



Situating L1 Cultural Conceptualizations in Reading Tasks of Domestically Designed English Textbooks: Linking Cultural Linguistics Theories to Materials Development Praxis

Ahmadreza Mohebbi
Kharazmi University

Elaheh Rahimi
Kerman Institute of Higher Education

ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to investigate Persian cultural conceptualizations (hereinafter CCs in the text) placed in the reading passages of the English textbooks published by one of the most prominent publishers in Iran. Employing the principles of critical literacy, together with the investigative framework of Cultural Linguistics, content analysis revealed that despite portraying some universally acknowledged conceptualizations in the readings, not all of them necessarily depicted Persian CCs. Furthermore, the study found that the processing questions and activities were confined to low order comprehension questions and language exercises, with few opportunities for the audience of the textbooks to get involved thoroughly with the conceptualizations used in the readings or challenge ways of thinking inserted in the passage in spite of the allegedly critical approach shaping the series. Accompanied by semi-structured interviews, the study concludes by offering practical pedagogical implications for materials developers and textbook designers. To further elucidate the purpose of the study, a tentative reading task concerning a Persian CC is developed and offered in the appendix.

INTRODUCTION

Language is regarded as a societal phenomenon (Pessoa and Freitas, 2012) but not as merely a medium of expressing or communicating with others (Norton and Toohey, 2004). Thus, learning a language is considered as a practice that shapes students' insights about themselves, their socio-historical milieu and their applicability for the society. Therefore, language teaching does not denote a simple transmission of factual information about the world, to superficial discussion or playful activities, as is common in communicative teaching. It has to go beyond the acquisition of language skills and communicative competence to the critical examination of the cultural and sociopolitical context in which it occurs. Adopting the phrase *foreign language learning* rather than *foreign language education* proves that language teaching implicates political and social goals visible in goals of teaching and learning of a second or foreign language curriculum. Consequently, the abovementioned core of language calls for an application of critical pedagogy within language courses. The outstanding objective of critical pedagogy is to let students and educationists to become aware of rudimentary cultural and moral values, ideologies of society, and educational surroundings to prove to be social transformers. Crooks (2013) defined CP as follows:

Critical pedagogy is teaching for social justice, in ways that support the development of active, engaged citizens who will, as circumstances permit,

critically inquire into why the lives of so many human beings, perhaps including their own, are materially, psychologically, socially, and spiritually inadequate – citizens who will be prepared to seek out solution to the problems they define and encounter, and take action accordingly.

Following the growth in domestically designed English textbooks around the world, an increasing number of research studies on the implementation of culture in English textbooks accentuates the impact of mainly local cultures on English lessons. Some examples are the studies by Abdullah and Chandran (2009), Al-Quarishi, Watson, Hafseth, and Hickman (1999), Coskun (2010), Dinh (2014), Schneer, Ramanathan, and Morgan (2007), Wu (2010), which demonstrate the incorporation of the local cultures of Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Vietnam, Japan and China respectively in the local English textbooks. These studies have employed different methods such as text analysis, frequency analysis, document analysis and a semiotic approach based on different cultural references revealed in texts and visuals.

However, very few studies, if any, have examined the representation of L1 CCs in the reading tasks of local English textbooks. To name a rare instance, Dinh and Sharifian (2018) employed Cultural Linguistics framework to study the CCs of the Vietnamese Lunar New Year/Tet in a reading section of a unit of a domestically developed textbook.

The scarcity of literature on the representation of Persian CCs in local English textbooks and ignoring the educational benefits of CCs on students reading skill is regrettable. It is sort of research that experts in the field are expected to conduct about their L1 CCs. To fill this gap, the purposes of this ethnography study are threefold. Firstly, it attempts to study Persian CCs represented in reading passages of English textbooks locally designed in Iranian high schools for grade 10, 11, and 12 students. Secondly, it aims to investigate how these conceptualizations are depicted in pre and post reading questions and activities. Finally, it seeks to explore how these texts, questions and activities enable the students to engage critically with the content and the context of the materials.

Cultural Linguistics and cultural conceptualizations

Cultural Linguistics, as a recently established area of study with multidisciplinary origins, investigates the relationship between language and CC (Sharifian 2011, 2017). As Sharifian (2011) puts it, in Cultural Linguistics, culture is regarded as a cognitive system, and language is considered as significantly affected by cultural formation of conceptualizations in accordance with human conceptual faculties. Language, in Cultural Linguistics, acts as a ‘collective memory bank’ for CCs having lasted at different stages in the history of speech community (Sharifian, 2011). The conceptualisation procedure implies schematising and categorising. Hence, CCs comprise of major concepts such as ‘cultural schema’, ‘cultural category’, and ‘cultural metaphor’. Cultural schemas are defined as conceptual patterns or pool of knowledge heterogeneously distributed among members of a given cultural community (Sharifian, 2011). In Sharifian’s academic publications, in contrast to CC (as a process) and CC (as the outcomes of that process), which occur consistently, the word cultural value is hardly ever used. The relationship might be relatively misleading. As Babai Shishavan and Sharifian (2013, 2016) refer to “first language values and CCs” and to “L1 cultural values and conceptualizations,” they generally presume a kind of union and conformity, however, the precise essence of it is left obscure.

Therefore, the present study was undertaken to address the following research questions:

1: What CCs are used in reading passages of Iranian domestically developed English textbooks?

- a) : How are these CCs explored in the questions and activities?
- b) : In what ways do these texts, questions, and activities enable readers to engage critically with the content and contexts of the material?

2: To what extent do L1 CCs in readings motivate and attract the students to the readings?

