

**Investigating the Intercultural Competence in  
English Textbooks:  
The Algerian Middle School “My Book of English-  
Year Four” as a Case to the Point**

التحقيق في الكفاءة بين الثقافات في كتب اللغة الإنجليزية:

المدرسة الجزائرية "كتابي للغة الإنجليزية للسنة الرابعة متوسط" كدراسة حالة

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Rec. Day : 03/12/2019	Acc. day: 27/05/2020	Pub. day: 15/09/2020
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**Abstract :**

This descriptive research aims at exploring intercultural competence in 2<sup>nd</sup> generation textbook of English at the level of middle school fourth Grade. After reading the literature and clarifying related concepts about intercultural competence, a couple of questions are set to explore the existence or non-existence of this competence in the aforementioned book. A content analysis was then conducted through an adapted checklist on the textbook in use. The results showed that the textbook deals partially with some components of intercultural competence whilst the other components are still less considered. Accordingly, recommendations were suggested as complementary remediation to the encountered lacunas.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Competence, Textbook Evaluation, Culture and Language, EFL in Algeria, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Textbook.

ملخص البحث

تم إجراء هذا البحث الوصفي لاستكشاف الكفاءة بين الثقافات في الجيل الثاني من كتاب اللغة الإنجليزية للطور المتوسط، وبالتحديد في السنة الرابعة. بعد قراءة الأدبيات وتوضيح المفاهيم

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ذات الصلة حول الكفاءة بين الثقافات، تم طرح ثلاثة أسئلة لاستكشاف وجود أو عدم وجود هذه الكفاءة في الكتاب المذكور أعلاه. تم بعد ذلك إجراء تحليل للمحتوى من خلال قائمة مرجعية ملائمة للكتاب الدراسي المستخدم. أوضحت النتائج أن الكتاب المدرسي يحتوي جزئياً على بعض مكونات الكفاءة بين الثقافات في حين لا تزال المكونات الأخرى أقل اعتباراً، وقد تم اقتراح مجموعة من التوصيات من كعلاج مكمل للنقائص التي قابلناها خلال دراستنا  
**كلمات مفتاحية:** اللغة؛ الثقافة؛ كفاءة التفاعل بين الثقافات؛ الكتاب المدرسي؛ كتب الجيل الثاني



## 1. Introduction

Globalization has changed the way we communicate. The direct and/or virtual contact between people from different cultural backgrounds led to a further investigation in the academic arena to identify the parameters that tune-up our communication. This dialogue, henceforth, is not only between individuals, but it goes beyond to encompass a dialogue between cultures, making thereafter the nowadays communication take an intercultural dimension (Busse, 2014). In this line of thought, the word intercultural started to echo in the field of language teaching due to the interwoven relationship between language and culture (Brown, 1994). This inquiry mirrored on the EFL settings in general, and textbooks in particular.

Additionally, the importance of textbooks for the learner and the teacher alike makes the Algerian official authorities, namely the ministry of education, take their evaluation as inevitable feedback to improve their content as to meet the current needs of the country in terms of globalization (Thaâlibi, 2006)

As an extension of these reforms, the Algerian ministry of education has published a series of textbooks devoted to the primary and middle school levels. These materials were claimed to modernize the educational sector and promote learners' autonomy (Merrouche, 2006). These textbooks were commonly named: second generation textbooks. English, as a middle school subject, has 4 textbooks by now, entitled "My book of English".

The fourth book of this series which is intended for fourth year is the case for our study.

## **2. Rational of the research**

The field of teaching foreign languages in general, and English in particular, is witnessing increasing attention to intercultural competence (Willems, 2002). The researchers, in this sense, think that it is important to investigate the situation of this competence in the Algerian educational settings, and more precisely the textbook of English year four.

Accordingly, this descriptive study was conducted through content analysis to bridge theory with practice. That is to say, the researchers want to shed light on the compatibility of the cultural content of the textbook in use with the requirements of intercultural competence.

