International Online Journal of Educational Sciences, 2014, 6 (2), 328-336

iojes
www.iojes.net

International Online Journal of Educational Sciences

ISSN: 1309-2707

Investigation of Cultural Elements in Coursebooks Developed for Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Received 20.02.2014
Received in revised form
02.06.2014
Accepted 22.06.2014
Available online
10.08.2014

ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language involves more than mastering the language in question linguistically. Since culture and language are inseparable in their essence, any coursebook developed for foreign language teaching should take into consideration the cultural aspects of the language to be taught. The current study aims to investigate two language coursebooks used for teaching Turkish as a foreign language in terms of cultural elements. Descriptive content analysis method was used to determine the cultural elements used in these books and inferences were drawn based on this analysis. The analysis demonstrated that both target and international cultural elements were used all throughout the coursebooks, the former with an overwhelming majority. However, it was concluded that despite the high frequency of cultural elements, they were not presented in depth. Moreover, the coursebooks neglected to present cultural elements with a comparative approach that may have a contributing effect on raising the cultural awareness of the students. The results were discussed and some suggestions were made to overcome the drawbacks in these coursebooks.

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Keywords:
culture; cultural awareness; coursebooks; language teaching materials; teaching Turkish as a foreign language

Introduction

Knowing a foreign language has been considered a vital issue, particularly in a world where communication is becoming more important than ever. Due to the continuously increasing importance of knowing a foreign language, scholars have been in search for better and more effective ways of teaching and learning a foreign language. Mitchell and Myles (2004) claimed that "language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (p. 235). Many scholars share Mithcell and Myles' ideas (e.g. Brown, 2000; Hedge, 2004; Jiang, 2000; Kramsch, 1993; Seelye, 1997; Swiderski, 1993). In this sense, teaching a foreign language, by not being aware of its close and intertwined relationship with culture, would be a frivolous effort. In other words, teaching a foreign language by adopting a culture-free approach may result in the production of meaningless messages in the target language by the learners of that language as "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003, p. 237). Therefore, it can be stated that "…the knowledge of a language's culture is though essential to a full understanding of a language's nuances and meaning…" (Holme, 2002, p. 212).

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15345/iojes.2014.02.007

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Culture and Foreign Language Teaching

It is hard to define culture since it is used in different contexts for a variety of purposes. Culture is "the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively"(Paige, et al., p. 177). In short, culture can be defined as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time" (Brown, 2000; 177). In this study, we define culture as a collection of all shared elements belonging to a certain society.

Many scholars claim that there is a very close relationship between culture and language (e.g. Brown, 2000; Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1993; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Teaching a foreign language by adopting a culture-free approach is futile since "ideas about language are ideas about culture, and ideas about culture concretely affect language teaching and language learning" (Swiderski, 1993, p.122).

Since communication is one of the main goals of knowing a foreign language, it is necessary that learners of a foreign language be aware of the culture-specific knowledge of that language. Successful communication can only be achieved by creating a learning and teaching atmosphere where learners of a target language are informed consciously about the culture of that language. Thus, developing just their linguistic knowledge is not adequate for them to become proficient in the target language (Krasner, 1999). Jiang (2000) suggests that teaching the target language in isolation from the culture of that language is not possible. Language learners should be aware of the differences and similarities between their culture and the culture of target language to learn the appropriate ways of using the target language, leading to a successful communication (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).

Knowing the culture of the target language is crucial for language learners to get the true meanings from that language and language learning should take place with a reference to its culture (Holme, 2002; Roberts et al., 2001). This knowledge can avoid the misunderstandings and eliminate the barriers resulting from the cultural differences while communicating in the target language; "failure to teach some aspects of culture could result in miscommunication, misinterpretation, and a major culture shock on the part of the students" (Krasner, 1999, p.87). In other words, teaching the culture of the target language to the learners helps them to think like a native speaker of that language (Stern, 1992). Language learners and all other people engaging in the business of language teaching should take into consideration that cultures have differences as well as similarities (Englebert, 2004). It is therefore necessary for any language learner to be aware of these differences and similarities in order to be competent in using the target language.

