

Investigating Cultural Elements in the 8th Grade English Coursebook and Teacher Reflections

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Abstract

English has been considered an international language for a relatively long term and learning a second language has become prominent in most parts of the world. Thus, countries have been developing their own ways of teaching this language to their citizens. Of these, the most prevalent one is to prepare local English coursebooks according to the specific countries' contexts and needs, since most language classrooms around the world are known to be heavily coursebook-oriented. For this particular reason, there has been a myriad of studies focusing on coursebook analysis. Considering this indispensable role of the coursebooks, constantly investigating the current books prescribed by the Turkish Ministry of Education has a huge value because these books are expected to be updated regularly. Envisaging these conditions, this study aims to analyze the books that are used in the 2021-2022 academic year in secondary-level English courses at the state schools from a cultural perspective. The reason for that is that learning a language is, by nature, a cultural activity. For this aim, the adopted methodology is determined as content analysis by using an adaptation of Yuen's (2011) framework. Drawing on the findings, implications for language education and suggestion for further studies are given.

Keywords: coursebook analysis, cultural elements, content analysis

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1. Introduction

English has been considered an international language for a relatively long term and learning a second language has thus become prominent in most parts of the world and acknowledged by nature as a cultural activity (Kramsch, 1997, Risager, 2018). Even though there have been many different approaches to teaching English, it might be fair to claim that language classrooms are still heavily coursebook-oriented. One example of these approaches is to use the coursebook as the syllabus (Appel, 2012), which is an extreme edge of the continuum compared to another approach, namely Dogme ELT (Thornbury, 2013). Considering this indispensable role of the coursebooks, constantly investigating the current books in use might have a huge value. In the Turkish context, these books are written and distributed by the Ministry of Education and updated regularly.

Envisaging these conditions, this study aims to analyze the books that are used in the 2021-2022 academic year secondary level English courses at the state schools. These books are written by local authors who are specialized in English Language Teaching field. For this aim, the adopted methodology is determined as content analysis by using the adaptation of Yuen's (2011) framework. Furthermore, this study could also be seen as a replication study. The reason is that a master thesis has been found to be analyzed in the same sample. Thus, comparing alignments in the results and, as an added value finding out the perspectives of teachers who use these books would be a valuable contribution to the field of language teaching.

The results will be discussed regarding the current sociological structure of Turkey. The reason is that the first observations enable the researcher to claim that even though Turkey is underway radical change in terms of the cultures that come together at schools, the books have not reflected this reality but focused on promoting a western

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culture or including too localized content rather than emphasizing an international cultural understanding. In this sense, another point that will be discussed is that even though we, as the researchers, claim that language classroom stakeholders should be aware of World Englishes, the books do not promote such an approach. Still, the guiding aim of this study is to reach “an ideal” in terms of interculturality that is accepted as a dream to achieve, if not possible at all (Çiftçi & Daloğlu, 2021, p. 2; Dervin, 2016)

2. Literature

The definition of culture has long been a hard endeavor for scholars (Kim & Peak, 2015). Nevertheless, Kim and Peak define “culture as the interplay of products, practices, perspectives, communities and persons” (2015, p. 86). The first dimension of culture, products include ‘artifacts (e.g., food, documents, language, money, tools), places (e.g., buildings, cities, houses, institutions (e.g., family, law, economy, religion, education, politics), and art forms (e.g., music, clothes, dancing, painting, movie, architecture)’. The second dimension, practices, involves ‘operations (i.e., manipulation of cultural products, acts (i.e., ritualized communicative practices), scenarios (i.e., extended communicative practices) lives (i.e., stories of members of the future)’. Perspectives, on the other hand, reflect the views, beliefs, morals, and attitudes that underpin products. Furthermore, they guide people’s behavior in cultural practice. Communities encompass particular social contexts, factors and groups in which members engage in cultural practices. They refer to individuals who represent the culture and its communities in distinctive ways. Personality and background of people are equally important factors in the cultural development of the self.

As Canale (2016) highlighted, investigating coursebooks has been a recursive topic in many studies. Particularly, these studies documented critical issues such as gender and racism (Canale, 2016). In a recent special issue of *Language, Culture and Curriculum* (2021, edited by the same author, the themes emerged in coursebook research presented under three titles: representation, interaction and learning. Canale (2021) starts with the indispensable nature of representations in this field because “what is (verbally, visually) included and excluded in the textbook plays a role in how ideas conceptions and cosmogonies about the target language, society and culture are virtually transmitted” (pp. 113-114). In addition, these representations play a huge role in how learners shape their understanding of the target culture by strengthening, demolishing, or confirming what they bring to the language classroom regarding that particular culture.