## **3. Research problem**

Indeed, textbooks are considered as "...a visible heart of any English language teaching program" (Ait Aissa, 2018, p. 162). As such, there should have been a plethora of works dealing with the evaluation of textbooks in terms of their cultural content and their effect on developing learner's intercultural competence.

In Algeria, however, second-generation textbooks have appeared since 2016 and little work has been conducted to address their Interculturality. It is high time, then, to put these textbooks under scrutiny after 3 years of existence.

## **4. Research questions**

The present study tries to answer the following questions:

- Does the book cover cultural topics from the small c and the big c aspects of culture in each sequence?
- Does the book address the source, the target, and the international culture with the same perspective?
- Does the book include activities that promote skills and attitudes related to Byram's intercultural model?

## **5. Background of the study**

### **5.1. The role of culture and language in communication**

Successful communication between two individuals depends by and large on many factors among which language mastery is a must, but not the only factor per se. The knowledge

about the social context is fundamental, as well, in as much to real-life communication (Savignon, 2018). Knowing the social settings would tune the intended meaning between the interlocutors in the real context which according to Kramsh (2013) is nothing but culture. Moreover, the permanent shift from linguistic competence to communicative competence and later to intercultural communicative competence highlights the fact that the awareness about cultural context is of a paramount role to achieve successful communication in realistic situations.

However, the cultural contexts in real-life situations may show some limitations of mutual understanding, mainly due to cultural differences. This could represent a serious obstacle for the interlocutors. Alpetkin (2002) argued, in this regard, that a lack of positive attitudes towards the other's culture may lead the communication to fail. Similarly, if the communicator is not skillful enough to interpret the cultural contrasts and differences, he will have a culture shock which leads to an eventual misunderstanding or even a conflict with the other (Alpetkin, 2002).

Hence, it would be of clear evidence that culture and language are interrelated, not just in their theoretical definition, but also in the practical field where communication takes place. This relationship has received particular attention in human sciences, particularly in the field of language teaching where it is claimed that neither the language nor the culture can stand on its own to assure communication (Brown, 1994).

## **5.2. Concepts of culture in the language class**

Pedagogically speaking, teachers may be confronted with many concepts related to the word "culture". Concepts such as categories of culture, types of culture, and critical thinking about culture, are hereby, worth defining:

### **5.2.1. Types of culture:**

The cultural topics discussed in class could shape a wide spectrum starting from the macro-level (Big c culture) like a simple discussion about historical events, geographical facts, literature, and music to end with the micro-level (small c culture) where the class participants discuss the very minor themes such as

table manners and greeting conventions (Xiao, 2010 ).

### 5.2.2. Categories of culture

In their classroom, learners could be exposed to cultural topics that are derived from their culture, that is to say the source culture, or they can be exposed to a foreign culture that we refer to as the target culture. In our case, the Algerian culture with its Big c and small c aspects is considered as the source culture, whereas the target culture will encompass the British and American cultures along with other cultures since English has been denationalized as far as culture is concerned. In this line of thought Alpetkin (2002) writes:

Given the lingua franca status of English, it is clear that much of the world needs and uses English for instrumental reasons .....How relevant, then, are the conventions of British politeness or American informality to the Japanese and Turks, say, when doing business in English? p61.

### 5.2.3. Critical thinking in teaching culture

In addition to the previous principles about culture teaching, the teacher has to make sure that his teaching of culture involves critical thinking about the cultural phenomenon to be taught.

In this sense, Moran (2001) sets four critical thinking questions for a successful culture course:

- what the cultural phenomenon is;
- How it is practiced;
- why it is practiced and;
- The self-awareness and self-positioning towards that cultural phenomenon.

Also, topics dealing with comparing source and target culture similarities and differences seemed to raise learners' cultural sensitivity which is attained by dealing with different, sometimes opposite, assumptions, beliefs and values (Alptekin, 1993).

However, it has been noticed that teachers tend to approach culture in its Big c aspects as they teach geographical and historical facts, political or economic information, they also focus

on the literary works such as novels and poems; but rarely do they go in-depth ( small C culture) of the target culture to address the beliefs, costumes, assumptions, values, and the rest of the cultural ingredients that are the preliminary factors that develop perceptions and attitudes towards the other (Cortazzi, 1999).