McKay (2003) claims that both linguistic and cultural knowledge should be learnt in order to be competent in the target language. Although being linguistically competent in a foreign language helps to establish good communication; without cultural competence, there will always be a fundamental flaw in that communication (Bada, 2000). According to Jiang (2000), people from different cultures can mean different things while using similar language. Moreover, learners having an interest in learning the culture of target language are typically perform better than other students in that language (Ellis, 1985). In foreign language teaching environments, we search for ways to arouse the interest of the students to the cultural elements of the target language and to make them linguistically and culturally competent in that target language.

Coursebooks as a Material for Foreign Language Teaching

In foreign language teaching, an impressive variety of materials is used. In his article, Tomlinson (2012) defines materials as "anything that can be used to facilitate the learning of a language, including coursebooks, videos, graded readers, flash cards, games, websites and mobile phone interactions, though, inevitably, much of the literature focuses on printed materials" (p. 143). Although there have been many changes in the materials used in language teaching, textbooks still have their place. Many scholars have considered the role of textbooks in language teaching as crucial (McGrath, 2006; Riazi, 2003; Richards, 2001) and they are used in most of the world as a language teaching material (Hutchison & Torres, 1994). According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), textbooks can be considered as "a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, and an ideology" (cited in Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung & Chung-Chieh, 2011, p.93). They help

language teaching programs to present the language content to the learners in an organized way (Richards, 2001).

Textbooks fulfill a variety of functions such as establishing a basis for the content, providing the language input for learners, helping the teachers' instruction, presenting a well-designed outline for the language course, and even helping inexperienced language teachers like a guideline (Richards, 2001). Moreover, learners can use textbooks outside the classroom for language study (Parish, 2004). Hutchinson and Torres (1994) claimed "no teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook" (p.315). In line with this, in many of language teaching settings, if not all, textbooks are used and it seems that they will be in the field of language teaching in some form despite some major changes.

Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language

In recent years, there has been a growing trend in teaching Turkish as a foreign language for a variety of reasons. The number of people wishing the learn Turkish as a foreign language is increasing in parallel with this trend. However, although there have been studies conducted for investigating different aspects of teaching Turkish as a foreign language (e.g. Apaydın 2007; Küçükler, 2010; Tarhan, 2005; Uysal, 2009; Ülker, 2007), these studies can be accepted as the starting point of a long and arduous *academic journey* since teaching Turkish as a foreign language has gained popularity in very recent years. Thus, there is actually a considerable need for more academic research on the topic.

In classes where Turkish is taught as a foreign language, books are the mainstay of teaching. Actually, books are the most common material for teaching a language in the world, at least for the time being. In Turkey, there are many books written for teaching Turkish to foreigners by both state and private institutions. Investigation of the effectiveness of these books in teaching Turkish in terms of many variables such as visuals, texts, lexical density, and assessment of learning is essential. As expressed before, culture is an inseparable part of language. Therefore, books for teaching Turkish as foreign language should be investigated in terms of cultural elements belonging to Turkish culture.

Purpose of the Study

Learning a foreign language in a culture-free approach by simply focusing on grammar and lexicon can lead to a breakdown in communication for a variety of reasons. In this context, it is expected that course books used for foreign language teaching should include cultural elements of the target culture. As indicated in the literature, culture and language complement one another. Moreover, in addition to the target culture, coursebooks for foreign language education should adopt a contrastive approach between the culture of the target language and culture of other languages to raise cultural awareness more effectively. This study aims to investigate the frequency of cultural elements in a book series developed for teaching Turkish as a foreign language. In line with this aim, the study attempts to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. Do the coursebooks analyzed in this study include cultural elements related to Turkish culture?