Compared to representation studies, coursebook investigation has recently adopted a new path, ‘textbook in interaction’. Acknowledging the valuable contributions of the above-mentioned research, Canale (2021) draws our attention to how these representations are realized in language classrooms through interaction and learning. Canagarajah is among the first scholars who focus on this line of research, along with Canale (2019), Foreman (2014) and McConachy (2018), to name a few. To start with the previous research, Canale’s (2016) study could help us to understand the current state of the art in the coursebook study. In a recent study from the Iranian context, Baleghizadeh and Shayesteh (2020) focused on a content analysis of three textbooks using Yuen’s (2011) framework of cultural representation. To their surprise, their findings revealed the cultural neutrality of grammar textbooks. The textbooks were largely dominated by the practice aspect of culture, which includes a society’s behavioral patterns. When compared to non-English-speaking countries, cultural elements from English-speaking countries take up more space in these international textbooks (i.e., *Understanding and Using English Grammar, Communicate What You Mean: A Concise Advanced Grammar, and Oxford Practice Grammar*).

If we return to the Turkish context, even though MoNE prescribes local books, language teachers are in search of alternatives. And consequently, Khan & Tas (2019), considering the importance of coursebooks in language classrooms, divide coursebooks into three categories: (1) international (or global) - do not aim at a specific culture but are supposed to refer to an international audience; (2) localized (or glocal) - belongs to a kind of interposition, bridging the global and local needs, contextualized (3) local - written by local writers for the needs of national education agenda (Khan & Tas, 2019). They aim to compare these two types of coursebooks (local vs. global) on the speaking skills provided in these books. Their claim is that coursebooks are indispensable elements in language classrooms due to the affordances they bring to both teacher and the learner. To that end, another emphasis is since language teaching aims to enhance students’ communicative competence within the framework of the Communicative Language Teaching method, the coursebooks claiming to have adopted this approach have been proliferated. However, this increase is not without scholarly criticism. Dogme ELT (Thornbury, 2013) is one of these critiques claiming that teachers do not necessarily need a coursebook that might restrict their teaching style to some extent. Compared to increasing interest in Dogme ELT, in Turkey, the mainstream approach in language teaching is still mostly based on coursebooks. This has to do with the teacher training policies, yet it is a topic that is not under the scope of this study.

Integrating local and global cultural elements into the coursebooks used in our language education has been found to be inadequate to some extent in the literature (e.g., Cakir, 2010). Furthermore, other scholars investigated

different aspects of coursebooks such as idioms, proverbs (Hatipoğlu & Can Daşkın, 2020; Khan & Can Daskin, 2014), use of English literature (Gumusok, 2013; Yildirim, 2012), language learning strategies (Bayezit & Cubukcu, 2015), incorporation of corpora (Asik, 2017), feelings of English language teachers and their primary level students towards local English textbooks (Tekir & Arikan, 2007), identity perception and hidden curriculum (Alagozlu & Ceken, 2015).

A reported failure in coursebook studies, regarding the representation of the culture and related elements are documented in Keles and Yazan's (2020) relatively recent study which analyses five editions of New Headway Elementary textbooks starting from when it was first published in 1993. While they assume that there should be transformation based on the results of "the growing research on world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, and EIL pedagogy since the early 1990s" (p.2), their findings show that the hegemony of inner culture remains still in the analyzed textbooks. In the light of the above-mentioned literature, the following research questions will guide this study:

1. How well do Turkish MoNE Secondary Education English coursebooks reflect the source, target, and foreign cultures?
2. How culturally relevant are the Turkish MoNE Secondary Education English coursebooks in terms of products, activities, attitudes, people, and communities?
3. What are reflective opinions of in-service teachers regarding MoNE Secondary Education English coursebooks?

