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The Place of Literary Texts in Algerian EFL Textbooks

introduction

English as a foreign language is taught in Algeria as compulsory subject of mainstream education both at the Middle and at Secondary schools. The materials used are locally designed and reflect the country's adopted educational paradigm. The EFL textbooks, which are the main used materials, are actually subject to the Ministry of National Education approval. Every time, educational authorities introduce a reform of teaching approach or paradigm new textbooks are designed to reflect the change. The current paper accounts for a thorough evaluation of three EFL textbooks designed along three successive educational reforms in Algeria during the 1990's and 2000's. It looked at the teaching and cultural contents of Think it Over (1989), Comet (2001) and New Prospects (2007) with a special focus on the place of literary texts as tools for teaching the language and means of developing the learners' cultural competence. It adopted a mixed methods research design combining between quantitative and qualitative approaches. From the quantitative perspective, it looked at the development of the rate of the inclusion of literary texts in the three successive textbooks. Then, it adopted a qualitative systemic functional approach to the analysis of the reading texts to highlight the pedagogical value of those literary texts. The results were conclusive. On one hand, they showed a clear rise in the number of literary text included in the most recent textbook New Prospects (2007) compared to the two previous ones which favoured scientific texts. On the other hand, they highlighted the important role of literary texts in cultural contextualisation. These changes are mainly explained by the adoption of a new teaching paradigm, the competency-based language teaching, which targets developing learners' intercultural communicative competence. There are not only more literary texts but, they are selected from different cultural areas including works by British, American and African writers.

1. **Cultural Contextualisation in Think it Over Textbook**
- **Presentation of the Textbook**

   a) Name of the textbook: Think it Over

   b) Date of publication: 1989

c) Authors: Hocine MENASSERI, Yamina ASSELAH, Nadjia HAMDAD, Farida HANICHE, Rabea KADI, and Sadia TAHARBOUCHET.

d) Publishing House: Institut Pédagogique National (IPN), Alger

e) Type of the textbook: Locally designed material meant for teaching General English at Algerian Secondary Schools.

f) Target learners: all streams third year Secondary School learners (3°AS) preparing the Baccalaureate exam. The learners are pre-university students and aged (17/18) years old.

g) Teaching methodology: Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

Think it Over includes eight main reading texts which illustrate the themes developed by the eight teaching units of the textbook. These texts are the ones selected and used for teaching/learning reading skills. In other words, they are the texts both teachers and learners interact with, study, and discuss in the classroom. However, each teaching unit contains further reading passages included under the rubric *'Reading for Leisure'* which the learners are invited to read for their own pleasure. Taking into account this distinction in the role of the reading passages, our analysis is going to focus only on the eight main reading texts as they are the ones around which the learning/teaching activities are actually built. It is, indeed, these texts – more than any other aspect of the textbook – which bring the cultural issues into the forefront of the classroom in a context where the textbook was the main teaching material.

Most of the linguistic and cultural semiosis that takes place in the classroom results from the learners' interaction with these texts which are instances of Firstness to use Peirce's term.

- **Reading Texts' Context of Culture**

Relating to their context of culture the texts can be divided into culture-specific ones with topics explicitly highlighting a given culture and non culture-specific ones with topics relevant to universal issues going beyond any specific culture. Whilst text 1, text 3, and text 4 are culture-specific exemplifying the foreign target culture (C2) and deal respectively with British and American cultures the rest of the texts are non culture-specific and portray rather a universal culture (C3). The non culture-specific texts deal either with scientific facts such as text 2 which explain how memory functions from a neurological point of view or with global issues such as text 5 which deals with pollution as a global problem affecting all countries. In addition, most of the texts present culture as a combination of facts and meanings. They either provide a set of facts about the foreign target culture (C2) (e.g.; Text 3 which portrays the problem of juvenile delinquency in Britain and Text 4 which highlights the American supremacy on the field of science and technology), or a set of values and meanings prevailing in the foreign target culture

(e.g.; Text 1 which exemplifies British values and life style). Only Text 7 and Text 8 portray culture as a dialogue by considering the contact of different cultures through immigration issues and the content of mass media respectively.

