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# A Critical Assessment of Problems in the Teaching of Culture in Iranian Public Schools

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***Abstract***

The following article strives to depict why culture is almost not taught in EFL classes in Iranian schools with the caveat that teaching English devoid of culture shall have dire national and international consequences given that we live in a global village. Based on Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) the article criticizes the Iranian education system because of trying to keep students in ignorance of foreign cultures and Iranian subcultures which leads to illiteracy, itself the main source of prejudice, segregation, hostility, and ethnocentrism. It also accuses the Islamic Republic governments of flip-flopping on this major issue and of condoning Intercultural Communicative Competence's aims and principles in education. It at first discusses the socio-political context in which English teaching takes place and shows how much anti-foreign culture and anti-foreign language the context is and then it depicts the precarious situation of subcultures and explicates the inevitable negative results that ignoring subcultures may have in a heterogeneous society. The article also accentuates the necessity of the teaching of culture in ELT by giving examples of cultural faux pas. It at last appraises the Iranian English school textbooks clearly showing their shallowness, triviality, incompleteness, and political bias. According to the principles of ICC, the article principally comes to the conclusion that the force of cultural levity at work in the textbooks propagates homogeneity, prejudice, and ignorance all detrimental to Iranian society and its relations with the international community.

***Keywords:*** *Culture; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Language; Subcultures; Teaching*

## *1. Introduction*

If you expect culture to be presented accurately, spoken about neatly, or dealt with adequately, you are in for a rude awakening. It stands to reason that culture is so vast, intricate, tangled, and multifarious that defies a precise definition and every single definition purporting to elucidate or explicate the fabric of culture will fall flat. This indistinct, hazy quality of culture magnifies when it comes to the teaching of it

in EFL classes and the problem exacerbates when it especially comes to the teaching of culture in Iranian English classes. Again, the situation even worsens when you are supposed to teach the culture of English-speaking countries, especially Great Britain and the United States, dubbed "*core English-speaking countries*" by the author of *Linguistic Imperialism* as opposed to "*periphery-English countries*" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 17) like Iran using English as an international link language or Lingua Franca, not imposed on it in colonial times bearing in mind that Iran was never colonized. The difficulty has always anchored in political tensions and fluctuations between Iran and the West since the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 that have had serious repercussions for the teaching of the culture of English-speaking countries particularly British and American culture in EFL classes. Taking a cursory glance at the corollaries to these chronic tensions may amply crystallize why they have taken a heavy toll on the teaching of culture in Iranian English classes: the siege of the American embassy in Tehran and holding hostage fifty two American diplomats for 444 days in 1979, the same year when the upheaval started, leading to a diplomatic impasse between the two countries that has not yet come to a cessation and there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel; the alleged American and British support and provision of modern weapons for Iraqi troops when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980; a mob attack on the British embassy in Tehran in 2011 allegedly ransacking offices and setting a building on fire apparently because of the imposition of sanctions on Iran concerning its nuclear programme; American 2018 withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal reinstating sanctions detrimental to the Iranian economy; the assassination of an Iranian major general near Bagdad International Airport by a United States drone strike in 2020. These are of course just a few but undoubtedly this kind of relations between countries is unprecedented and out of the ordinary.

Consequently, an untrustworthiness of Western policies, culture, and language, especially the English language that naturally carries American and British culture, has always persisted in the Islamic Republic since its onset. Accordingly, the first supreme leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini was dead set against Western values and culture and rejected dominance of Western power. His successor Ayatollah Khamenei has followed in Ayatollah Khomeini's footsteps and in some cases has even outdone his predecessor in repudiation of Western culture. Therefore, according to Islamic Republic authorities, a preponderance of English in general life represented a major threat to the nascent Islamic culture in Iran and went against the grain of Islamic values and ideology and has still continued to do so. Galtung enumerates six types of imperialism two of which are social and cultural (1980) whose steed is the English language and because English is closely associated with 'conquest' and 'colonization', the Islamic Republic governments have incessantly peddled the revolutionary terms 'cultural invasion' and 'cultural imperialism' and to block them, as only one example, they banned English in Primary schools in 2018 regarding this invasion as the quintessence of soft war, seemingly believing in the following famous quotation: "Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad; now we are sending English teachers" (qtd. in Alderson, 2009, p. 13) and also in that it would be incumbent on them to stifle and chain the spread and power of the English language as much as possible because its main goal is to exploit the periphery countries and English is an effective means of legitimating 'exploitation', another item that has always been at the top of the political agenda in the Islamic Republic. However, the authorities are leery of cultural imperialism as "the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system" (Schiller, 1976, p. 9). These processes have almost recently been tagged as Americanization or Westernization loathsome to the Islamic Republic agenda. The authorities fundamentally believe that "the dependence of the country on a borrowed language", conducive to dependence, too, "on foreign theories and methods underlying the borrowed language, thus resulting in a borrowed consciousness" (Enriquez, 1984, p. 3) and that "English linguistic hegemony, the saturation of the Periphery with Centre ideas to the point where there is consent to Centre policies" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 168) will put the revolutionary slogan 'self-sufficiency' in jeopardy. Generally

speaking, they concur that "education and culture play an even more important role as instruments of domination and oppression" (Ngũgĩ, 1983, p. 96) and strive not to be made "permanent parasites on the developed countries for knowledge and information" (Pattanayak, 1986, p. vi) and sometimes reprove Iranian elites, whose magnetic pull of English is allegedly hard to resist, for wanting to pave the way for Western exploitation. I think the importance of the socio-political context in which a language is taught needs no further elaboration. On balance, I imagine that there are formidable obstacles, if not insuperable, on the road to a proper teaching of culture in Iranian ELT.