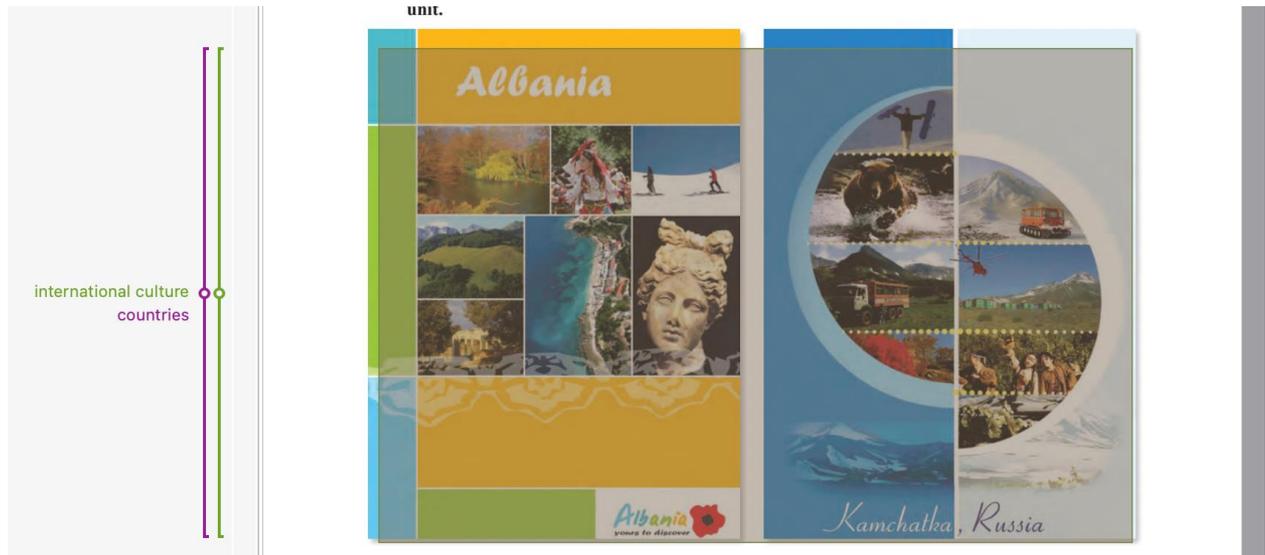
3. Method

The studies investigating coursebooks mostly have utilized qualitative analysis: content analysis and critical discourse analysis, to name a few (Weninger, 2018). Similarly, this study adopted content analysis as the methodology (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). The data consists of one book used in state secondary schools and the recordings of the interviews with three teachers, each had lasted around one hour. Upswing, 8th Grade (i.e., the selected coursebook) used in all public schools in Turkey, used by more than 1 million students and written by a Turkish author. It should be noted that there are two sets of books offered for each Grade which are common in the curriculum included yet offer some differences in the way how they present the curricula.

In the next phase of the study, three teachers were interviewed about their implementations of the books analyzed, and the results of the study were shared with the teachers to consult their expertise to confirm the analysis from the practitioner's perspective as well. During these semi-structured interviews, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their usage of the books. Teachers are selected according to the city they work, namely İzmir, Şanlıurfa and Bursa & Van, using convenience sampling.

The data was collected and analyzed using MAXQDA, a software program designed for qualitative and mixed-method studies. After the coursebook (Upswing, 8th Grade) and the transcripts of the interviews were uploaded to the program, the cultural categories were added as codes for the content analysis. The coding procedure was initiated as suggested in the literature (Saldana, 2015). The framework used in this study was first introduced by Yuen (2011), improved by Kim & Paek (2015), and finally adopted by Akandere (2021) according to the coursebook used in this study. Accordingly, listening parts and extra activities were not analyzed aligning with the literature. The source, target, and international cultures were all color-coded, with pink representing the source culture, red representing the target culture, and green representing the international culture. Similarly, each category of the cultural elements was grouped in colors. A sample coding from the final cycle in the program is given below (Figure 1). After the first coding procedure was completed, the researcher giving two weeks off, coded the whole book again and the total number of the codes was compared to the literature (Akandere, 2021).

Figure 1. A representation of the sample coding in MAXQDA



4. Findings

After the exhaustive coding procedure explicated above in detail, it became possible to represent the written content of the book with percentages to have a better grasp of it. In total, there were 762 elements, %49 of which consisted of source culture elements. The other half is shared between the target (%26) and international (%25) cultural elements. If a careful examination is given to the table below, it is inevitable to observe that in any culture type representation of the “Persons” weighs heavily even though it is closely followed by the “Products”. On the other hand, “Practices” and “Communities” have the same value in their representation. “Perspectives”, obviously, is the least embodied aspect. By looking at the numerical values of the table, a further interpretation would be to highlight that the very visible part of the culture (persons and products) forms %88 of the table.