Therefore, it is preferably suggested that cultural contents in language teaching should cover the source culture of the learner, the target culture of the country where the target language is the first language and the international target culture where the target language is used as a lingua franca and this is in terms of big and small c aspects of culture.

### 5.3. Intercultural competence

While culture has endless definitions in social sciences, it is considered by some scholars as a systematic inherited way of interpretation of social patterns dealing with beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideas (Errington, 1990). In this sense, the word interpretation is a key-word in regard to our topic, since it paves the way faithfully to deal with culture as a living unit with which we can interact and interpret culture as it is rather than it is supposed to be.

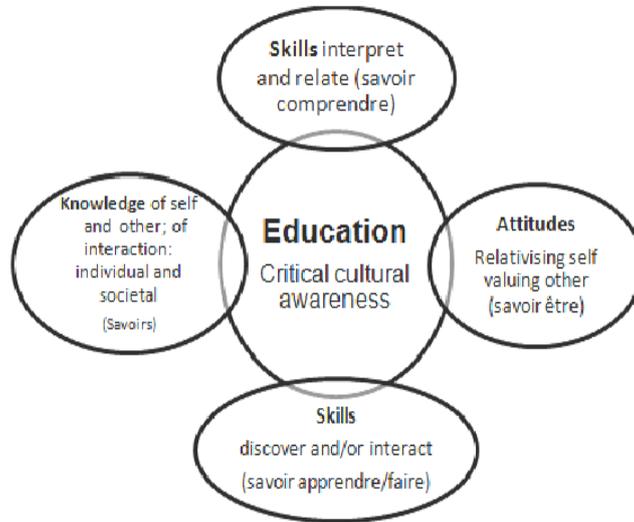
Byram (1997) came up with his model (figure 01) of intercultural competence where he suggested five (5) 'savoirs' to perform it.

According to Byram these savoirs are:

- Savoirs: the knowledge about oneself and other big C and small C culture.
- Savoir-être: the attitude of being keen on discovering the other with an open mind.
- Savoir comprendre: skills of interpreting cultural differences and similarities .
- Savoir faire/apprendre: skills of making use of the knowledge to communicate with the other.
- Savoir s'engager: skills of evaluating the other's culture and valuating it with respect and tolerance.

The Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence supports Errington's (1990) definition of culture that was used earlier since the proposed skills and attitudes are of an interpretive

essence along with the sufficient knowledge about the target culture. Similarly, the components of Byram's intercultural competence raise the critical cultural awareness suggested earlier by Moran (2001).



**Fig.1. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence**

In other words, Intercultural competence in language education/teaching (as figure1 illustrates) is nothing but that critical thinking and awareness in as much to the categories and types of culture. It fosters, thus, the learner to develop attitudes and skills to deal with eventual issues when two cultures are in contact.

#### **5.4. The cultural content in Textbooks**

In language teaching and especially EFL context, the abovementioned realistic communication with the other is mainly assured by a virtual contact through textbooks that offer virtual cultural windows for the learner. Indeed, textbooks are of a primordial role for both the teacher and the learner. First, for the teacher, textbooks represent adapted materials where texts, pictures, audio scripts, and activities are presented in a systematic way. Teachers also consider textbooks as reliable tools to prepare their learners for official exams, since these teaching materials are

designed according to the national curriculum. Second, the learners see in the textbook a teacher that accompanies them home and a friendly trainer that helps them prepare their next lessons (Cortazzi, 1999, p. 199). It is, thus, inevitable that the intercultural dimension of culture that is to be taught through different topics should find its way to textbooks.