## *2. Culture and Language*

The statement that 'language carries culture' has become a commonplace. The inextricable link between culture and language has been asserted in the following definition of culture: "Culture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world. However, meanings are not simply floating 'out there'; rather, they are generated through signs, most notably those of language" (Barker, 2005, p. 7). In other words, "the construction of language by culture and the transmission of culture as language" (Holme, 2003, p. 26). Of necessity, when something is connected with language, it is discursive. By the same token, Byram in his writings about the teaching of culture in language classes in lieu of 'the study of culture', uses 'cultural studies' implying and covering discourse and power. For example: "in situations of second language acquisition it is likely that the learner will belong to a minority group in an inferior power position" (1994, p. 8). So, culture is taken into account as a discursive construction regarded as homogeneous, static, and essentialist by some and as heterogeneous, dynamic, and developing by others. The 'global village' has made us transcend the local, communal, and even national facets of culture and take into consideration its international aspect. It is not accidental that the following expressions have had a high-profile in recent writings about culture: cross-cultural understanding, multiculturalism, basic information about other peoples and nations, global literacy, global understanding, intercultural approach and the like. Intercultural communication requires intercultural communicative competence (ICC) which can be acquired solely by sociocultural competence and the skill of 'interaction' as a means of boosting knowledge about the other. Such an interaction generating reciprocal action and influence equips the individual with both communicative competence for the effective exchange of information and intercultural communicative competence for "the establishing and maintenance of human relationships" (Byram, 1997, pp. 32-3). Culture is analogous to an iceberg, that is, the visible part includes the facts and information and the invisible part comprises values, beliefs, perspectives, perceptions, attitudes, and the like. It goes without saying that if ICC is absent in an encounter, both sides will only scratch the surface.

Accordingly, this interactional practice accords importance to both native and foreign cultures or respectively to both enculturation and acculturation. Fundamentally, the participants of an encounter "have to cope with three different cultural contexts, namely their first language culture, their foreign language culture and the culture of their interlocutor" (Piasecka, 2011, p. 22). Before striking a conversation with a foreigner we should be cognizant of the fact that we are the progeny of the culture or socialization in which we live; that what we say, do, believe, or act upon are not absolutely or essentially true; that as individuals we have our own prejudices, biases, and foibles; that we complete each other in the process; that culture is relative as "one culture can only be understood in terms of another" (Levy, 2007, p. 107); that "To hold one's own cultural ways up as the norm for measuring those of others is to reflect a bias … it encourages intolerance" (Oswalt, 1970, p. 20). Such an interactive encounter has its roots in the Saussurian linguistic enunciation that we understand our world via comparison and difference. So, /b/ is different from /p/ because hearing or seeing these signs, our mind creates different concepts. When you tell a friend that his car is very beautiful, in fact, you compare it to your own or other cars. You cannot understand the difference between day and night, between God and Satan without

comparison either and this is the way of the world. In brief, what we are is built by what we are not and because cultural structures resemble linguistic structures very much, the same thing happens in ICC. "The characteristics of one's group as whole … achieve most of their significance in relation to perceived differences from other groups and the value connotations of these differences … the definition of a group … makes no sense unless there are other groups around" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 66). In other words: "Because a large part of culture proceeds at a subconscious level, people are usually unable to identify their own cultural expectations, assumptions, and presuppositions until they encounter ones different from their own" (DeCpua, 2016, pp. 17-18). In the process, the intercultural speaker finds herself in a "third place" (Kramsch, 1996, p. 257), corresponding completely neither to her native culture nor to the foreign one and resulting at last in achieving critical competence or critical awareness and this "plasticity of identity" (Barker, 2005, p. 233) testifies that simultaneously "we think about ourselves and others" (Barker, 2005, p. 233) or "Everyone invents himself … by inventing, for that purpose, the others" (qtd. in Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 141). ICC implies Lyotard's "'incommensurability' or untranslatability of languages and cultures" (Barker, 2005, p. 115) and celebrates difference. In other words, ICC helps us abandon our search for universal truth and realize that truth is nothing save "our ongoing conversation with each other" (Barker, 2005, p. 129). We should take notice of something: 'A little learning' Alexander Pope argues, 'is a dangerous thing'. Accordingly, a superficial and shallow acquaintance with a foreign culture may insidiously lead to ethnocentrism, considering one's own culture as normal or natural. "Culture is not a natural phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people's behaviour or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them" (Goodenough, 1964, p. 36). A proper, analytical understanding of another culture via critical awareness will be conducive to the achievement of a modus vivendi which is the goal of intercultural communication.

