects of two groups, Chinese and Spanish. They figured out that "some bias favoring the Spanish speakers [culture] might be expected on the vocabulary recognition portion" (P: 157).

Conclusion

The local source culture (Iraqi culture) type is distinctively prevailing in the national examinations of the sixth preparatory classes in Iraq. The neutral type of culture, to a certain extent, shares this predominance whereas the other two types (target and international) are under-represented in the examinations under investigation. The least-represented is the international culture.

This unequal incorporations of cultural types show that the NEs are culturally imbalanced. Culture, then, is not well-integrated in these examinations as there is an obvious bias in favor of the source culture. Consequently, these examinations can be described as mono-cultural.

It is highly recommended that test designers pay the issue of incorporating culture in the National examinations the required consideration in order not to focus only on one type of culture. Rather, diversity of cultural types on the question's paper can give the examinee the chances to be in touch with all cultures particularly the target type of culture when English can be learned and tested in its own context.

Since all the process of EFL teaching in secondary (intermediate and preparatory) schools in Iraq is textbook-driven the national examinations are definitely textbook-based, too. As such, the cultural content of the national examinations is expected to reflect, to a certain extent, the cultural content of the “English for Iraq” textbooks themselves.

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