In this respect, scholars and academics classified textbooks according to their cultural content in various ways. For example, textbooks are said to be one-dimensional, if they take the target culture as their core cultural content (Dubin & Lezberg, 1986). The discussion of similarities and contrast between the target and the source culture in this kind of books cannot occur without the intervention of the teacher. The teacher would support the cultural content of these teaching materials by critical thinking questions; for example: "...these are the British outfitting costumes at weddings, discuss yours" (Dubin & Lezberg, 1986, p. 48). The two-dimensional textbooks, by contrast, encourage intercultural understanding. They deal with culture-related themes from two different perspectives, thus stimulating both comparison and contrast between the target and the source culture (Dubin & Lezberg, 1986).

Moreover, Newby (1997) categorized textbooks into two categories as far as the cultural content is concerned: the first category encompasses the international textbooks which are produced generally for autonomous learners; they discuss cultural topics regardless of the source or the target culture. They may emphasize specific or general cultural facts and orientations, mainly tourism-oriented lessons. The second category is the locally produced textbooks whose authors are generally non-native speakers. The local textbooks, by contrast to international textbooks, introduce a local perspective to related cultural topics. Furthermore, local textbooks promote learners to develop their self-awareness about their cultural patterns and comparing them to others.

From what has been stated in the previous paragraphs, we can say that a textbook is intercultural relevant, if it addresses topics from big c culture and small c culture, and if it provides, as

well, the learner with critical thinking activities about the similarities and differences existing between the learners' culture (source culture) and the other's (target culture). Local textbooks, in this sense, seem to have a more intercultural essence than their international counterparts.

In the Algerian settings of language teaching, one can say that the textbooks of English in the Algerian educational system in general, and middle school in particular, have undergone a series of adaptations and reformulations in this regard. The textbooks dealing with foreign languages, namely English, are often bi-dimensional. The shift in the ideology of the textbook designers in Algeria was perceived in the proclivity to teach cultural themes in "my book of English; 2nd generation textbook" which replaced "on the move" and 'spotlight' in which the focus was on developing the linguistic and the communicative competence (Merrouche, 2018).

Appeared in 2016, the 2nd generation textbooks go in harmony with the competency-based approach principles, the cultural content, on its part, is claimed to be richer and more diversified according to the authors. The contents of the books are devised in a series of sequences each sequence starts with "Me and..." which would raise self-awareness, a key stage in intercultural competence. In each sequence, culture is addressed in a series of activities. No separate section, however, addresses culture in isolation. This research is concerned with one of these textbooks: My Book of English-Year4.

## **6. Research methodology**

The current study is mainly descriptive since it aims at exploring intercultural competence in the second generation textbook of English intended for the fourth-year middle school level. As such, we opted for a content analysis procedure. The content of the book will be analyzed following an adapted checklist based on a combination of three reliable checklists: First, Chen's (2009) checklist for exploring Big c and Small c cultural themes, then Cortazzi's (1999) checklist for categorizing culture into source culture, target culture and international culture. Finally, the checklist draws its main hubs from Byram's (1997)

model of intercultural competence components.

The researchers opted for Checklists as a content analysis tool since they are said to be the most effective tool in evaluating textbooks in a systematic way (McGrath, 2002). Moreover, the choice of Byram's model for analyzing the intercultural representation is due to the fact that it is recognized as the most compatible in intercultural studies according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (2001).

The checklist to be used considers intercultural competence in its three components:

**a-Knowledge** about the source (Algerian) ,target culture(UK and USA) and international cultures (countries in which English is used as a second language). The checklist also took into account the two types of culture with their big c and small c aspects,

**b-Skills** related to interpreting, interacting, relating and evaluating: these skills are reinforced through tasks, texts, images or any other activity that promotes learner's reflection and/or critical thinking about the differences and similarities that might exist between the source and the target culture.

**c-Attitudes** towards the other i.e. whether the textbook includes cultural contexts in which the learner may change his cultural perception or acceptance of the other's values and norms.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1. knowledge

The authors of the book confirm in their preface that the book helps the learners to develop their cultural knowledge through three main hubs (Tamrabet, 2019, p. 3):

- Learning about figures and places in Algeria and the world;
- Drawing lessons from the experiences of a number of prominent personalities at the national and international level;
- Developing a sense of citizenship through identifying the cultures of others.