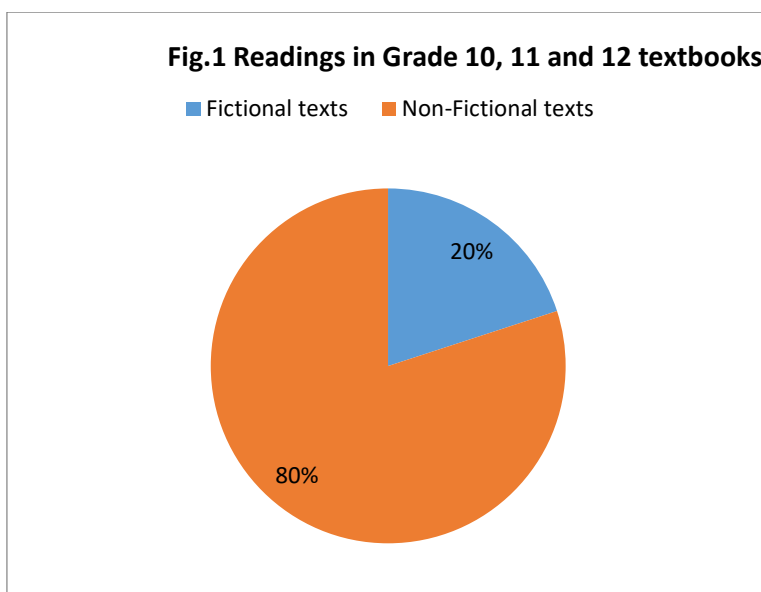
METHODOLOGY

Materials

This study focused on three EFL textbooks titled ‘Vision’ series developed by Iranian authors who understand the context of ELT in Iran. These textbooks, are published by a prominent publisher in Iran and prescribed as the basic textbooks by Iranian Ministry of Education and Training. These textbooks, are locally developed for Iranian high school students of grade 10, 11, and 12 respectively. Each book is composed of both multicultural anthologies of literary and nonliterary texts containing various genres taught at public schools in Iran.

The English textbook for Grade 10 includes 4 units and 16 texts, while, the Grade 11 textbook has 3 units containing 9 texts, and grade 12 textbook contains 3 units and consisting of 12 texts. As displayed in figure 1, 80% of the three textbooks include non-fiction texts (informational articles, biographies, scientific essays) and only 20 % of the three books is fictional (short stories). In terms of literary and non-literary aspects, it seems that non-literary texts dominate the three books. All three books include broad topics. Grade 10, for instance, constitute the following: *endangered animals and nature*, *a wonderful liquid* (it is about human blood), *no pain no gain* (it is about hardworking), and *a true paradise* (It is about Iran as a paradise for tourists). In Grade 11, texts contain topics such as *languages of the world*, *have a healthier and longer life*, and *art culture and society*. In grade 12, the topics concern *respect your parents*, *how to use a dictionary*, and *earth for our children*.

Figure 1. The Percentage of the CCs in Reading Passages



Data collection and analysis

This study uses a case study method (Duff, 2008), as a qualitative research practice, along with the principles of content analysis and critical literacy theory, as described in Table 1, for data collection and analysis. Data collection in a case study includes applying different sources in the study (Cresswell, 1998), it involves studying the three English books’ pages to investigate

CCs as well as the type of activities and exercises that facilitate students' development of cultural awareness represented in the books. Nunan and Bailey (2009) described two approaches to beginning an analysis: either by starting with data and deriving themes and categories from these data, or beginning with a theory and looking for data that will prove or disprove theory. In this study, the first approach, the grounded approach as an inductive process, was selected for data analysis. For the textbook analysis, the first stage entails reading through each textbook along with the activities and questions and scrutinising its purpose, subject matter, and audience employing questions developed by and adapted from Reade (1998) and Rice (1998) (both in Huang 2011a) and McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004). (See Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Methods

Aspects of critical literacy	Methods	
	Where data are collected	How data are analysed
Subject matter		
What is the topic?	Textual samples (stories, poems, paragraphs/essays for reading, discussion notes)	Determine whether the topics enable students to confront relevant cultural and social realities
Purpose		
1. What is the writer's purpose?	Pre-reading, discussion, post-reading questions, activities, and exercises	Examine the extent to which the questions, activities and exercises allow students to problematize and question the world as constructed by the textbook
2. What kind of political, economic, or social interests are served by the way the text is written? What kind of values are privileged in this text?		
3. Whose voices are missing, silenced or discounted?		Examine if or to what extent the textbook provides multiple perspectives on an issue or topic
Audience		
1. To whom is this written?	Pre-reading, discussion, post-reading questions, activities, and exercises	Examine the extent to which the questions, activities and exercises engage students in projects that can make a difference in their own and other people's lives
2. What assumption about the reader is implied in the textbook?		
3. How does the text position the readers?		

The process of data analysis first began with pinpointing the CCs presented in the reading sections in the three textbooks. To determine how CCs in activities and questions could

motivate and engage students with texts, the learning activities and questions were analyzed and examined.

Interview

A semi-structured Persian interview was conducted to tap into the learners' opinions about the reading sections in textbooks. Semi-structured interviews are considered to be a qualitative method of questioning that relates a set of open questions arranged in advance (questions that encourage discussion) with the possibility for the interviewer to find out notable themes or responses further. Granting the respondents the freedom to state their opinions in their own terms is considered to be one advantage of using semi-structured interviews (Cohen and Crabtree 2006).

The interview questions were as follows:

- 1: Does using L1 CCs improve your level of understanding the passages in English books at school? What is your idea?
- 2: How do L1 CCs in readings simplify the understanding of the text for student?
- 3: How important is employing these CCs in attracting EFL/ESL learners' attention toward the reading passages?

RESULTS

Cultural conceptualizations represented in the selection

Regarding the first research question in this study, the content analysis of the readings revealed that the CCs represented in three books are commonly supposed to be universal (see figure 2) and traditional CCs of *hospitality, politeness, respecting parents, love and care for elderly moral values and principles, blessing, donation, diligence, Holy Quran, and Allah*. Although, these texts appear to be didactic, they help readers to become socialized and accept ethical principles and modes of behaviour which are considered to be desirable in a society.

