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A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF NEW ENGLISH FILE SERIES IN TERMS OF CULTURE TEACHING

NEW ENGLISH FILE KİTAPLARININ KÜLTÜR ÖĞRETİMİ AÇISINDAN ELEŞTİREL DEĞERLENDİRMESİ

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Abstract

Teaching culture as a part of language classes has increasingly become prevalent. The present study has tried to reveal the teachers' and the students' views on teaching and learning "culture" through English language coursebooks. In order to gather data, interviews have been conducted with 15 English instructors and 35 students in the Preparatory School of Foreign Languages at Namık Kemal University. The perspectives of teachers and students are hoped to be very effective in increasing awareness regarding culture teaching and developing intercultural competence by means of coursebooks.

Key Words: Culture teaching, English language coursebooks, Intercultural competence.

Özet

İngilizce derslerinin bir parçası olarak kültür öğretimi giderek yaygınlaşmıştır. Bu çalışma, İngilizce ders kitapları yoluyla kültür öğretimi ve öğrenimi konusunda öğretmenlerin ve öğrencilerin görüşlerini ortaya koymaya çalışmıştır. Veri toplama amacıyla, Namık Kemal Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Hazırlık bölümündeki 35 öğrenci ve 15 İngilizce öğretmeni ile mülakat yapılmıştır. Öğretmenlerin ve öğrencilerin bakış açılarının,

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kültür öğretimi ve kültürlerarası bilinci geliştirme ile ilgili farkındalığı arttırmasında çok etkili olacağı umulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültür öğretimi, İngilizce ders kitapları, Kültürlerarası bilinç.

I. INTRODUCTION

In our dynamic, multicultural world it is crucial to build tolerance, empathy and appreciation towards other cultures and other people. One of the possible ways to ensure this is to teach culture, cultural awareness and sensitiveness to learners in the process of education and especially in language fields for culture is inseparable element of language learning and teaching. Furthermore, language and culture are so closely linked that any change within culture is reflected in the language and vice versa. Therefore, it is obvious that language teaching or learning can't be achieved without the integration of culture and cultural components. As Byram claimed, language is the key to open the closed door before the culture. (Byram, 1990: 17)

When the process of language teaching and learning is considered, English language "course books" or "course book packages" are probably the first ones to come into mind since they are the mostly used language tools besides offering a wide variety such as opportunities to practice target language forms or grammatical structures, authentic reading texts, exercises in within themselves. Additionally, they tend to take a role of teaching cultures of the nations implicitly or explicitly which has become a questionable issue in language education fields. Therefore, many studies have been conducted in order to shed light on whether textbooks or course books include culture teaching or not.

Text books have many shortcomings in terms of cultural components, though L2 culture is claimed to be as an interdisciplinary core in most of the L2 textbooks. However, it is possible to make a clear distinction between textbooks due to their cultural components as "*Textbooks based on source cultures*", "*Textbooks based on target culture*", and "*Textbooks aimed at international target cultures*". The last category includes course books which have a wide variety of cultures set in English speaking nations or the countries where English is seen as foreign or second language. In this respect, since English is learnt and taught as a foreign language rather than a second language in Turkey, the course books used can be defined as "**Textbooks aimed at international target cultures.**" Moreover, another important issue to note that nearly all of the current course books and also "New English File" (NEF) which has been currently used in many universities as a main course book, claim to have been designed according to Common European Framework (CEF). CEF aims to present a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks and so on throughout Europe (Council of Europe, 2001: 1).

In the core of CEF, the idea of the integration of target culture and even multicultural aspects into language teaching and learning lies. Since present course books claim to be following the notions of CEF, this study tries to find out whether culture teaching has been placed in course books or not as claimed, depending on the perspectives of the teachers and students who have been using them.

All in all, culture teaching via English language coursebooks has become not only widespread but also one of the disputable issues of language teaching and learning. Therefore, the main principal of this study is to explore the views of the learners and teachers who have currently been using NEF as coursebooks in the Preparatory School of Namık Kemal University. Moreover, the reasons of culture teaching and the place of culture in coursebooks are going to be discussed in order to have a deeper understanding regarding the role of “culture” in language teaching and learning process.