From the first glance, these hubs seem to go in line with the principles of intercultural competence for the authors took into account the national and the international levels. Indeed, the

cultural content of the textbook covered a wide range of cultural topics. Sequence 01 of the book dealt with 17 cultural topics of a big C aspect; ranging from landmarks, famous figures in Arts, history, and literature. Some authentic materials were presented as well at the end of the sequence. The source culture represented 35% of the total topics, the target culture represented only 17% while international culture represented almost half (48%) of the cultural content. The distribution of these topics in culture categories (target and non-target) was quite reasonable.

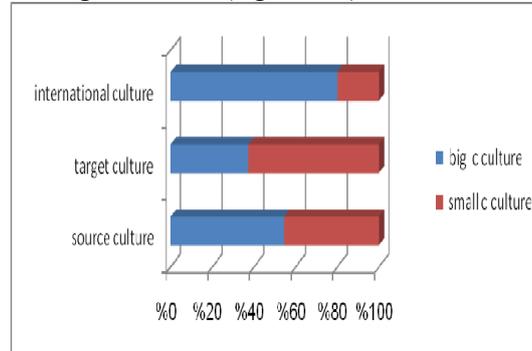
The relative presence of the source culture may reflect the author's intention to raise the learner's awareness about his own perception of the world or (his world). That is to say, the learner would have an insight into his society's values, assumptions, and history. The learner is supposed to consider Algerian landmarks, figures and other culture-related themes as an international heritage. Nonetheless, the Algerian figures presented in the sequence were stereotyped under two categories: males in terms of gender, writers in French in terms of linguistic background.

Concerning the target culture, we can feel that the textbook authors do not take the British or American culture as an exclusive medium to teach English in a cultural context since it represented only 17% of the cultural content in sequence 01. The target culture was depicted under some tasks dealing with means of transport (double-decker bus) and a famous British landmark (Big Ben). Added to that, the American culture has been neglected either in its small c or big c aspect.

Surprisingly, international culture represented almost half (48%) of the cultural content. The sequence dealt with many landmarks and figures from different countries, namely Turkey, Spain, Italy, and China. This would encourage learners to discover new values and new facts about the other. Yet, the small c culture was not sufficiently covered in sequence 01. This may be due to the nature of the first sequence which deals with famous landmarks and figures in Algeria and the world.

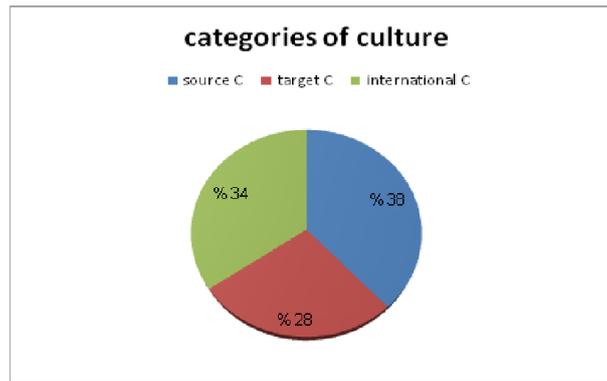
Sequence 02 and 03 dealt with 12 small c cultural topics, ranging from people's lifestyle in the world to life issues, citizenship, community, and the like. The distribution of these

topics was as follows: the source culture represented 41%, the target culture 41% and international culture represented only 18%. Moreover, unlike sequence 01, the small c culture topics had been dealt with little consideration with respect to international cultures. The dominant categories, hereby, is the source and the target culture (figure 02).



**Fig.2. Distribution of cultural types through culture categories in the textbook**

Nonetheless, there has been perceived a maladjustment concerning the distribution of cultural types with cultural categories. In other words, international culture was largely represented under a big C perspective while only the source culture had homogeneity in this regard. The textbook in use seems to have covered different types of culture, and in different categories, which is primordial for a textbook to offer an intercultural context for the learner to study English as a lingua franca of the world. The distribution of the different categories of culture is represented in figure (03)



**Fig.3. Distribution of culture categories in the textbook in use.**

## 7.2. Skills and attitudes

Although the diversity of the cultural content of the textbook that was perceived above in terms of types and categories, the content analysis that was conducted following the above-mentioned checklist showed that few tasks and activities were devoted to raising learner's awareness about any eventual difference that might exist between the learner's culture and the other's culture.