To start off, the reading text in grade 12, for instance, deals with the CC of *respecting parents*. The story of *Respect Your Parents* concerns an old woman who asked his son the same question for three times and made him furious. The son shouted at his mother, "Why do you keep asking me the same question again and again? Are you hard of hearing?". Then, the mother went to her room and came back with an old diary. She opened a page and kindly asked her son to read the page. After reading the short diary, suddenly the son burst into tears, kissed and hugged his kind old mother and said repeatedly, "Mom, mom, mom, forgive me." The old woman hugged her son and kissed him and said calmly, "we must care for those who once cared for us." We all know how parents cared for their children for every little thing. Children must love them, respect them, and care for them.

In the grade 11 textbook, the religious conceptualisation of *praying* is emphasized. The reading *Having a Healthier and Longer Life* explicates how people can have a healthier lifestyle. Aside from checking general health, paying attention to physical health, and having healthy relationships, in Iran, the most important thing to enjoy a good lifestyle is having emotional health by praying. In other words, praying reduces stress and people enjoy a calm and balanced life. For Iranians, praying basically means *imploring the God for forgiveness* and the attraction of spirit toward the immaterial world. That is to say, it denotes supplication, moaning and

seeking help from an almighty being who created humans and bestowed his blessings to his creatures. In Islamic culture, praying is considered to be the highest type of worship requiring some conditions to be fulfilled. For example, the place of praying and the time of praying,

Self-sacrifice is another CC in grade 11 textbook. It recounts the story of a firefighter working hard to become a good firefighter. The man talks about the number of lives he has saved and the number of people he has made happy. He believes that through self-sacrifice, you can enjoy every minute of your life as a firefighter. In Iranian culture, martyrs always epitomise self-sacrifice as they fought against their enemies and sacrificed themselves to save millions of lives during the war.

A Wonderful Liquid, a reading about blood donation in grade 10 English textbook, demonstrates the CC of *humanitarianism*. Muslims believe that this incredible liquid is a wonderful gift from Allah. In Islam, blood donation is always recommended to save human's lives and help others against pain and adversity. In the holy Quran Allah says, "Whosoever saves a human life, saves the life of the whole mankind. Iran is an Islamic country and the influence of religion on pro-social activities such as blood donation is outstanding. We can thank Allah by keeping our body healthy. One way to do that is to donate our blood to those who need it.

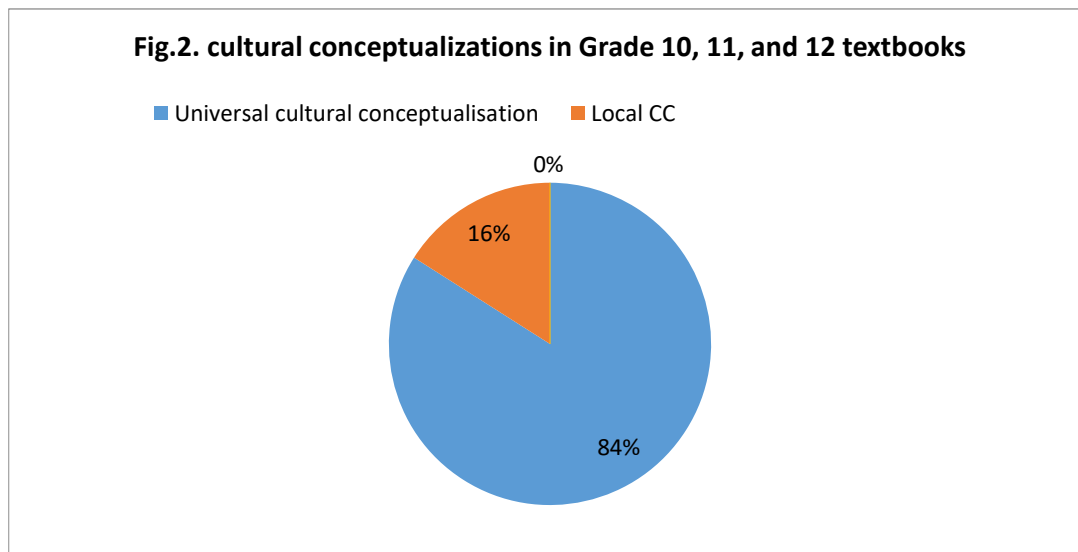
Iran: A True Paradise is another reading depicting the cultural conceptualisation of *hospitality* of Iranian people. This text elaborates on a number of countries that attract tourists every year. In Asia, Iran is a great destination for tourists as Iranian people are hospitable and kind and generous toward tourists. For Iranians, a guest is a gift from God (Allah). To respect a guest is considered to be a way of respecting Allah. This is shown by how they feel about their guests and love them as a priceless jewel. Regardless of where Iranians live, this popular *Persian hospitality* has run in their blood from generations to generations.

In the Grade 10 and 12 textbooks, the writers represent a number of famous figures, such as *Thomas Edison* (Grade 10), *Tahereh Safarzadeh* (Grade 10), *Alexander Fleming* (Grade 10), *Hafez* (Grade 12), and *Asadi Tusi* (Grade 12) through reading texts. *Thomas Edison* (1847 – 1931) who has been labeled as America's greatest inventor, was an American inventor and businessman. He said, "I never quit until I get what I am after". The key to his success is considered to be hard work and believing in himself. Another figure is *Tahereh Safarzadeh* (1993-2008), an Iranian writer, translator and thinker. She learned reading and reciting, and translating the *Holy Quran* at the age of 6. She was also a poet and published her first book while she was studying at University. For Iranians, she symbolises a hardworking woman. The next figure, *Alexander Fleming* (1881-1955), a greater researcher, found a new medicine called penicillin to save people's lives. The three figures Edison, Safarzadeh and Fleming represent the CC of, *diligence* in unit 3 of Grade 10. *Hafez* (1311-1414), is known to be as one of the most famous Persian poets of all time. He is called *Hafez* because he learned the *Holy Quran* by heart. He is a source of inspiration for many poets and authors around the world. *Asadi Tusi* is another Iranian Poet in the 5th century. The first Persian dictionary called *Loghate Fors* was made by him which is held as a valuable treasure of Persian language.