2. **Comet's Textbook Linguistic Texts and their Cultural Contextualisation**

- **Presentation of the Textbook**

  a) **Name of the textbook**: *Comet*: a Communicative English Teaching Course Book for all Streams.

  b) **Date of publication**: 2001

  c) **Authors**: Abderrazzak BENZIAN, Habib BOUAKKAZ, Boubekeur Seddik HADJIDJ

  d) **Publishing House**: Institut Pédagogique National (IPN), Alger

  e) **Type of the textbook:** Locally designed material meant for teaching General English at Algerian Secondary Schools.

  f) **Target learners**: all streams third year Secondary School learners (3°AS) preparing the Baccalaureate exam. The learners are pre-university students and aged (17/18) years old.

  g) **Teaching methodology**: Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

- **Cultural Contextualisation in the Reading Texts**

Comet includes eleven main reading texts which illustrate the themes dealt with in each teaching unit. Like in *Think it Over*, these main reading texts are the ones around which all the teaching activities in the classroom take place. Each text is meant to illustrate the theme of the unit and include the language points required. The textbook, however, includes further reading passages the learners' are invited to read for their own pleasure but not study in the classroom. These texts fall into two categories according to their position in the textbook. The first category includes eleven texts which are part of the teaching units and used as further illustrations of the themes. The second category includes thirteen texts grouped at the end of the textbook under the heading of "More Reading Passages". Since only the main reading texts are actually used by the teachers and the learners as the centre of the learning teaching semiosis wherein the linguistic and cultural interaction takes place, our analysis is going to be restricted to the eleven texts. In fact, they can inform about the meaning making process that affects cultural issues in the classroom.

Like *Think it Over*, *Comet* also includes both culture-specific and non culture-specific texts. Actually, there are four culture-specific texts which explicitly aim at familiarizing the Algerian learners with typical aspects of the foreign target culture (C2). Therefore Text 1 tells about the speaker's corner in Hyde Park in London. It describes specific aspects of British culture including facts and values. Text 3 exposes the reasons which made English an

international language emphasizing the contributions of Britain and the United States of America to its supremacy. Text 4 illustrates the British humor as well as other cultural specificities using Shakespeare as an iconic figure. And Text 5 brings to the front the American economic supremacy and the scientific grounds on which it is based together with highlighting the values of the American dream.

The rest of the texts are non culture-specific and mainly refer to international culture (C3) even if in some illustrating examples they do refer to Western countries. They generally portray culture as facts and meanings. Text 2 for example deals with the importance of transportation to modern life explaining how important it is to mankind. Text 6 gives a user friendly non-specialist account of what a computer is and explains what are its main uses as well how it can facilitate the work of people be they engineers or businessmen. It also shows, in popular science style, what are the main components of computers referring both to hardware and software. Text 8 deals with the theme of automation and computation discussing both their positive and negative effects on the life of humans mainly as relates to issues of employment. Text 10 explains how the business letter is very important to all business affairs, describes its evolution though time as a writing genre, gives instructions about how to write an appropriate business letter, and provides examples of forms of address and salutations used in different countries (cultures). Text 11 describes the problem of pollution which all countries in the world face but which is often made more prominent in Western societies compared to other parts of the planet.

Text 7 and Text 9 are the only texts which portray culture as a dialogue and are the only texts kept from *Think it Over*. They show the contact of cultures either directly through issues of immigration or indirectly through the influence of mass media and cultural transmission. Text 7 belongs to the type of committed writing and deals with the danger of impoverishment of humanity's cultural heritage as a result of the cultural invasion faced by Third world countries. Whilst Text 9 deals with the problem of immigration and the cultural complexities it creates in Europe. It belongs to the field of humanities and conveys a socio-political discourse which attempts to understand the cultural and other difficulties immigrants and their children face in the host country taking France as an illustrative instance.

3. **Cultural Contextualisation in the Reading Texts included in New Prospects Textbook**

- **Presentation of the Textbook**
   a) **Name of the textbook**: *New Prospects*
   b) **Date of publication**: 2007
   c) **Authors**: Si Abderrahmane ARAB, Riche BOUTELDJA, and Mhammed BENSEMMANE

d) **Publishing House**: The National Authority for School Publications

e) **Type of the textbook** : Locally designed material meant for teaching General English at Algerian Secondary Schools

f) **Target learners**: all streams third year Secondary School learners (3°AS) preparing the Baccalaureate exam. The learners are pre-university students and are aged (17/18) years old.

g) **Teaching methodology**: Competency-Based Approach to Language Teaching

- **Cultural Contextualisation in the Reading Texts**

New Prospects includes six reading texts. Each text relates to the theme developed in the teaching unit it is extracted from and serves as an illustrative instance. In addition to the reading text, within each unit there is another text included under the rubric *'Reading and Writing'* and which serves for the development of the language skills. By the end of the textbook, there is a section which includes a resources portfolio with further reading texts. The latter are thematically grouped and related to the six teaching units. As in the two previous textbooks, the main reading text is the one that is used for study in the classroom constituting then the semiotic resource by means of which the cultural semiosis operating between the local and the foreign takes place. For this reason only these reading texts are going to be analysed in the following section.