2. Do the coursebooks analyzed in this study include cultural elements related to cultures other than Turkish culture?

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the cultural elements in a book series used for teaching Turkish as a foreign language. To this end, descriptive content analysis method was employed. According to Krippendorff (2004), "content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p.18). In this study, the analysis of the coursebooks in terms of cultural elements was limited to the written content included in these books.

The Material

The coursebooks developed by Gazi University Tömer based on The European Language Portfolio (ELP) are for A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 levels. From these coursebooks A1, A2 level (Basic Level) two books were

selected for the content analysis (see Table 1). All the selected coursebooks address adults and young adults who want to learn Turkish as a foreign language.

Table 1. Information about the Selected Coursebooks

Name	Level	Publisher	Publication Date
Yabancılar İçin Türkçe	A1 Basic Level	Gazi University TÖMER	2013
Yabancılar İçin Türkçe	A2 Basic Level	Gazi University TÖMER	2013

The first book, *Yabancılar İçin Türkçe A1 Basic Level*, consists of six chapters. Each chapter has sub-sections related to the title of the chapter as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Layout of the Selected Coursebooks (A1 Basic Level)

Chapters	Title	Subtitles
Chapter 1	MERHABA	Ben ve arkadaşlarım
		Ben kimim?
		O Nasıl Biri?
		Evim ve Çevrem
Chapter 2	NEREDE NE ZAMAN NASIL	Hayat Nasıl Gidiyor?
		Tadı Damağımda
		Öğrenciler Alışverişte
		Ben çok hastayım
Chapter 3	DİKKAT	Otogarda
		Hastanede
		Cadde ve sokaklar
		İçinde ne var
Chapter 4	TEKNİK İŞLEMLER	Sevgili günlük
		Kumbara bankası
		Kahve molası
		Yeni tarife
Chapter 5	NASIL GİDERİM	Şaka
		Anıtkabir ziyareti
		Hakanın Yurttaki İlk günü
		Kapadokya Yolu
Chapter 6	İLETİŞİM KURUYORUM	Kutlama Mesajları
		ÇokYaşa!
		Mesajınız var!
		Güzel bir günün sonunda

The second book, *Yabancılar İçin Türkçe A2 Basic Level,* consists of five chapters. Each chapter has sub-sections related to the title of the chapter as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Layout of the Selected Coursebooks (A2 Basic Level)

Chapters	Title	Subtitles
Chapter 1	HABERİN VAR MI?	Haberler
		İhsan Oktay Anar'ın Son Kitabı Çıktı
		Hava durumu
		Bir köşe yazısı
Chapter 2	BU BENİM DÜNYAM	Mektubunuz var
		Kargonuz var!
		Çömlekçilik kursu
		Sudaki resimler
Chapter 3	DURMA KEŞFET	Küçük Bilim İnsanları
		Ehliyetsiz Kimse Kalmasın
		Gezelim Görelim
		En iyi Arkadaşım evleniyor
Chapter 4	HAYATI ÖĞRENİYORUZ	Görüntülü Telefon görüşmesi
		Film Başlıyor
		E-posta hesabım
		Bu Nasıl Çalışır?
Chapter 5	OKUYALIM VE ÖĞRENELİM	Sabiha Gökçen
		Uzun ömrün sırları
		Üniversiteye ilk adım
		Yedigöller

Data Analysis

As aforementioned, descriptive content analysis was conducted to investigate the cultural elements in the selected coursebooks developed by Gazi University Tömer for adults and young adults who want to learn Turkish as a foreign language. The main purpose of the content analysis was the frequency calculation of the cultural elements in the selected books. These books were investigated in terms of cultural elements, the results obtained from the document survey were analyzed, and frequencies of the cultural elements were presented in tables for inferences. The researchers independently identified cultural elements and agreed on 95% of the cultural elements and the remaining 5% of undecided elements were resolved through discussion. Moreover, the results were reviewed by three experts from the field of Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language to verify the creditability of the analysis.