The readings of the five international and national famous figures above offer biographical data on them. A biography is a comprehensive account of a person's life which retells their story. A bio goes well beyond the rudimentary facts like education, work, relationships, and death; it portrays a person's experience of life events. Biographic readings are regarded as valuable sources of conceptualizations as they discursively represent conceptualizations linked to people. What is more, these readings aid the readers to learn about these figures if they do not know much about them. To be more precise, through learning biographic descriptions on the

abovementioned five famous people, both students and teachers may find out different CCs these imminent figures represented throughout their whole lives. The CCs that they are able to explore from reading biographies of the five public figures involve *perseverance*, *bravery*, *dignity*, *female diligence* (for Tahereh Safarzadeh), *patience*, and *spirituality*. Interestingly enough, the majority of the CCs used in the three textbooks teach religious and moral conceptualizations.

Figure 2. CCs in Grade 10, 11, and 12 Reading Passages



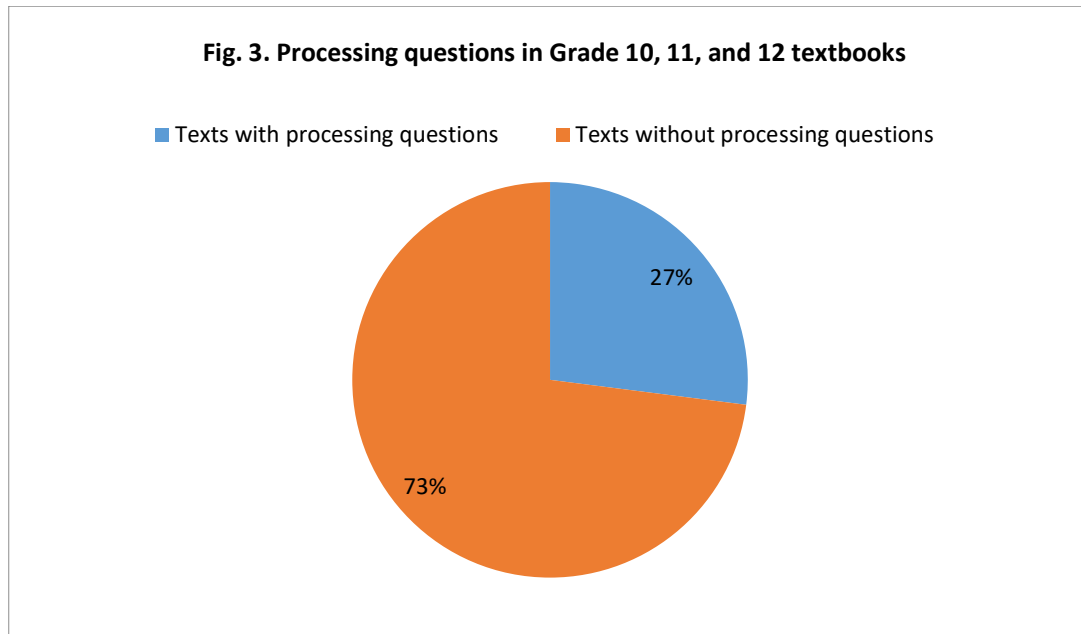
Drawing on these examples from the three textbooks, as it is portrayed in figure 2, it can be claimed that only two Persian CCs of *hospitality* and *praying* are attached to Iranian people and other CCs are universal. Generally, given the fact that the majority of Iranian people are Muslim, religious, moral conceptualizations dominate the most part of the books. Pragmatically and semantically, a text provides a comprehensive explanation of ideological conceptualizations, requiring the readers' subjective interpretation; therefore, students and teachers are challenged to use their background knowledge i.e. schemas and experience. Although some of these readings are not relevant to the experiences of the given teenage audience, they are not a hindrance to learning, and certainly, provide students with a level of challenge in case the materials can be scaffolded by the teachers in order that learners might be in a better position to consider the topic from a distance that enables the critical lens (Huang 2009).

Undoubtedly, the most critical CCs underlying the selections included in the textbooks revolve around religious conceptualizations. As an instance, the *Holy Quran* and *Allah* are two terms which are frequently repeated in 3 of the 4 units in the Grade 10, and also 2 of the 3 units in the Grade 11, and 2 of the 3 units in the Grade 12. It is clear that these textbooks fail to address other L1 CCs. Applying only religion-oriented conceptualizations is nowhere near adequate to familiarise students with Persian CCs and motivate them to read the texts critically. As Iranian students are grown up in a religious context; that is to say, they are surrounded by religious and spiritual conceptualizations through their families, school lessons, public places, social media, etc. it would be more beneficial if English textbooks give priority to other Persian CCs.

Cultural conceptualizations in the materials

In grade 10 textbook, only 4 of the 16 texts, in the grade 11, just 3 of the 12 texts, and in the grade 12 like Grade 11, 3 of the 12 texts consisted of processing questions and activities. However, the format of questions and activities in the three textbooks were not quite similar. Obviously, the remaining short texts like biographies, scientific short articles etc. neglected to include any processing activities and they appeared to be only supplemental texts or textbook fillers used in consonance with the other texts, hence, they were excluded from the analyses. As illustrated in figure 3, approximately 73 % of all texts in three textbooks involve no processing activities and questions, and merely 27 % of the texts included processing questions.

Figure 3. Processing Questions in Grade 10, 11, and 12 Reading Passages



The texts minus processing activities and questions do not appear to be practical and the following questions are raised in the mind:

- 1) What is the main objectives of these short texts without questions?
- 2) Does this indicate that students want to read these texts themselves or educators will use them as supplemental texts?

From a critical literacy perspective, supplemental materials should offer alternative viewpoints to texts including the same topics, which these texts failed to do that. Thus, firstly, it would have seemingly been more practical and cost-effective to ignore such materials in textbooks.

Texts in Grade 10 contained the following processing activities and questions procedure:

- A) **Choose the best answer-** This section includes three multiple choice questions. Each question has three options allowing students to react to the text.
- B) **True/False-** This section allows the students to think about the information and assesses their ability to identify whether statement of facts, principles, generalization, relationships, or evaluative statements are correct.
- C) **Match the two halves-** following the True/False questions are often the match two halves questions used for recognition of relationships and making associations.