The examination of the six reading texts' cultural components reveals that they present each a different conception of culture either as facts, as meanings, or as a combination of facts and meanings though not often as dialogue. Culture is then presented as historical fact, a set of shared values, facts and traditions determining stereotypes, practices and behaviours defining a life style, human achievements and scientific discoveries, and social attitudes and behaviours. In addition to this, they can be grouped into three categories translating distinct attitudes towards the type of cultural contents to include in foreign language teaching/learningmaterials.

The first category consists of materials that use the learners' local culture (C1) as a vehicle to teach the foreign language. An instance of this in New Prospects is well illustrated by text 1 which explicitly deals with the Algerian local culture. However, because it considers, culture as historical facts, it sets the Algerian local culture in the midst of other cultures in a kind of dialogue highlighting the positive influences of such diversity. Taken from an encyclopaedia the text mentions different ancient civilisations such as the prehistoric civilization of the Sahara, the Phoenician, the Roman, and the Ottoman civilizations. So even if concentrating on the learners' local culture (C1) or Self, this text cannot be said to favour

enculturation attitudes. On the contrary, it invites the learners to value their culture and see it as part of the human Culture.

The second category comprehends materials that favour the foreign target culture (C2) as a relevant context to teach the foreign language. In New Prospects this category is best illustrated by text 3 and text 6, extracted from The Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, and dealing respectively with culture as facts and traditions determining stereotypes and culture as social attitudes and behaviours specific to the target foreign culture as met in British and American societies. Though focussing exclusively on the target culture running the risk of creating in the learners acculturation attitudes justified by a desire to identify with the foreign cultural model, they are useful in breaking some assumed attitudes towards the Other's culture (C2). In fact, by setting the British and the American cultures in a contrasting stance the two texts help the learners to accept cultural diversity within the same English culture. This would help them get rid of stereotyped positions by which they view culture as a homogenous body of facts or behaviours common to all English language speaking countries.

More important than this, such texts would make the learners review their conceptions of culture and subsequently accept their local cultural diversity looking at it as a fact common to different cultures in the world. In other words, such content provides space for Small Cultures to be introduced into EFL teaching materials which generally favour the Large Culture.

The third category relies rather on universal themes representing trans-cultural materials (C3) as appropriate means to teach the foreign language within a cross-cultural perspective. Likewise, texts 2, 4, and 5 are the instances which correspond to such materials in New Prospects. These texts respectively look to culture as shared values (ethics), practices and behaviours (lifestyle), and human achievements and scientific discoveries. Therefore, these texts set the learners' in considerably fair contexts where they can recognise that fundamental human values underlie all cultures even if concrete practical aspects vary significantly from one social group to another. A further advantage of this type of texts is that they give the learners an opportunity to shape their own place (their third space) in the present world that is characterised by a growing globalisation. The latter requires, above all, intercultural competency to achieve cross-cultural understanding.

In the whole it appears that the three types of texts are included in New Prospects though the third category significantly outnumbers the first and the second ones. However, it is worth to note that in illustrating instances there is an explicit focus on the British and American cultures as compared to local culture and to the other English speaking countries (C4) which are not at all mentioned in the reading texts. The focus on the British and

American cultures incorporated within a universal dimension, in most of the texts, may be interpreted as a way to raise the learners' awareness about the target culture without getting them lost in the content of discourse. This is actually reinforced by Halliday's conception of

language as embedded in its cultural context and hence sustaining that learning a language implies the systematic learning of its underlying culture. All the texts are very didactic and distanced from the readers.

Conclusion

Taken as signs or semiotic resources the reading texts and the visual images used inthe three textbooks are either icons or symbols of the respective cultures they refer to. Inaddition they are relatively old and somehow outdated even if some of them deal with contemporary themes such is the case in NP (see Chapters 7 and 8). This tendency translates a longing for the past ideology where old materials are associated with values of correctness,authenticity and legitimacy.

A further important finding is that within the three textbooks culture as a pedagogiccomponent mainly in culture-specific texts and most of illustrating images is conceived as Large culture (Holliday, 1999) based on an ethnographic view generally identifying one country with one culture. It is also presented as essentialist identifying a given social (or even national) group who share common practices, language, and meanings.

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