For the calculation of the frequencies of cultural elements in the selected books, each cultural element was calculated with their multiple uses. Moreover, recurring cultural elements were also calculated as single units for the comparison purposes. The reason for adopting such an approach in calculation was that simply presenting the number of cultural elements with multiple uses could result in drawing hasty conclusions.

Cultural elements related to Turkey were accepted as target culture. Since the books have not been developed for learners belonging to a specific country, the researchers decided not to use a category for home culture. Instead of the term home culture, the term international culture was used for cultural elements belonging to cultures other than the Turkish culture. Moreover, the wide variety of the origins of the students learning Turkish as a foreign language by using the books in question (ex: China, Moldova, Sudan, Syria, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh etc.) justifies such an approach adopted by the researchers. The great variety in the origins of the students made it difficult for the authors to focus on every culture in the books, so an international approach was adopted to analyze the possible uses of cultural elements in the books.

Results

Findings acquired from the document analysis show that an overwhelming majority of cultural elements in the books (89%) belong to target culture as seen in Table 4. As far as international culture is considered, the frequency of cultural elements is quite low (11%) when compared to cultural elements belonging to target culture. The overwhelming majority of target culture elements can be understandable since the aim is to teach Turkish to foreigners. However, the findings could be quite misleading when we just concentrate on the multiple uses of cultural elements used in the coursebooks. The repetition of the same cultural element more than once should be calculated as one, since nothing different was expressed with each use of the same cultural element. For instance, there were 9 uses of Anıtkabir and 13 uses of Nemrut in the books. For this reason, in order to make more reasonable inferences about the data, only one use of each cultural element in the books were taken into consideration.

Table 4. Frequency of Cultural Elements in terms of Multiple Use

Coursebook	Target Culture (Turkish)	International Culture	Total
A1 level+A2 Basic Level	1761 (89%)	218 (11%)	1979

When only a single instance of each cultural element is taken into consideration (see Table 5), an overwhelming majority of cultural elements in the books (88%) belong to the target culture. As far as international culture is concerned, the frequency of cultural elements is quite low (12%) when compared to cultural elements belonging to target culture. We can say that, particularly for target culture elements, authors of the coursebooks in question paid attention to using cultural elements belonging to the target culture in the development process of these books. However, it could be again misleading when only the frequency of cultural elements is considered while deciding whether a coursebook serves to raise cultural awareness among students; culture is not just related with the calculation of cultural elements simply with numbers.

Table 5. Frequency of Cultural Elements in terms of Single Use

Coursebook	Target Culture (Turkish)	International Culture	Total
A1 level+A2 Basic Level	472 (%88)	63 (12%)	535

The overall analysis shows that overwhelming majority of cultural elements in the coursebooks belong to the target culture in terms of both multiple and single uses. However, as stated before, deciding whether a language coursebook is sensitive to raising cultural awareness among students cannot be justified simply the calculation of the frequency of cultural elements in that book. We believe that providing detailed information about a cultural element by adopting a neutral approach is of great importance for students to understand the culture of that society. The books in the current study ignore this reality and provide cultural elements mostly superficially. There are very few exceptions in the analyzed books. For instance, in a dialogue where Safranbolu houses are introduced, there is detailed information about these houses. The dialogue includes the description of the houses and deer horns in the houses believed to bring luck by the owners of the houses (In A2 Basic Level book, p. 89). There are two more instances of such a detailed description about cultural elements; pottery (in A2 Basic Level book, p. 30) and Turkish paper marbling (in A2 in Basic Level book, p. 34).

In a language coursebook developed for foreign language teaching, it is rational for any book to include cultural elements in a comparative way. In other words, foreign language coursebooks should include texts comparing the target culture elements without being critical to those of elements belonging to the learners' own culture. The comparisons should be made by being neutral in order to avoid describing one culture as superior to the other one or vice versa. Throughout the coursebooks analyzed in the current study, no such comparisons were found, making the existence of cultural elements in these books superficial.