Each text in Grade 11 follows different formats for questions and activities. For example, the text in unit 1 contains 4 questions the three of which concern scanning. Scanning aims at facilitating readers' reading and they look specifically for particular facts or pieces of information without reading everything. The last question deals with True/False item. The text in the Unit 2 includes 3 questions. The first question requires students to read a number of sentences and then find each idea in the reading and write the number of the paragraph discussing it. The next question deals with skimming the reading. By skimming students only seek the general ideas in the text and also identify the topic and understand the writer's main idea, or message. The third question is related to scanning which has already been explained.

In Grade 12, most questions and activities have to do with writing exercises and also focusing on the grammatical rules. For example, the first two questions in the first text deal with writing and the last one asks the students to find the object pronoun in the text. The next two texts follow the same format as the next one.

Regarding the format of questions in Grade 10, in general, *choose the best answer* section provided questions allowing students to choose a correct answer from the choices in a list. For example, in the reading text *Endangered Animals* students faced this:

Which animal is not an endangered one?

- A) Wolf b) Cheetah c) Horse

The next question enquired 'where is the natural home of the Iranian cheetah?'

- A) Forest b) Plain c) Mountain.

Also, the second reading 'A Wonderful Liquid', is followed by these questions:

1. What color is plasma?

- A) Red b) Yellow c) White

2. How can we keep our body healthy?'

- a) By eating fast food b) By doing daily exercises c) By sleeping late.

Unfortunately, as it is obvious, these question types fail to engage students to read the text critically as they surmise the true answer through their background knowledge. A number of studies claim that taking a multiple choice reading test does not gauge a reader's depth of textual understanding (Thissen, Steinberg & Fitzpatrick, 1989; Kubiszyn & Borich, 1987; Farr, Pritchard & Smitten, 1990; Kemp, 1985; Ben-Shakar & Sinai, 1991; Bridgeman, 1992; Seda, 1989; Bauman, 1982). Current theory proposes that a successful reading comprehension should provide the capacity for students to read the text critically; in other words, comprehension involves being able to understand cultural or linguistic basis that form the texts. (Vasque, 1994; Lipson & Wixson, 1991; Anderson & Freebody, 1985; Rogers -Zegarra & Singer, 1985; Gillet & Temple, 1990; Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Auerbach, 1989; Flores, Cousin & Diaz, 1991; Brice Heath, 1983; Johnston, 1984; Bernstein, 1976; Luke, 1993; Kress, 1985; Hasan, 1973).

The True/False section includes 3 questions measuring low level of learning- understanding and remembering. These questions are used to assess a student ability to determine whether a statement is correct. As illustrated in Figure 4, the second text in the Grade 10 *A wonderful Liquid* follows 3 questions:

is also the case for the third and fourth questions. However, the second text *Having a Healthier and Longer Life* which is about the different ways of having a healthier lifestyle, contains questions that ask students to skim the text and find the main idea, and also a number of questions that start with *what* and *how*, which to some extent motivate students to move beyond the details of the text. The questions are as follows:

1. What increases the risk of heart attack?
2. How can we check our general health?
3. What is the most important factor to have a healthier life?

It seems that *Having a Healthier and Longer Life* provided rich materials to open discussions regarding the health issues, encouraging students to read the text critically.

The reading text *Art, Culture and Society* involved 3 questions. The first question dealt with recognizing the reference words like *it*, *its*, *them*, and *they* in the text, measuring students' ability regarding reference words. The third question, a matching question, as mentioned above, did not engage students meaningfully with the text. However, the second activity contained the following questions:

1. What does art reflect?
2. How can we help the economy of our country?
3. Why is Persian art famous?

These kinds of questions provide students with an opportunity to critically engage the issues and CCs within the text. For example, the first question *what does art reflect?* requires students to read the text in more critically relevant ways by reflecting upon Iran's art and its influence worldwide. Here, the text gave voice to the experiences that students go beyond the text while reading as the questions are contributed to a critical discourse of the text.

A closer examination of texts in Grade 12 revealed that none of the texts contained evidence of critical or higher questions posed to the learners to move beyond the details of the text and have a deeper and more complex engagement with the text, generally, the questions focused on the low-level skills. For instance, in the story of *Respect Your Parents*, the questions queries into what seems to be not relevant to important aspects of the text and they simply asked students to what these words such as *it*, *them*, *you*, *his*, *her*, refer to, write five questions with the question starters and then answer them. This text provided rich materials regarding the CC of *Respect* and maybe something worth tapping for a reader's opinion in regard with *respect* in Iranian culture. The remaining texts like *How to Use a Dictionary*, and *Earth for our Children* provide students with opportunities to read the text as a facilitator for practicing language in a much decontextualized manner. Therefore, the questions focused on finding reference words, taking notes, making questions with *what*, *where*, and *how*.

Table 2. Levels of Questioning in Reading Passages

Text	How many questions	Lower order questions (Comprehension and inferential)	Higher order questions (analysis, application, synthesis, critical)
Endangered Animals	9	9	0

A Wonderful Liquid	9	9	0
No Pain No Gain	9	9	0
A True Paradise	9	9	0
Language of the World	14	14	0
Having a Healthier and Longer Life	7	3	4
Art, Culture and Society	11	8	3
Respect your parents	11	11	0
How to Use a Dictionary	8	8	0
Earth for our Children	7	7	0

Interview samples

In order to address the second research question of the study, a total of 15 male high school students aged between 15 and 20 were randomly interviewed to give their opinions about whether or not they were interested in and understood the reading passages of the English textbooks they had studied at school. The following sample represents some of their translated responses to the questions.

Interviewee No. 1 (Male, age 16, grade 10)

Q1: In my perspective, the purpose of learning is international and intercultural communication, therefore, learning these CCs will help us distribute the culture and history of our country around the world.

Q2: These CCs in the readings help us get a general view of the passage and the topic which eases the process of comprehension of the reading for us.

Q3: It depends on what conceptualizations are used in the readings. In my idea, cultural and moral conceptualizations are more attractive than the religious ones.