### *3. Subcultures*

In the context of teaching language, ICC does not only deal with the dominant languages and cultures of the native and foreign countries. As Hadley contends, the first priority in the process of gaining ICC is to have students understand how much their attitudes, aptitudes, priorities, and views of the world are formed by their own culture (2003) and this is a holistic view taking into account subcultures, too. Mantle-Bromley reiterates that teachers should strive to acknowledge the existence, validity, and legality of the pluralism that exists in all cultures (1992). As a matter of fact, they should inculcate students with ICC's pivotal ideas that pluralism is inevitable; that cultures and subcultures within their own country or outside are different and interestingly the differences are constructed by ourselves; that prejudice depreciates difference and directs bigotry and discrimination at ethnic minorities; that as we are deeply rooted in our culture, 'the other' also is rooted in and compared or linked with their own and the encounter with them would oblige us with a better and clearer cognizance of our own identity. Chastain too, regards the understanding of subcultures within a pluralistic society as equally important (1976). However, some teachers recommend that "learners' awareness of cultures and cultural identities should begin with their own but be gradually extended outwards, to regional, provincial, national and international" (Byram, 1997, p. 24). In view of ICC, culture is not homogeneous, stable, or "an all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behaviour" (Atkinson, 1999, p. 626). Conversely, it is heterogeneous, hybrid, diverse, fluctuating, volatile, and developing. Rorty beautifully avers that

> Our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional. We can only hope to transcend our acculturation if our culture contains (or, thanks to disruptions from outside or internal revolt, comes to contain) splits which supply toeholds for new initiatives. … So our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to

be brought up in a culture which prides itself on not being monolithic – on its tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighbouring cultures (1991, p. 14).

To understand the totality of subcultures (both native and foreign) is of course impossible. By the same token, we can at least focus on the most significant facets and ways of life.

Culturally and linguistically speaking, Iran is a diverse country. Languages like Azeri, Gilaki, Turkish, Mazandarani, Luri, Arabic, Kurdish, Balochi, Turkman, Qhashquai, Taleshi, etc. are fluently spoken in different parts. Constitutionally, mother tongue education is allowed but not established yet in the education system. After an overall elapsed time of 47 years from the outbreak of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the perspective of mother tongue education is still murky. Successive Islamic Republic administrations have been ambivalent and paradoxical about this kind of education in schools. At one time it became the subject of heated debate in the press or within the administration and another time got out of perspective. Sometimes the authorities were hot for it and sometimes they got cold feet. On his election hustings, President Rohani espousing minority rights, categorically promised to observe and establish the rights to use and teach mother tongues in schools. Due to certain problems like lack of specialists to teach these languages, lack of appropriate textbooks, and clash of wills in the administration to boot, little progress has been made in this case. Notwithstanding, lack of conviction and determination should be mentioned as another reason for this failure because specialists could be trained and books written at least for one mother tongue to gradually complete the process in the future. There is no denying that this project is costly and time-consuming and even during a two-term presidency the problem would be insurmountable but there is no point in twiddling our thumbs all these years, too. In spite of all this, Rohani's pledge should not be regarded as an empty slogan because fortunately his administration has managed to open a course of 'Kurdish Language and Literature' at the University of Kurdistan' and also a course of 'Turkish Language and Literature' at Tabriz University and I personally think that this has marked a turning point in minority languages education in Iran. Teaching local languages to their native speakers in schools-which as mentioned above, has not been established yet-is a good thing but the other side of the coin is to teach these languages to other people, preferably students, as a second language which is of course a salient goal of ICC, too. Why don't we teach these languages next to English in schools? What about a Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish, etc. course that students have to choose one of them to study compulsorily at universities? Teaching a minority language as a second language, we kill two birds with one stone. First, we make our students become cognizant of their multilingual environment and recognize its minority languages; second, we pave the way for them to learn a foreign language, English for example, easier and better because there are similarities in second and foreign language learning. Learning minority languages, students develop multiple identities which "will stimulate the maintenance of ethnic loyalties on one hand, but also weaken conflicts on the other" (Allardt, 1979, p. 39). In actuality, this would be "a parallel "discipline" of **cross-cultural training** … to include **diversity training**, which facilitates intercultural communication among members of various gender, ethnic, and racial groups" (Martin, 2018, p. 45). More importantly, it brings about integration and heads off feelings of dissatisfaction and separatism amongst the minority groups.

In my personal view, at two nodal points Iranian people hailing from all ethnic groups have always met, conversed, befriended, interacted, learned about each other and therefore established diverse communities in which integration rather than assimilation has come to the fore: military service and universities. In fact, "mutual additive 'learning' of other cultures" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 124) results in integration which means "a choice of inclusive group membership" ((Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 124), taking place at the two points. For instance, my best friends have been Kurds and Turks whom I met at the universities in which I studied. Notwithstanding, it is most unfortunate that a spurious event has recently happened and is increasingly intensifying and that is the localization or nativization of both military service and universities. A large number of soldiers are conscripted into local garrisons and also a large number of students are matriculated at local universities, a policy mostly adopted and expedited by