This study focuses on the **following questions:**

- 1) Is it important to integrate culture into language learning and teaching process ?**
- 2) Is there target-language culture in English language course books?**

1.1. Limitations

- 1) Only NEF course books have been employed in the study.
- 2) Since A1 and A2 level of students do not have a higher language competence when compared to the other levels, B1 level of learners are preferred as the participants of this study.
- 3) This study is just limited to the Preparatory School of Foreign Languages in Namık Kemal University.

1.2. Why to teach culture in language teaching?

“Culture” can be simply described as the values, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of a society. According to another definition, “culture” is the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group: the sum of a nation or group’s most highly thought of works of literature, art, music, etc. (Richards, J.C.,& Schmidh, R., 2002) In a wider sense, it can be defined as every day life of people, customs, skills, their history, art, literature or everything about people. Brown states that culture is a way of life. It is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. It is the “glue” that binds a group of people together.(Brown, 2007: 188). The idea that underlies “culture “is the connection between people. This is explicitly expressed in lyrics of John Donne (1624) ;

“ No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;.....any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in

mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”(cited in Brown, H. D.,2007:188)

The lyrics are the clear representatives of the notion that people are not isolated from each other and they are interconnected. This relation is provided by the shared attitudes, values, norms, behaviors and beliefs which form the cornerstones of “culture”. In the case of foreign language or second language teaching, without integrating culture, it is impossible to achieve a good level of proficiency in the target language.

Since language learning is not just learning the patterns, rules or linguistic units, learners need to have communicative competence. That is to say, they should know how to address people in the target language and how to express agreement and disagreement with someone. In other words, they should gain the sense, or functionality of culturally conditioned behavior, have an idea about conventional behavior in common situations of the target language and understand interaction of language and social variables. As Hinkel states communication in real situations is never out of context, and because culture is part of most contexts, communication is rarely culture-free. Thus, it is now increasingly recognised that language learning and learning about target cultures can not realistically be separated. (Hinkel, 1999:197) Furthermore, if the learners want to be successful communicators of target language, learners are required to gain awareness about the appropriate ways of behaviours and customs in the target language. Otherwise, misunderstandings and misinterpretation among the members of the target society can naturally occur. Valdes expresses that there is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language. (Valdes 1990: 20) The students can be exposed to an empty frame of language if they don't learn cultural aspects of the target country.

As students have ideas about the gestures, body movements, customs and life of the others, they will not only gain cultural insights but also develop cultural understanding and tolerance to the people who are different from themselves. They will be aware of the differences and foster cultural sensitiveness which is the most crucial need of today's multicultural globe. Besides this, including cultural components will doubtlessly have a motivational effect on students for the videos, proverbs, films and various authentic materials containing cultural clues of the target culture present variety and richness to the atmosphere of language learning environment. Additionally, cultural elements in course books create more authentic language learning by bringing difference and novelty into language learning. Furthermore, students will improve communicative skills properly and especially they will develop not only intercultural but also international understanding. They will also possess intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy for the others. Moreover, their perception of the world will change as a result of recognizing that there are different lives, ideas, values in the world and they are valuable in their own cultural context. Similarly, learning of culture will certainly dispel myths about the others by instilling an intercultural competence and

promoting openness to the world. Lastly, it is necessary to point out that culture also provides a general education about the world.

1.3. Culture in Coursebooks

Teaching the necessary four skills as listening, speaking, writing and reading was seen as primary objective of language teaching and learning process in the past. However, in today's world which has become a global village, learning just four skills to be able to competent in the target language can be regarded merely as "knowing linguistic structures" and "applying them". What carries utmost importance is to be able to use aquired language in appropriate context. Moreover, the changes in the approaches and methods of language teaching have paved the way towards communication based language teaching ways rather than the traditional grammar focused methods. Since to be able to communicate, the speakers are needed to engage in the exchange of the knowledge, feelings and behaviours, they are required to be aware of the appropriateness, coherence and accuracy of the communication. This necessity has brought the notion of "communicative competence" into language learning and teaching process. As communicative competence focuses on both the knowledge of grammatical rules and of the rules to use language accurately and correctly in social context, it is seen as vital for communication. As a result of these new paradigms of teaching, suggesting to be able to use language properly at the right place and time clearly has enhanced the significance of culture teaching in language learning and teaching processes.

There has been numerous views about culture's place and ways of integrating it into language teaching. One of the available and probably the cheapest ways or resources so as to place culture in the classrooms is the language teacher who teaches the target language. The other mostly adressed source in order to integrate "culture" into teaching is coursebooks or coursebook packs offered by publishers although these may be considered as very limited for they may not provide rich enough opportunities to create a considerable variety in the classroom.