Interviewee No. 2 (Male, age 17, grade 11)

Q1: Definitely yes. Because these CCs are part of individuals' life and they seem to be inspiring and interesting especially for teenagers.

Q2: Persian CCs such as *Nowruz*, *Iranian Nature Day*, and *Red Wednesday* could help foster comprehension of the readings owing to the fact that the learners already have a presupposition about that concept in their minds.

Q3: Readings about Persian traditional celebrations, costumes, historical events could greatly intrigue the learners' curiosity.

Interviewee No. 3 (Male, age 18, grade 12)

Q1: Yes, to a large extent. They are the best incentives for learners to feel like starting to read the passage.

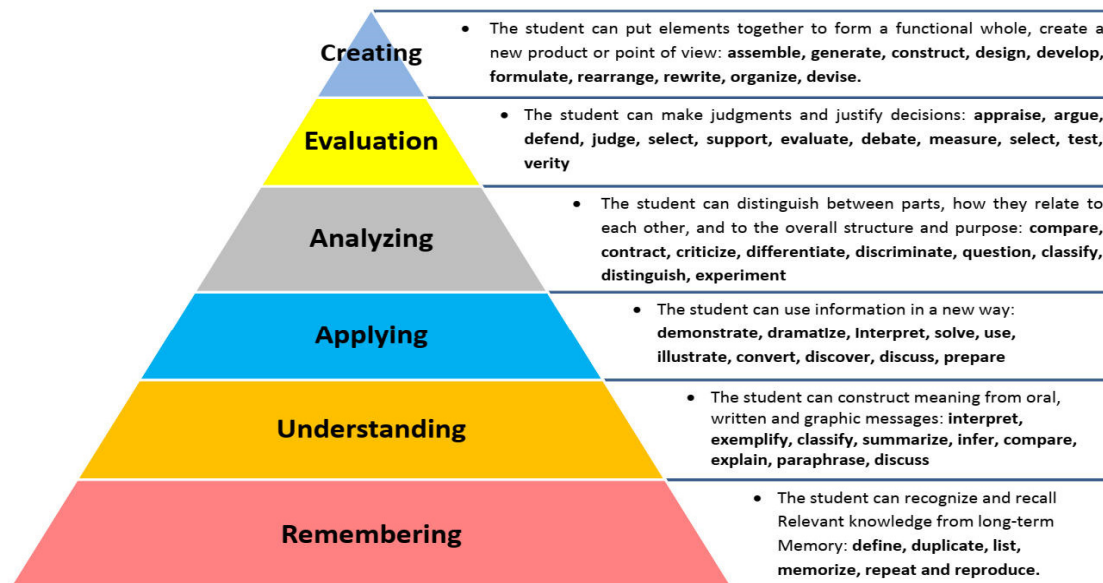
Q2: Considering the fact that the conceptualizations are known to the learners, they simply become more willing to keep reading the passages which makes comprehension too easy a job for the learners.

Q3: language learners always look for learning something new through the readings. I think CCs are the best topics in the readings.

DISCUSSION

As it is universally acknowledged, critical literacy concerns an axiological interpretation of meaning and language praxis in terms of power relationships. It holds that language is by no means neutral and, highlights the way texts perform special functions. Accordingly, critical literacy is inherently linked to classroom rehearsals of reading intending to enhance “ways in which knowledge and ways of thinking about knowledge and valuing knowledge are constructed in and through written texts” (Hammond and Macken-Horarik 1999). Initially, the preamble of *Vision* series signifies a critical standpoint particularly in its transformative purpose to “provide experiences that allow each child to build upon an ever expanding body of knowledge and ability, and to invite that child to question, to reflect, and to gain understanding” (Perfecto and Paterno 2018). However, a precise investigation of the readings, involving the way the conceptualizations were embedded within, disclosed the contrary. Briefly, the textbooks included universal conceptualizations, but not all of them necessarily concerned the target audience of high school students in a first language context. There appeared to be a presupposition that universal conceptualizations in readings primarily published for a mature adult target were easily transferrable to a younger one without facing difficulties of comprehension and appreciation. Alternatively stated, it denotes that contexts bear no relation to conceptualizations; as a story embraces positive conceptualizations, young students will still be able to relate to the experience and identify with the conceptualizations even though it is manifested via an adult’s experience. Regarding how these conceptualizations were explored, it was revealed that discussion of the texts were limited to low order comprehension questions, nor was there an effort to critique or discover the CCs of the readings. In order to solve this serious problem, while designing reading tasks and relevant activities, materials developers are advised to employ Bloom’s taxonomy of higher thinking. Benjamin bloom developed this taxonomy in 1956 which was later updated by one of his students called Lorin Anderson in the 90s (see figure 5). This classification moves through 6 levels intellectual behavior. The first three levels are regarded as lower order stages; the final three levels are interpreted as higher order. Higher order questions are what we employ for critical thinking and creative problem solving. It is expected that pre and post reading activities developed in consort with this taxonomy, will challenge EFL learners’ critical thinking abilities to a large extent.