President Ahmadi Nejad's administration. There are fears of a hidden agenda behind this proposal because it is a huge obstacle to communication between different ethnic groups which will certainly lead to stereotypic thinking, overgeneralization, separation, ethnocentrism, reduction of diversity and pluralism, lack of recognition or knowledge about the 'other', intensification of conflict, promotion of prejudice, and ignorance about ethnic groups, all against the grain of ICC. On the contrary, ICC requires that communication should be established and facilitated and all channels of communication between different ethnic groups need to be kept open. In our university, for example, very few students from different ethnic groups have been matriculated. One day sitting at my office and the door ajar, I saw a student garbed in a traditional dress (Probably Balochi dress) accompanied by two other students. One of the students touching and feeling the material, holding up some parts of the dress and letting them down, made fun of him saying: 'What kind of a dress is this?' 'Don't you feel embarrassed?' 'Why don't you wear an ordinary dress?' Of course, I do not want to blame the student because he was ignorant about the fact that his friend belonged to a different ethnic group; that he had the right to be different; that having a different dress is not a deficiency; and that perhaps it was the first time that he met an ethnically different person. Basically, I want to reiterate that "ignorance, as well as intensifying suspicion and conflict between groups, can enhance deterrence through 'the fear of the unknown'" (Booth, 1979, p. 97). So, we may conclude that communication and friendship between these two students would not be successful and ongoing. It is not accidental that the writer of *Linguistic Genocide* considers linguistic and cultural diversity as necessary as biodiversity for the existence of our planet (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Conversely, it is patently obvious that some authorities think that the dominant language, Persian, is to be used in order to unify the nation and consequently, minority languages that present ethnic identities threaten our national unity and should be supressed in one way or another. By the same token, the Persian language has dominated the other languages. We do not have any other alternative but to paradoxically support both diversity and integration. That is to say, the wide use of Persian conducive to linguistic unity and the promotion of multilingual education in addition to keeping all channels of communication open between different ethnic groups enhance diversity. To recapitulate briefly, "In our times, unity is achieved through diversity. Pluricultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual societies rise. The states that don't accept this trend are opting for conflict" (qtd. in Ekern, 1998, p. 4). If this paradox, a blessing in disguise, does not become a set goal of our government, we will be cursed with another paradox. As a writer truly argues, we tell minorities that if you want to get your share of services and power of this society you have to assimilate and become like us but simultaneously, we do not allow you because you are not like us and this will be conducive to segregation and apartheid (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). In this case we can follow the example of the EU whose structure is similar to Iranian society having several different varieties of nations. Whereas the EU uses English as Lingua Franca which brings about integration and a European identity, that is, inclusion, it requires people to learn "at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue" (Byram, 2003, p. 84) which promotes diversity, that is, exclusiveness. Language itself is power and when you denigrate minority languages, you, in fact, take away power from minority groups and consequently they will not be able to "create a sense of peoplehood, and to challenge officially sanctioned structures and languages" (Nieto, 2010, p. 146). At least because of its Islamic nature, the Islamic Republic has to observe the rules and instructions of the Quran. As opposed to the Bible that sees the diversity of languages as a curse and also a punishment for people's pride, Abdussalam reminds us, the Quran stipulates that language variation is one of the great signs of Allah on earth (1998).

## *4. The Necessity of Teaching Culture*

Hadley reports fluctuations in foreign language learning in the U.S. in 1905 to 1991 (2003). In comparison, in Iran there has always been a predilection for learning foreign languages, mainly English, since it superseded French after the Shah succeeded to the throne in 1941 and it has even risen to a fever

pitch since the outbreak of the Islamic Republic which led to Iranian diaspora and also since the emergence of the social networks. Research shows that in Iran the number of private English Institutes had added up to 3000 in 2015 (Mehrani, 2015). Only in Neyshabur, a small town in which I live, for example, do you find in the region of forty institutes. Additionally, the two main universities of the town run their own English colleges to boot. Perhaps recently the number has dwindled not of course because the fever has subsided but because the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and as soon as it ends it is forecast that the number of institutes will rocket up again. Notwithstanding, paradoxically the teaching of English at state-controlled schools is a far cry from it at the private institutes. After almost seven years of learning English at schools, most of students are not able to make a single true English sentence; it is, in fact, a waste of time and energy. By the same token, the parents who can afford, prefer to send their children to institutes to learn English. Institutes use textbooks such as *Top Notch*, *Summit*, *Headway*, *Family and Friends*, *Pockets*, and a lot of other books that are easily accessible. I dispense with the linguistic matters because I do not want to confuse the issue which is the teaching of culture but suffice to say here that when it comes to the teaching of culture the English textbooks taught at state-controlled schools, written of course by some Iranian teachers, are a complete fiasco about which I will tell you later in the next part.

At the turn of the century humanity is being bomborded with a lot of problems: polution of the environment, terrorism, migration mostly from Third World countries to the west, and the rise of new diseases the last one being the Coronavirus slaughtering people throughout the world. By the same token, to deal with them, the international community can no longer afford to waste time and should build a better, safer world by spending more time on education and culture. ICC aiming at the promotion of cooperation and coordination amongst different peoples and cultures has strived to contribute substantially to the whole humanity in this case. Taking only a brief glance at the long-term goals that ICC has set for itself, we should gradually awaken to the realization that every education system has to comply with its commitments and aspirations if it is going to be efficacious and functional. ICC concerning both linguistic and cultural matters is, in fact, aiming to:

- Develop cross-cultural understanding and communication amongst both national culture and subcultures and also amongst the native and foreign cultures.
- Promote multilingualism and as a result of it, multiculturalism.
- Enhance global literacy, that is, information about other peoples and nations.
- Boost reciprocal understanding, acceptance, and tolerance amongst both national culture and subcultures and also amongst the native and foreign cultures.
- Promote ethnic and cultural diversity, both domestic and foreign.
- Enable learners to adjust, deal or cope with different patterns of behaviour that they encounter.
- Make both learners and teachers become cognizant of the fact that their own culture as well as the foreign culture are socially constructed.
- Repudiate typification and welcome the uniqueness of each individual and dispel prejudice and bias while learning of a foreign language.
- Have learners realize that their priorities and attitudes are formed by their own culture; in other words, the angle from which they look at the world is culturally bound.
- Make learners perceive that to understand novel patterns of behaviour, they cannot put them in the framework of their native culture

• Illuminate that there is no equivalence between cultural systems, that is, they are different.

• Reiterate that the difference between cultures should be recognised, respected, and appreciated. One's own culture should not be upheld as natural and others, because they are different, nonsensical, immoral, and illogical.

• Compare cultures to each other; comparison as a criterion helping us understand each other more perfectly; both self-awareness and other-awareness. That is, "each difference recognizes another difference as the necessary condition of the preservation of its own" (Bauman, 1991, p. 256).

• Include both little c culture and big C culture in the teaching of culture.

• Avoid making generalizations about cultures or sticking to universal facts about human nature, which is stereotyping: "the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits" (Barker, 2005, p. 307).

• Encourage both learners and teachers to understand that learning is a process and providing and learning mere facts about a culture would not be effective. That is, "process … as a way of perceiving, interpreting, feeling, being in the world, … relating to where one is and who one meets" (Robinson, 1996, p. 432).

• Promote and improve critical thinking in learners so that they can evaluate and analyse the information and form a judgement leading to 'taking action' which is the fruit of ICC as a process, at last. For Wittgenstein, a reaction is the origin and the basic form of language game (1980). Therefore, "a readiness to fight; and joining the battle for the sake of the other's difference, not one's own" (Bauman, 1991, p. 256).

ICC requires that communication in FLT should be concerned with more than exchanging information and sending messages. It should also take into consideration how our utterances will be interpreted, understood, or perceived by an interlocutor from a different cultural context. In other words, we should have the ability to consider the perspective or viewpoint of the interlocutor, too. Accordingly, "successful 'communication' is not judged solely in terms of the efficiency of information exchange. It is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships" (Byram, 1997, p. 3). Once a tourist struck up a conversation with a student of mine in the street but the student perpetrated a faux par. The tourist paid her a compliment on his chador (A large piece of cloth that is wrapped around the head and upper body worn by Muslim women): 'Your chador's very beautiful; the design and colour, I mean.' Returning the compliment, the student said: 'If it were possible for me, I would give it to you. Please excuse me.' The tourist was quite surprised at this reaction: 'What, why do you want to give it to me; I don't need your chador, I don't wear it.' Although the student strives to be polite, mere politeness is not enough and the tourist takes offence and is put off and the conversation does not last; in actuality, the student fails to develop a human interaction. The first mistake that the student committed was that she assumed people to be like her in lieu of recognizing difference. The second fault is that the student had not learnt to analyse cultural meanings and practices and encounter with the 'other': 'In hindsight it was obvious that a simple Thank You was the proper answer but it was not obvious at the time' said the student later. The third defect is that she put the tourist within the framework of her own culture looking at the tourist from her own cultural lenses. In Iranian culture when somebody pays you a compliment on your dress you would usually say: 'It does not mention. Let me put it off and give it to you' and you would say: 'No, thank you. It is beautiful on you.' So, FLT should oblige individuals by dismantling "their preceding structure of subjective reality and re-construct it according to new norms … a process called 'tertiary socialization'" (Byram, 1997, p. 34).

My own cultural awakening took place when I was a second-year student of English Literature in 1998. In our university we had a kind and accommodating British teacher, hailing from London as she herself said. She taught us History of English Literature. Of course as a second-year student I did not have this course but she let me attend her class in advance because I was really interested to acquire British pronunciation and it was a rare opportunity that had to be taken in a country like Iran that you could hardly find a native teacher. Realizing this, she started obliging me with tapes, CDs, and books. One day I went to her office to get a CD or something from her. Paying her a compliment, I committed a serious and terrible faux pas: 'Please excuse me lady, I always get you into trouble.' It was crystal clear that my utterance infuriated the teacher so that she blushed, was taken aback and put off for a moment but realizing that what I said was born out of an appalling ignorance and I did not really want to be uncouth (The word 'always' in the sentence being an indicator), she pulled herself together and said: 'Mr … if I were you, I would not say that to a lady.' I did not know what had actually happened but I felt that I had messed it up. I was so embarrassed that I just got a chance to say goodbye and quickly ran to the dormitory and immediately looked it up in the dictionary. 'To get a woman into trouble' means 'to make the woman who is not married pregnant.' I gratefully thanked God we were alone otherwise I would have put her down and disgraced myself as a benighted person. I had merely translated the expression from Persian into English. In Persian you can use it positively for both men and women. Then I realised why Hadley had emphasized that connotations are culturally bound (2003). I would like to give you another interesting example. As we know, the word 'beautiful' is simply amongst the first words that we teach learners but it has completely opposite connotations from culture to culture. Imagine that you see your American friend accompanied with his wife in the street and tell him: 'vow, what a beautiful wife you have got; lucky you.' This sentence in the American context is positive and taken as a compliment but if you say the same to an Iranian friend, the word 'beautiful' is no longer a compliment but a sexual innuendo; so, you will be slapped hard across the face and lucky if not handed over to the police. These two examples may demonstrate that Byram's distinction between 'information' as "decontextualised presentation of facts with only minimal and usually unprincipled structure" and 'knowledge' as "structured information" (1989, p. 120) is right and that the mere acquisition of information about a culture is inadequate as a basis for education through FLT and will not be conducive to 'cultural awareness' whose definition shows the depth of the matter: "the ability to see all culture, one's own and foreign, as the historically transmitted result of a community's history, mentality and living conditions" (Mennecke, 1993, p. 43).