On one hand, several determinants of culture teaching regarding teachers in the classroom are obviously teachers' preferences on teaching or their choice of methods, their experience related to target culture and their desire to bring cultural values and aspects in with the language teaching aids such as videos, films or authentic texts. On the other hand, the chosen coursebooks with all their extra materials which come as ready-made packages for teachers play a role of guidance by shaping what aspects of culture will be taught, how culture will be included and how it will be presented during the process of learning and teaching.

When it comes to textbooks or coursebooks, the dominance of “high culture” which can be described as a culture belonging to a specific group and reflecting the norms of some people or emphasizing popularity of some qualities in a particular country has gradually become a prevalent but controversial issue for many educators and professionals. However, nowadays it is increasingly embodied in terms of cultural understanding towards others, current events, every day life of people rather than only the history, the art or the literature of a single country or the life of popular singers in course books. The idea which considers culture as not the reflection of celebrities or good points of nations has gained more importance among coursebook designs. Furthermore, the shift to communicative teaching ways has helped culture have “ a wider meaning” in itself, making it a much more desirable element of syllabuses and curriculums and this changed the notion of culture to a great extent. Thus, not only do recent EFL textbooks include materials designed to promote awareness of race, gender, and environmental issues, but these points are highlighted in the publishers’ promotional materials.(Hinkel,1999:208). In this sense, it can be clearly told that the notion of “culture” in today’s world with the help of publishers’ changed to meet the requirements of globalization.

Coursebooks have many advantages by supplying a route to follow, a system for progress and planned materials both for language teachers and learners. In terms of culture teaching, they can provide information about conventional behaviors of the target language, cultural connotations of words and phrases, chances to evaluate statements about a society to the learners. Moreover, course books can provide opportunities to use target culture before using it in real life. However, coursebooks can also have some disadvantages such as creating unequal cultural understanding, causing misinterpretations, idealizing some notions and ignoring facts, not presenting the roles or gender relations realistically. As a result, the divergence between the real life and the reflected life in coursebooks which can sometimes be oversimplified such as the openings and closings of a dialogue or speaking activities about greetings and farewells can be distractive. In other words, they may be undisputably good conversational practices but ignorance to the authenticity or naturalness gives no chance of difference and choice to the learners which causes superficial learning environment and as a result, this leads to ineffective learning and teaching process. Keeping this potentiality in mind, teachers need to be very careful in choosing their coursebooks or the materials they bring inside the classroom.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Design of the Study

A qualitative research has been conducted in the present study. Since the researcher tries to depict the perspective of the learners and teachers, descriptive research has been utilized.

2.2. Participants

This study has been implemented in Preparatory School of Foreign Languages in Namık Kemal University during the spring semester of 2009/2010 academic year. The study has been carried out with 15 English instructors including 4 male and 11 female instructors who have been using NEF in maincourse lessons and 35 students who are at B1 level of English. 23 of them were female and 12 were male. The main reason for choosing these students is the recognition that B1 level students have developed relatively higher awareness and understanding towards language learning when compared with students of A1 and A2 levels.

2.3. Instruments

In order to find answers for the research questions, an open ended interview has been conducted with 15 English instructors of Preparatory Programme in Namık Kemal University. Moreover, the views of 35 students have been taken via open ended interviews.

III. FINDINGS

The findings of the present study include qualitative data gathered from both students and English instructors through open ended interviews.

3.1. Findings from Qualitative Data Gathered from Students

- 91.5% of them stated that it is necessary to learn culture while learning a language. They emphasised the significance of meaningful communication and knowing societal norms and behaviours. 8.5% of them stated their concerns about the dangers of learning a culture through language.
- 97.2% the students believe that they will get abundant advantages by learning the culture of target language by means of language while 2.8% of them said that it causes people to lose their identity.
- 97.2% of them stated that their course books teach culture and cultural aspects whereas 2.8% of the students implied that they do not give cultural information, but a general knowledge of the world.
- 94.3% of the students mentioned that there are many parts in the coursebooks which include cultural elements while 5.7% of them thought that the coursebooks do not include any cultural components such as conventions, customs, beliefs.