Figure 5. Updated Bloom’s Taxonomy of Higher Order Thinking



CONCLUSION

Adopting critical literacy tenets, through the investigative framework of Cultural Linguistics, the current study investigated and argued CCs placed in the reading passages of three high school textbooks by a leading publisher in Iran. Understandably, despite their best objectives, the three textbooks appeared to be inclined towards the stockpiling of particular capacities without directing them to develop critical reading skills. Furthermore, as the study revealed, the dominance of low-level comprehension questions seems to hinder students' developing of a more critical position while reading texts. In essence, students are taught to be passive readers, taking a stance of reverence since they are not given the opportunity to question or critique topics and CCs inserted in the readings, even in something as apparently commonplace as a table of contents. Unless students are instructed to become critical readers of passages, subsequently, they will not be enabled to utilise and practice these literacy principles to acknowledge and ratify or to question the CCs by dismissing, beliefs, and ideologies they face in real life outside the textbooks. Such critical underpinnings will ultimately prepare adults who are more able to recognise and appraise the methods authors use to frame students' standpoints. Hence, it behooves textbook compilers to feasibly take a highly critical stance in terms of L1 CCs while developing English textbooks, especially those tailored for younger students. This research has practical implications for research and pedagogy in the field which purports to claim that the study of culture implementation in textbooks must surpass the 4Fs (food, fact, festival, folklore) (Kramsch, 1993). Therefore, as Dinh and Sharifian claim, Cultural Linguistics helps to make a systematic and comprehensive analysis of CCs in preference to culture in broad sense of the term in textbooks. From pedagogical perspectives, given the increase in local textbook development in Iran, it is correspondingly crucial to implement Persian CCs in reading tasks of English textbooks customised for middle and high school students to produce culturally cognizant teenagers and future adults and also develop a more comprehensive concept concerning textbook development quality in the country. Teachers themselves are also equally expected to exert more critical perception of achieving their professional responsibilities. It is thus suggested to establish more strategies in which

textbooks, developed through a critical framework, are perfected by procedures adopted in real classrooms. This study, being the prime example of its kind employing Cultural Linguistics principles into textbook evaluation, could also benefit teachers to get more familiar with their own mother tongue's L1 CCs which simplifies the act of teaching reading passages.

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, N., & Chandran, S. K. (2009). Cultural elements in a Malaysian English language textbook. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from <http://ddms.usim.edu.my/bitstream/handle>.
- Al-Quarishi, K. D., Watson, M., Hafseth, J., & Hickman, D. (1999). *English for Saudi Arabia*. Riyadh: Ministry of Education
- Anderson, R.C. & Freebody, P. (1985), 'Vocabulary Knowledge'. In Singer, H. & Ruddell, B. (Eds.), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (3rd Ed.), (pp. 343-372). International Reading Association. Newark: Delaware.
- Auerbach, E. (1989). Toward a Social-Contextual Approach to Family Literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 52. 2, 165-182.
- Babai Shishavan, H., & Sharifian, F. (2016). The refusal speech act in a cross-cultural perspective: A study of Iranian English-language learners and Anglo-Australian speakers. *Language & Communication*, 47, 75–88.
- Bauman, J. (1982). *Linguistic Structure and the Validity of Reading Comprehension Tests*, Final Report Washington D.C: Centre for Applied Linguistics.
- Ben-Shakar, G. & Sinai, Y. (1991). Gender Differences in Multiple Choice Tests: The Role of Differential Guessing Tendencies, *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 2R. 23-35.
- Bernstein, B. (1976). 'Social Class, Language and Socialisation'. In Karabel, J., & Halsey, A.H. (Eds.), *Power and Ideology in Education*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blom, J. & Gumperz, J. (1972). 'Social Meaning in Linguistic Structure: Code Switching in Norway'. In Gumperz, J. & Hymes, D. (Eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics: the ethnography of communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Bloom, B. S. (1956). Taxonomy of educational objectives. Vol. 1: Cognitive domain. *New York: McKay*, 20-24.
- Brice Heath, S. (1985). 'Being Literate in America: A Sociohistorical Perspective'. In Niles, J. & Lalik, R. (Eds.), *Issues in Literacy: A Research Perspective*, Rochester, New York: The National Reading Conference, Inc.
- Bridgeman, B. (1992). A Comparison of Quantitative Questions in Open-Ended and Multiple Choice Formats, *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 22, 253-271.
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). *Qualitative research guidelines project*.

- Coskun, A. (2010). Whose English should we teach? *Reflections from Turkey. ESP World, 1*(27), 1–20.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative research and research design: Choosing among five traditions. London: Thousand Oaks*
- Crookes, G. V. (2013). *Critical ELT in action: Foundations, promises, praxis*. London: Routledge
- Duff, P. A. (2008). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dinh, T.N & Sharifian, F. (2018). Vietnamese cultural conceptualizations in the locally developed English textbook: a case study of ‘Lunar New Year’/‘Tet’. *Asian Englishes*. Routledge.
- Dinh, N. T. (2014). Culture representation in locally developed English textbooks. In R. Chowdhury & R. Marlina (Eds.), *Enacting English across borders: Critical studies in the Asia Pacific* (pp. 143–167). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Farr, R., Pritchard, R., Smitten, B. (1990). A Description of What Happens When an Examinee Takes a Multiple Choice Reading Comprehension Test, *Journal of Educational Measurement* 27, 209–226.
- Flores, B., Cousin, P.T., Diaz, E. (1991). Transforming Deficit Myths About Language, Learning and Culture, *Laneuae Arts, Q.8.*, 369–377.
- Gillet, J.W. & Temple, C. (1990). *Understanding & Reading & Problems. Assessment and Instruction* (3rd Ed.). Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman and Co.
- Hammond, J., & Macken-Horarik, M. (1999). Critical literacy: Challenges and questions for ESL classrooms. *Tesol Quarterly, 33*(3), 528–544.
- Hasan, R. (1973). 'Code, Register and Social Dialect'. In Bernstein, B. *Class. Codes and Control Vol 2*. London: Routledge and Kegan.
- Huang, S. Y. (2009). EFL reading through a critical literacy perspective. *English Teaching & Learning, 33*(3), 51–93.
- Huang, S. Y. (2011a). Critical literacy helps wipe away the dirt on our glasses: Towards an understanding of reading as ideological practice. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 10*(1), 140–164.
- Johnston, P. (1984). 'Assessment in Reading'. In Pearson, P. (Ed.), Barr, R., Kamil, M., Mosenthal, P. (Section Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, New York: Longman.
- Kemp, P. (1985). 'Standardised Tests and Reading For Not Reading'. In Unsworth, L. (Ed.), *Reading & An Australian Perspective*. Australia: Nelson.
- Kramersch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G. (1985). *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice*. Australia: Deakin University Press.