Some tasks, however, have been noticed to encourage learners to reflect upon their culture by relating to other cultures. The skill of evaluating other cultures is not enhanced by any activity or task. Still, some texts related to colonialism are felt to be implicitly leading learners to compare some cultural phenomena but eventually making stereotypes instead of comprehending the other.

Attitudes were implicitly dealt with through instilling universal values: this is what the authors of the textbook write in the part 'I learn to integrate', which is meant to evaluate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For example, valuing travel as a source of knowledge about the world. Another attitude that could be felt in sequence two is the fact of being aware about the influence of other people on one's character, personality, and dreams. Through sequence three, texts and tasks seem to promote (as the authors claim) learner's sense of tolerance towards the

other by valuing a world culture based on respect and mutual understanding

To sum up, the findings of the study are presented in the table1 bellow.

**Table.1. Results of the study**

		Knowledge (Savoirs)			Tasks developing skills and attitudes	
Sequence	Source culture (Algeria)	Target cultures (Uk, USA)	International Cultures	Tasks/texts /activities encouraging Discovery, Openness...etc	Tasks /texts/activities fostering the skills of Interpreting, interacting and evaluating.....etc	
Frequency and percentage of culture related tasks, texts and images						
Big C elements Sequence 01	Architecture geography Famous figures in Art, literature and history	6 35%	3 17%	8 48%	0	1
	Example	Great mosque of Tlemcen Katebyacibe	Big ben Shakespear	Al-hambra palace Picasso		Task 52 p.21 Identifying the paintings of Picasso and Da vinci (interpreting docs in other cultures)
Small C elements Sequence 02 & 03	Life experiences beliefs, values, Community and citizenship	5 41%	5 41%	2 18%	0	1
	examples	Katebyacine Zohradhrif	Rosmary (USA) Brad pitt (USA)	Dewi(india) Yara (Palestine)		Relating school life texts(America, India, Algeria) Texts dealing with cultural issues: colonialism, prejudices, diversity, globalisationvs

## 8. Conclusion

In the field of language teaching, the cultural content that meets the communicational needs of learners of foreign languages should be reconsidered within an intercultural dimension. In other words, topics of big c culture are no more sufficient to tell about the real cultural context encountered either in the local or the

target community. Therefore, topics from small c culture should be taught with equal importance to big c cultural topics. Moreover, the learner has to develop skills and attitudes that enable him understand any cultural difference or similarity that could be felt in real cultural contact. For this particular motif, our study was conducted on one of the most effective materials in teaching foreign language i.e., the textbook.

After a content analysis, the textbook in use seemed to present some lacunas concerning the notion of intercultural competence components. While knowledge (savoirs) was reasonably covered; skills and attitudes (savoirs être, s'engager, apprendre, comprendre, faire) were implicitly targeted through few tasks along the sequences. The attitudes (openness, avoiding stereotypes and the like) were implicitly embedded in some tasks and documents (mainly texts).

### 9. Recommendations

Considering this research as a bridge between the theory (teaching theories, academic works) and practice (the textbook authors), The researchers drew some recommendations for EFL participants as to deal with the lacunas encountered for a better consideration of teaching culture in an intercultural dimension.

- The textbook designers are solicited to include tasks and activities that lead the learner to develop intercultural skills and attitudes when dealing with cultural themes. They may include activities, in the upcoming updates of the book, which lead the learners to ask questions about “why and how” a given cultural phenomenon is different here and there.

- Teachers are solicited to improvise intercultural activities in their lesson plans or create problem-solving-situations based on intercultural issues. The teachers may devote an amount of time in their sessions to explain some cultural facts that are different from the learners' practices and beliefs.

- Researchers are invited to conduct further research in the field, namely the evaluation of the 2nd generation textbooks, and especially in terms of intercultural competence.

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