3.2. Findings from Qualitative Data Gathered from English Instructors

- 86.7% of the instructors stated that social and cultural contexts can't be separated from language and with that reason teaching culture is one of the main components of the coursebooks whereas 13.3% of them implied that students may lose their national identity as a result of learning cultural values that belong to the target community.
- 86.7% of the instructors thought that coursebooks should teach culture while 13.3% of them believed that coursebooks should aim at teaching culture but to some extent.
- All of the instructors agreed that the coursebooks they use have numerous parts which are designed so as to teach culture and cultural aspects of the target language.
- 93.3% of the instructors mentioned that teachers should also support the coursebooks in terms of culture teaching by presenting some background information in courses to be able to create more awareness whereas 6.7% of them stated that teachers should not take any role of culture teaching or provide cultural information in language teaching process.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

It is one of the crucial necessities of our multicultural world to learn at least a second or foreign language to be able to be a part of it since there are no boundaries any more in the world for human beings as a result of globalization. It also requires people to be aware of the fact that the world is neither a monolingual land nor has a single culture. In this respect, it is important for both teachers and students to understand sociocultural values, norms and concepts of the target language in the learning and teaching process so as to be culturally competent in it. With these ideas in mind, the present study has tried to reveal the ideas of teachers and the students about the place of "culture" in language education and especially in course books they have been using. Additionally, the importance of integrating cultural components into language education has been discussed. 15 English instructors of Namık Kemal University and randomly chosen 35 B1 level of students from the Preparatory classes of Namık Kemal University have been the participants of this study. In order to obtain relevant data, interviews with instructors and open ended interviews with the students have been implemented.

Firstly, whether it is significant to integrate culture into language learning and teaching process have been tried to answer. The reflections from the students' interviews showed that nearly all of the learners have developed an understanding on the place and function of culture in language classes. They are aware that language use reflects the culture of its speakers and learning of a language together

with its culture increase their intellectually, general view of the world, and communicative competence. Some even expressed that learning target culture help to understand their own culture better. As Meyer says, "Intercultural competence includes the capacity of stabilising one's self-identity in the process of cross-cultural mediation, and of helping other people to stabilise their self-identity."(Meyer, 1991: 137) However, a small number of students expressed their fear about losing their own cultural values and also they do not see any reason for culture learning for knowledge of language is only a requirement of job.

Secondly, for the questions as to whether English language course books teach culture or not and what kind of observations about the culture they got from course books have indicated that students are in the idea that coursebooks have a teaching role in terms of culture. Although some students claim that just American and British cultures are included in course books and especially they got negative opinions about the characteristics of some nations, students mostly believe that it has a multicultural approach. Nevertheless, they also state that there is a very limited information about their own country and they wish to see more Turkish cultural elements in course books.

Next, the instructors views about teaching culture via coursebooks have been taken through interviews. The teachers were asked what they think about teaching "culture or cultural values" by means of course books. While many of the teachers stated it is a main part of language learning and teaching process emphasising on the interrelatedness of language and culture, some teachers expressed that they are not in favor of it as a result of the fear about unexpected results. Moreover, although the same teachers see language and culture as two different fields and so, they do not see any reasons for placing cultural values in course books, a great number of teachers agree the idea of culture teaching via coursebooks pointing out the importance of "communicative and cultural competence" in language. Furthermore, their opinions about course books which they have been using in maincourse classes were asked in order to identify whether course books includes culture teaching or not. All of them stated that coursebooks have a goal of teaching language together with cultural values which can be explicitly seen in certain texts, dialogs and parts such as "Social English" or "Practical English". Lastly, teachers are in the opinion that language and culture are two inseparable elements of language teaching. Also, culture make lessons more enjoyable, funny and effective providing difference, familiarity with language and motivation to the learners.

Considering the views of the learners and teachers, it can be explicitly stated that English coursebooks reflect not only international cultures but also target cultures. A focus on culture in course books has particular communicative objectives besides offering an intercultural competence development. Hence, a sensitive and careful approach should be taken by the teachers as it can create some misunderstandings and prejudices.

Therefore, it may be suggested that teachers, educators and especially course book publishers essentially need to develop a critical and an objective view towards coursebooks and their cultural components in order not to cause any misunderstanding or prejudices. Moreover, instead of putting particular English speaking countries into the centre of the coursebooks, they need to take a multicultural approach in order to create consciousness, sensitivity and understanding for the differences and similarities of the nations.

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