- Kubiszyn, T. & Borich, G. (1987). *Educational Testing and Measurement; Classroom Application and Practice*. (2nd ed.). Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman and Company.
- Lipson, M., & Wixson, K. (1991). *Assessment and Instruction of Reading & Disability, An Interactive Approach*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Luke, A. (1993). *The Social Construction of Literacy in the Primary School*. Melbourne: Macmillan.
- McLaughlin, M., & De Voogd, G. (2004). Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(1), 52–62.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2004). *Critical pedagogies and language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D., & Bailey, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Exploring second language classroom research*. Boston: Heinle.
- Perfecto, M. R., & Paterno, M. G. (2018). Critiquing Culture in Reading Materials Used by ESL Private Middle Schools in the Philippines: A Critical Literacy Perspective. In *Situating Moral and Cultural Values in ELT Materials* (pp. 29-49). Springer, Cham.
- Pessoa, R. R., & de Urzêda Freitas, M. T. (2012). Challenges in critical language teaching. *Tesol quarterly*, 46(4), 753-776.
- Reade, H. (1998). Incorporating a critical literacy perspective in an intermediate reading class. *Teachers' voices*, 3, 39-6.
- Rice, J. (1998). Portable critical literacy strategies. *Teachers' voices*, 3, 55-60.
- Rogers-Zegarra, N. & Singer, H. (1985). 'Anglo and Chicano Comprehension of Ethnic Stories'. In Singer, H. & Ruddell, B. (Eds.), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading: (3rd Ed.)*, {pp. 611-620}. Newark Delaware: International Reading Association.
- Seda, I. [(1989). Assessment Format and Comprehension Performance. Paper presented at the 34th Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association, New Orleans.
- Schneer, D., Ramanathan, V., & Morgan, B. (2007). (Inter) nationalism and English textbooks endorsed by the ministry of education in Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41, 600–607.
- Sharifian, F. (2007). 3. L1 cultural conceptualizations in L2 learning. In *Applied cultural linguistics* (pp. 33-51). John Benjamins.
- Sharifian, F. (2011). *Cultural conceptualizations and language: Theoretical framework and applications*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Sharifian, F. (2013). Globalisation and developing metacultural competence in learning English as an International Language. *Multilingual Education*, 3(1), 7.
- Thissen, D., Steinberg, L., Fitzpatrick, A. (1989). Multiple Choice Models: The Distractors are also a Part of the Item, *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 22, 161-176.

Vasquez, O. (1994). The magic of La Clase Magica: enhancing the learning potential of bilingual children, *Australian Journal of Laocuage and literacy*, 11, 2, 120-128

Wu, J. (2010). A content analysis of the cultural content in the EFL textbooks. *Canadian Social Science*, 6, 137–144.

APPENDIX

The following is a recommended sample of a reading task orbiting around a Persian traditional cultural conceptualisation preceded and followed by pre and post reading activities regarding the conceptualisation of superstition.

Before you read

Discuss the following questions in depth

- 1: Are you a superstitious person? If yes, what superstitions do you believe in?
- 2: Do you think that there is truth behind superstitions?
- 3: What is your lucky or unlucky number?
- 4: Do you believe 13 is an unlucky number?
- 5: What are some superstitions in your country?
 - What are some things that are considered unlucky?
 - What are some things that are considered lucky?

Sizdah-Bedar

Sizdah-Bedar, the traditional Persian festival of nature, is celebrated as a finale to the Nowruz holidays in Iran. It is an ancient Iranian nature festival which goes back to about 4,000 years ago. Despite customary superstitions regarding thirteen as a sinister number, it does not symbolise bad omen in Persian culture, it is simply considered as a day to respect the nature. According to traditional beliefs, the thirteenth day of every month belongs to Tishtrya, the god of rain, Zoroastrian benevolent divinity which is associated with life blessings and fertility. From Zoroastrians' perspective, to have the god of rain as triumphant and the evil of drought as eradicated in the New Year, all the people ought to commemorate Tishtrya and beg him for rainfall. Thus, on the final day of Nowruz holidays, as soon as the earth grows fully green, people leave their houses to go to the nature and water streams on the 13th to ask Tishtrya for rain. Serving traditional foods, having nuts and playing group games are inseparable parts of this occasion. Knotting grass blades and wishing upon the knot is another popular tradition of this day. When the knot is tied, the grass is thrown into water streams. It is held that if the knot is opened, fortune finds the way and wishes will come true. Some people also pull practical jokes and tell lies on this day, calling it the Thirteenth Lie, which looks more or less like April Fools. People will also release goldfish into the lakes as a symbol of freedom.

Comprehension check

1. People in Iran leave their homes on the thirteenth day of the New Year because:
 - a) They believe it is a sinister day
 - b) Thirteen is an evil number in their religion

- c) They intend to ask Tishtrya for rain and blessings.
 - d) They want to finish the holidays
2. According to the passage, traditionally speaking, Sizdah-Bedar is culturally conceptualised as:
- a) An auspicious day
 - b) A sinister day
 - c) A family gathering day
 - d) A rainy
3. Based on the popular myth in Iran:
- a) People should leave their homes to ward off bad luck
 - b) Thirteen is a good number
 - c) Sizdah-Bedar is the end of holidays
 - d) Nature typifies rain
4. In Iran, knotting grass blades on Sizdah-Bedar day is the cultural conceptualisation of
- a) Ending bad luck
 - b) Beginning of a good year
 - c) Making wishes
 - d) More blessings

Ahmadreza Mohebbi received his MA in Applied Linguistics at Kharazmi University. Ever since his graduation, he has taught EGP and ESP in state and private organizations. His main research interests are Cultural Linguistics, Linguistic Landscape, Political Discourse Analysis, Cognitive Linguistics, Intercultural Communication, and Teaching English as an International Language.

Email: Ahmadreza_mohebbi@outlook.com

Elaheh Rahimi obtained her MA in Applied Linguistics at Kerman University, she also did a BA in English Language and Literature at the state University of Yasouj. She has been teaching English for 14 years. Her main areas of interest for research are Intercultural Competence and technology, Cultural Linguistics, Critical discourse analysis, Political Discourse Analysis, Intercultural Communication and education.

Email: elahehrahimi496@yahoo.com