Discussion and Conclusion

As pre-mentioned, the current study aimed to investigate whether two coursebooks used for teaching Turkish as a foreign language include cultural elements. Based on the findings, it can be said that the books include cultural elements belonging to target culture and international culture. Although the number of target culture elements (Turkish) is overwhelmingly greater than those of international culture elements, we believe that the dominance of cultural elements in terms of the frequency does not prove that a coursebook raises cultural awareness of the students in the target language they learn. Drawing conclusions simply based on the number of cultural elements is certainly misleading since numbers of cultural elements without detailed information about them cannot help the learners to obtain adequate information about the culture of that society.

In the coursebooks analyzed in the current study, despite the adequate number of cultural elements in terms of the target language culture, very few detailed information about those elements were found. In other words, the books approach cultural elements related to both target culture and international culture superficially. However, in order to raise cultural awareness among the learners of foreign language, in this context Turkish, it is important to give adequate information about the Turkish cultural elements used in the books investigated. There may be *cultural spots* giving more detailed information about a cultural element that is mentioned superficially in a reading text in the coursebook.

Another important point in raising cultural awareness is to adopt a comparative approach while presenting the cultural elements in the coursebooks. According to Byram (1997), encouragement of the language learners to make comparisons between their home culture and target culture serves culture learning. In his study aiming to evaluate the *Yeni Hitit Yabancılar için Türkçe* coursebook series from the cultural transmission perspective, Yılmaz (2012) found that the first and second book in the series include a wide variety of cultural comparisons in the form of questions in the writing and speaking sections. In the *Hitit* series, a similar approach was adopted (Ülker, 2007). However, in the coursebooks analyzed in this study, there were no comparisons of any cultural elements related to Turkish culture with those of international cultures. This may result in lacking of a deep understanding of the target culture by the

learners, causing to learn the language ineffectively and creating misunderstanding for the learners while using the language particularly in communicative settings. Without any comparisons between the cultures, it is not easy for the language learners to learn the foreign language effectively, particularly for communicative purposes. This may be seen a serious flaw of the books analyzed in the current study. When learners are provided with opportunities to compare a cultural element in the target culture with that of their own culture, they may deepen their understanding of the foreign language they aim to learn.

In a foreign language course, instruction should be given by adopting a holistic approach including both linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language. Foreign language coursebooks should adopt a neutral approach while presenting the target culture. Focusing entirely the cultural elements of the target language in a biased manner may face resistance from the students. Therefore, adopting a comparative approach in terms of cultural elements in the coursebooks without being critical one another may be a more realistic approach, creating a more comfortable language-learning atmosphere.

Some of the recommendations while developing a foreign language coursebook, in this case Turkish, are as follows:

- Texts should include culture-specific topics rather than presenting mostly *pure facts*.

- Comprehension questions related to the text should give students the opportunity to compare the target culture and their home culture.

- *Culture Spot* sections should be added to the end of each chapter in the coursebooks to raise the awareness of the students to the culture of the language they are learning.

- Speaking and writing sections of the coursebooks should include subjects that allow students to compare their own cultures with the target culture.

- More coursebooks should be developed for teaching Turkish paying special attention to the learners' nationality since presenting international culture elements in addition to the Turkish culture may prevent the learners to compare the cultural elements of the target culture with those of their own cultures.

- Turkish coursebook developers should develop a guidance accompanying the main coursebook for language teachers on how to use the book in their lessons by putting special emphasis on the cultural elements.

The results of the current study indicated some important conclusions that may be useful for the development of coursebooks aiming to teach Turkish as a foreign language in the future. It is clear that high frequency of cultural elements in a coursebook does not mean that the book in question serves to raise cultural awareness of the learners in the target language. Moreover, an approach in which the target culture and the learners' culture are compared neutrally should be adopted to provide learners ideal opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the target language. This study was limited to the investigation of cultural elements in the coursebooks in question. The other books in the series may be investigated in further studies. Future studies may also include views of teachers and students using these books in terms of cultural aspects included in the books.

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