At this juncture, I would like to return to my British teacher because something else occurred at that time, a really horrendous and despicable faux pas which stresses the necessity of the teaching of culture even more. The teacher once decided to hold English conversation classes for students from all majors. Students enrolled and eventually two classes were held, one for girls and one for boys. I was the only student whose major was English. In the first session, I realized that the students had not attended to learn English; in fact, they had come to experience a 'foreign' teacher first-hand. Notwithstanding, it was a shocking experience because for the first time they saw a female teacher who taught English energetically laughing aloud, joking, looking at them in the eyes, jumping and sitting on the table dangling her feet, using gestures or pantomime to communicate or get an idea across, etc. In Iranian-Islamic culture a woman can do these only in the presence of close relatives: Father, brother, uncle; otherwise, they may be taken as sexual innuendoes and the same thing unfortunately happened and students started writing letters to her referring to and including the same matter. The teacher realized that by educating them she was, as a matter of fact, lowering herself and immediately dismissed the boys' class. This again illuminates that cultural studies plays a very important role in language teaching and should not be relegated to an adjunct. Here, both the teacher and students committed the mistake of putting and evaluating each other's culture in the framework of their own native culture which led to an unfortunate event. Accordingly, we should teach students how to "suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours. There also needs to be a willingness to suspend belief

in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the other with whom one is engaging" (Byram, 1997, p. 34). The role of education, too, should be stressed: "We see things in terms of what we know. Education, however, can turn a bias into a perspective that opens the eyes and allows understanding rather than into a blinder that restricts vision and ensures ignorance" (Patrikis, 1988, p. 16). And the same ignorance, personally I think, has been the cause of ethnic cleansing and hate crimes throughout the world. Teachers should be trained so that they know that truth is different from context to context and there is no universal truth; truth is, in actuality, created. Using John Locke's enunciation about the mad, I should like to say that what we have are 'ideas' not 'truths': "some *Ideas* very wrongly, they mistake them for Truths" (1975, p. 161) and the same madness for truth is a source of disagreement between different cultures. Especially I think teachers, in order to teach ethically, democratically, and with respect for human rights and social justice, should be acquainted with Foucault's concepts of 'discourse', 'truth', and 'power'; then, in accordance with the aims of ICC they should, like Foucault, "do away with the idea of 'eternal' and 'universal' truths and with a certain form of calm self-righteous morality" (O'Farrell, 1989, p. 38).

## *5. Iranian School Textbooks*

I would like to say the last word first, here: that from the viewpoint of the teaching of culture, the Iranian school textbooks are really deplorable. The books concentrate on topics mainly from Iran with almost no mention of Britain, America, and the other English-speaking countries. It is incredible that 'America' or 'the United States' and Iranian subcultures have been stated even once in none of the six books that I am going to introduce. As a result, the books do not provide any possibility for comparison between the two cultures and students, therefore, will not be able to gain a critical perspective on them. Assessing these books, we cannot even speak of "the tendency to teach cultural studies indirectly and incidentally to the teaching of culture" (Byram, 1989, p. 62) or "superficial contrasts" (Byram, 1989, p. 57) because the language used in the books is well-nigh devoid of culture; they do not even do justice to the dominant culture let alone subcultures or foreign cultures! On the cover of all the six books this sentence has been written in Persian: this book has been authored in accordance with 'the genuine culture and valuable Islamic identity'. Patrikis would count this, by itself, as 'political bias' (1988) in the presentation of cultural issues. Accordingly, acculturation is very imperceptible in these books. Now let me point out to some characteristics of the textbooks:

• The language has not been used in a natural context. In **Prospect 1** (Alavi Moghadam, 2019), textbook of the first grade of High School, for example, there are several short English conversations between Iranian teachers and students (pp. 6, 8, 16, 30, 32, 44), between students (pp. 10, 18, 22, 38, 42), or between students and parents (pp. 28, 32). As far as I am concerned, in Iranian public schools the Translation Method is still used and few teachers speak English in class and very few parents speak English at home (I have got a course of General English, with non-English students who have recently matriculated, in which I should not speak English at all because their English is very poor and these students have newly finished their high school). Some of these conversations could have been superseded by conversations between foreigners. Another example is a conversation between a librarian and an Iranian woman who is going to get her identity card (p. 12), whereas people are most unlikely to speak English or register their names in English in Iranian libraries. A tourist, coming there to get a book on Iranian culture, for instance, could have supplanted the woman, not conflicting, of course, with the Islamic goal of the writers printed on the cover. Even if one side had been replaced with a foreigner, it would not have been effective because no cultural issues are discussed, but at least it could be a start. No mention of English-speaking countries, no mention of subcultures, at all. According to Patrikis, the writers have perpetrated the sin of triviality that is, reducing the variety of cultural elements (1988).