Table 1. The distribution of the codes according to the adapted framework

CULTURAL ASPECTS	SOURCE CULTURE		TARGET CULTURE		INTERNATIONAL CULTURE		TOTAL	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
PERSONS	176	47%	133	67%	39	21%	348	46%
PRODUCTS	154	41%	56	28%	118	62%	328	43%
PRACTICES	17	5%	5	3%	13	7%	35	5%
PERSPECTIVES	5	1%	4	2%	2	1%	11	1%
COMMUNITIES	22	6%	1	1%	17	9%	40	5%
TOTAL	374	100%	199	100%	189	100%	762	100%

As an answer to the first two research questions, it is unfortunate to state that neither the Turkish MoNE Secondary Education English coursebook (Upswing, 8th Grade) is culturally relevant in terms of the distribution of the products, activities, attitudes, people, and communities nor it equally reflects the source, target, and foreign cultures considering this table.

To answer the third question, the results of the content analysis of the three interviews are presented below by giving particular interest to the most essential and commonly emphasized emergent issues. After the teachers were informed about the different culture types, they first stated that even if they do not explicitly know the theoretical background, they were aware of these culture types through practice. However, their common concern is that there is no harmony in the presentations of these cultural elements, in addition to their ineffectiveness. The reader might

remember that, as it is given in the previous section, cultural representations are mostly given through people and products similar to the perspective of a tourist rather than a prospective citizen. Thus, teachers reflected between the lines that they are not sure whose culture they are teaching, which causes pedagogical problems. Another issue is related to the texts in the coursebook. Surprisingly, two teachers gave the exact same example as problematic (i.e., cake with mango), referring to the lack of authenticity in the texts.

Even though the following topics were not directly related to the scope of the current paper, it is essential to mention them to relate the theory to the practice. The first is the curricular problems, such as not having enough class hours to cover all the topics and the particular pedagogical agendas regarding the upcoming exam this year. Thus, the content is stated to be mostly based on culture-independent, too detailed vocabulary distinctions (e.g., paragliding, skydiving). Consequently, the content of the book is not effective in preparing students for the exam either due to the new question types. Most importantly, the teachers drawing on their class practices pointed out that there is a lack of integration between the English course and the other lessons (not knowing countries, numbers). To be more explicit with an example, it has been reported to be quite hard for English teachers to teach geography while their objectives were to teach the English names of the countries. And finally, even though every year the book has been updated, teachers mentioned that it is not the content that has been updated.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the coursebook and cultural representations in terms of the persons, products, communities, people and perspectives adopting the analytical lenses of the relevant literature by confirming their results (Kim & Peak, 2015; Yuen, 2011). Even though this study is limited in the sense of its moderate power to represent the reality (one coursebook, three teachers), the results are contending since it is contributed to the literature by adding the teachers' perspectives. On the other hand, it is fair to say that Keles and Yazan's (2020) concerns indeed require further attention. It is clear that the endeavors to integrate a more international perspective to English Language Teaching have not found an audience from the coursebook authors. Namely, the prevailing understanding is still to represent either the target culture or source culture, as evidenced in this study rather than embracing a pluralistic understanding of English.

As for the implications drawing on the results, it is obvious that coursebooks should be updated more often informed by the relevant literature. In addition, the harmony between target-source-international culture had better be balanced to relieve the teachers' concerns. Similarly, including other aspects of cultural elements more (i.e., practices, perspectives and communities) rather than only focusing on products and persons would represent a holistic culture understanding better.

One final remark is related to the limitations of this study accordingly presenting informed suggestions for further inquiries. The absence of an Intercoder was a concern that threatens reliability in addition to the saturation of the data, even though the researcher showed an effort to solve the first by coding twice the coursebook with some time off and by comparing the final coding percentages to the previous study's results. Thus, it is suggested that this study might be further developed by increasing the included coursebooks and teachers and having an intercoder. By going beyond the scope of the study, Canale's (2021) perspective on the issue should be acknowledged as well in any study regarding coursebooks even though there is a myriad of studies in three major themes which are representation, interaction and learning. The suggestion is that having language scholars investigate textbooks from various disciplines (e.g., applied linguistics, discourse analysis) is not enough since there is still a research gap on how language coursebooks and other school subject coursebooks interact (Canale, 2021). Nevertheless, while this study contributes to this line of research by presenting a unique perspective, in line with Canale's (2021) understanding, future studies might focus on how this interaction occurs. Having an understanding of this issue would help coursebook designers to see the whole picture.

To conclude, this study presented an analysis of the coursebook used in MoNE schools supported by teachers' views. The findings demonstrated that the content of the local coursebook is not aligning either with the current English language teaching literature or providing an added value to the realities of our country that it is on the way to being a multicultural country. That is why the above-mentioned suggestions should be considered in further studies.

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