• The aforementioned political bias abounds in **Prospect 2** (Alavi Moghadam, 2019), textbook of the second grade of High School. Again, no mention of foreign cultures or Iranian subcultures. 'England' and 'British' have been mentioned only once in Practice 1 Talking about Nationalities (p. 13): 'Is she/he from England?'/ 'Is she/he British?' Some other nationalities have been named save English speaking countries. The pictures of Avicenna, an old Iranian physician, two famous modern Iranian doctors, and Louis Pasteur have been featured for role play (p. 39). A short conversation is about Isfahan, a famous Iranian city (p. 42); it is based on giving mere facts and generalization: it 'is very famous for its mosques and palaces'/ 'we can have special food downtown'. Another conversation is about Ghez-ghal'eh, a village in West Azarbaijan, A province in north-west of Iran (p. 48). Triviality is preponderant.

• The cultural issues featured in **Prospect 3** (Alavi Moghadam, 2019), textbook of the third grade of High School, are Norooz (p. 50) the Iranian New Year Festival; Yalda Night (p. 58), the festival of the longest night of the year; Iranian Fajr International Film Festival (p. 82); and Fitr Eid (p. 57), an Islamic Festival. The problem is that students already know more about these issues than mentioned in the book and also, they read about them in other courses in Persian and therefore, they are not really attractive and there is no motivation behind. But the conversation between Clara, a little girl, and a police officer (p. 68) takes the biscuit; both are foreigners but Clara has got 'hijab.' So, the context in which the language has been used is not natural and it is not clear, when all the conversations in these six books are between Iranians or rarely one side is a foreigner, why it has been included.

• In **Vision 1** (Alavi Moghadam, 2017), textbook of the fourth grade of High School, there are several reading passages in which mostly the writers seem to deliberately eschew giving foreign nationalities with bias. Two people are named as 'Famous Iranian Scientists' in a passage (p. 76), or an Iranian scientist as 'a great inventor' (p. 85) but in another passage Thomas Edison's nationality is not given (p. 80). In a passage a woman is introduced as 'an Iranian writer' but exactly beneath this passage on the same page, Alexander Fleming is introduced in a smaller passage whose nationality is not mentioned (p. 82). Despite themselves, the writers imply that the Iranian students, affected by cultural invasion, for example, are more conversant with foreign cultures than their own. In a three-paragraph passage Iran has been compared to Egypt referring to the pyramids, France, Italy, Spain as 'beautiful European countries', Brazil, Chile, and Peru having 'ancient history and amazing nature' (p. 105). A six-line paragraph has been allocated to all these foreign countries but more information is given about Iran in an eight-line paragraph. A passage shows a travel agency in Spain in which the Great Wall of China and Taj Mahal in India are offered to a Spanish tourist but he chooses to visit Iran (p. 102). The Nile is introduced in a very small passage '**useful** for villages and **small** cities' (p. 52) and no mention of the countries in which they are located. All the books begin with 'In the Name of Allah' or in a passage about 'blood', it 'is a gift from Allah' (p. 50), or in a drill 'We believe in Allah' (p. 92) referring only to Islam. 'God' could have been a neutral word, of course, given that there are students whose religions are different. Patrikis would call this stereotyping (1988). ICC condemns stereotyping because it "reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes "difference"" (Hall, 1997, p. 258). No mention of subcultures or English-speaking countries, at all.

• In **Vision 2** (Alavi Moghadam, 2017), textbook of the fifth grade of High School, because the level of language rises we expect the level of culture to increase, too, but astonishingly it falls. Part of the world's map has featured some countries but again the English-speaking countries are out of the picture (p. 17). In a passage titled 'languages of the World' (pp. 25-26), Chinese and English are respectively introduced as 'the most popular' and 'an international language' with the token expression at the end that 'we should respect all languages'. A conversation about a tourist who wants to buy a Persian carpet and an Iranian (p. 85). A passage titled 'Art, Culture and Society' (pp. 90-91) refers only to Iran; of course, not attractive because Iranian students already know the information given.

• In **Vision 3** (Alavi Moghadam, 2020), textbook of the sixth grade of High School, the level of culture is the lowest. An Iranian doctor, who in the past served modern medicine in Iran, is introduced (p. 19). A passage about Hafez, a Persian poet, whom students already know (p. 29). A small passage about culture whose one sentence is: 'it brings us a sense of identity of our past and the responsibility to protect it for our future generations' (p. 29). In a sense it might be true but simultaneously it implies that culture is static, unchanging, and fixed. Students should be cognizant that "Preserving "communities" is not a good for its own sake, as if peoples should be preserved as museum pieces, so that they are not lost to posterity" (Kalantzis, 1989, p. 12). The first Persian dictionary has been introduced in a small passage (Alavi Moghadam, 2020: p. 57); the first English or American dictionary or both could have been named, at least. In another passage two people speaking about wind turbines, just mention wind towers in Yazd, a distinctive cultural feature of this ancient Iranian city (p. 75).

It goes without saying that the presentation of cultural material in these textbooks is very poor and triviality, bias, and incompleteness are very much in evidence. ICC affirms that knowledge is not already out there; it should be constructed, through interaction between the teacher and students, in order to demur to fixed truths and ideas, racism, sexism, structural inequality, and social injustice that persist in society, what Ramírez calls "culture of liberation" (1974, p. 88) and to urge students to become moral human beings, to care for others, the environment, and the earth, to be generous, to think beyond their own limited self-interests, and to become involved in civic life … to serve their communities … teaching them that living in a democracy is both hard work and a privilege that can be easily squandered … discarding the functional view of education with a more visionary and utopian one. This … is the true purpose of schools (Nieto, 2010, p. 33).

Accordingly, the contents of a school textbook should promote, respect, and preserve heterogeneity and as Byram puts it, they should make the students cognizant that speaking differently, people think differently, too; that they should take risks of misunderstanding while communicating and know how to cope with them (2003); that "Thinking, behaviour and perception of the self and the world do change with the change in language" (Pavlenko, 2006, p. 13); that one culture could only be understood in comparison with another which makes our own culture "strange to us, allowing new descriptions of the world to be generated" (Barker, 2005, p. 27) because "perception and understanding require shifts in viewpoint" (Byram, 1989, p. 55). Accordingly, the Iranian textbooks vouchsafe little agency to both teachers and students and do not oblige them with an apprehension of cultural otherness, creativity, and critical thinking; they conspicuously disempower subcultures and easily condone the absence of English speaking countries, separating the language from its origin. They do not propagate that "communities are always mixed, contradictory, conflict-ridden and by no means socially isolated entities" (Kalantzis, 1989, p. 12). Above all, learning should produce the Foucauldian powerful person who feels ready to take action and bring about resistance and change, that is, the final aim of ICC. In other words, a meaningful learning is one that "can be given a use by living human beings" (Barker, 2005, p. 244) and in this case we can conclude that learning English in Iranian public schools should unfortunately be defined as "*systemic* failure" foundering "to provide the learner with an opportunity for successful social interactions" (Nieto, 2010, p. 16).

## *6. Conclusion*

This type of learning English as depicted above, does not equip Iranian students with critical thinking meaning that they do not learn how to criticize human societies, their own and foreign. When a system ignores subcultures and foreign cultures as if they do not exist at all, it, in fact, slaughters curiosity about other cultures in students; it intransigently disregard heterogeneity in favour of homogeneity

rendering something possible by force which is conversely impossible, inevitable and unalterable. When a system does not grant students a proper tool for comparison, it, in actuality, does not let them know what an asset 'difference' is to human beings, what a smorgasbord of peoples and ideas it offers and what a kaleidoscope of good and perfect visions. By the same token, when students encounter even a minor difference, they view it as barbarian and irrational and therefore, disagreement and hostility start. From a postcolonial point of view, the English language was once used to describe the situation of the British in the colonies, to juxtapose the dominant culture with the dominated or the superior with the inferior, *A Passage to India* being a good example. On the contrary, writers such as Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe created their own English language and used it in a novel way appraising and criticizing the situation of immigrants and low-class people in western societies. I just want to say that the English language possesses the capability to be appropriated and reconstituted to the benefit of its users. In other words, the above-mentioned writers and the like 'write back to the centre', to use a postcolonial expression. One way out of this morass is the same; that Iranian education system should train students in such a way that in the future they are able to propagate their ideas, religion, values, and in general culture throughout the world using and adapting the English language to their needs and aspirations. If they have got the faculty and ability to make other nations understand and appreciate their culture, only then will cultural invasion lose its meaning and power. The performance of this task demands utmost attention to the teaching of culture. Teaching a language devoid of culture makes it empty, insubstantial, abstract, and neutral and will be conducive to illiteracy. Language devoid of culture gives the students information and language gifted with culture imparts knowledge to them. I think the first step is FL teacher training. Teachers should be trained to be cognizant of their role as educators and instructors who are expected to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to communicate. They should perceive that teaching language devoid of culture leads to separation and gifted with culture results in communication and to my personal view, the famous expression 'teaching is an art' refers to the latter. Intercultural communicative competence is the system to which the teachers should adapt the classroom. At this juncture, they may raise a consequential question: 'what culture or whose culture should be taught?' Everybody may come up with an answer but all will be as vague as the question itself. My own answer, although vague, might be useful. I believe that the salient point is that the teacher first of all needs to study and become conversant with both native and foreign cultures and also ICC's aims. When they have taken their bearings from them, they do not need to be anxious about whether to teach big or small C/c cultures; they do not need to be worried about whether to teach American or British culture and the like. Taking into account ICC's aims and teaching culture in accordance with them should be the only anxieties. In other words, they should make certain that at the end of each class students have become more gregarious, humane, and responsible towards other human beings, censorious, and sensitive to social injustice and inequality.

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