



IARTEM *e-Journal*
Volume 6 No 2

Volume 6 Number 2

Employment of American and British first language textbooks as a foreign language resource in private schools in South Lebanon

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of research that examined how teachers employed first language textbooks to teach English as a foreign language and to develop the intercultural competences of their students. The research employed semi-structured phenomenological interviews and questionnaires with eight South Lebanese educators. The findings demonstrate how in relation to language learning, the employment of foreign textbooks produces successful results. The research though also details how teachers have to work hard to bridge the cultural gaps between their students and the 'alien' cultures detailed in the textbooks. Problematic, it would appear to the development of inter cultural competence is that in South Lebanon some cultures, noticeably that of Judaism, and some topics, such as sexuality, that schools, teachers but moreover parents control how and indeed if, students are inculcated into wider cultures and debates. The conclusion of the research details

how in the development of intercultural competence that teachers are the key mediators of students' responses to cultures and practices other than their own.

Keywords: textbooks, Lebanon, Education, Language learning, Teacher mediation

1. Introduction

This article aims to explore the employment of American and British first language textbooks to teach English as a foreign language in private schools in South Lebanon. The research explores how such textbooks are employed to teach English language while representing other cultures and how students and teachers alike mediate such cultural constructions. The article seeks to critically analyse the importance of the textbook in the creation of an image of other cultures in the minds of pupils aged six to 14, and how comparisons between native and foreign cultures is inculcated into this process. Before we examine why we should observe textbooks to be an important area of research it would seem necessary to provide some background detail to Lebanese culture, its language learning and its educational system. Firstly, then, we turn to an examination of Lebanese culture itself.

1.1. The Lebanese Culture and foreign language learning

Lebanon has always been described as the link between the East and the West. It gained this reputation primarily from its geographical location on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It is considered an Arab country, as well as a Mediterranean one. This openness to the outer world, plus the continuous invasions, missionaries and mandates brought to Lebanon infused its people with a multiplicity of different and differing cultures and languages.

The Lebanese people are well known for their passion for speaking foreign languages. To the Lebanese command of languages indicates a high level of education (Suleiman, 1999) which in turn increases an individual's societal status. Indeed, families and communities alike subjectively measure a child's intelligence by how many English words he/she can memorise before going to school. Local

communities likewise measure a school's efficacy by how many English words the children learn.

It is important here though to mention that preference for foreign languages varies according to religion, socio-economic status and distance from the capital Beirut. Christians, for instance, are known for their use of foreign languages more than Muslims. People, belonging to middle class and above, who can afford private schooling, use English or French more than those of a lower economic status who send their children to public schools.

The Lebanese culture then is unique and to shed light on such One also needs to draw attention to its environment. Culture, in Lebanon, plays an important role in shaping people's preferences and choices. It has a definitive impact on educational decisions and practices for parents, students and teachers alike. In this cultural milieu teachers and students are observed to be the fruits of their environment and local culture. Therefore, learning and teaching practices mirror cultural perceptions and beliefs.

1.2. The Lebanese Education System

The education system in Lebanon is composed of two sectors: private schools and universities requiring tuition fees, and public or government schools and universities which are free of charge (Education Encyclopaedia-State University). Lebanese students are required to take the government baccalaureate examination at the end of the secondary cycle which has forced the private sector not to deviate too far from the curricula set by the Ministry (ibid).

The Lebanese education system is predicated by the notion that learning foreign languages is of great importance. Indeed, the new national curriculum, approved in 1994, made it a requirement for all schools to have either English or French as a first or second foreign language of instruction (Bahous et al, 2011). Formal foreign language learning begins when Lebanese students join kindergarten at the age of three. Instinctively, then, English is not considered in Lebanon to be a foreign language but a language twin to Arabic.

1.3. The teaching of English

The history of teaching English as a foreign language in Lebanon dates back to the 17th century with the arrival of, amongst others British, French and Russian missionaries. During the 17th and 20th centuries, under Ottoman rule, the teaching of English in schools was established by these foreign missionaries, and as such became a product of Ottoman-European relations (Bacha and Bahous, 2011). From the 1970's onwards the status of English language as a *global lingua franca* began to grow and it became an important means of communication in trade, technology, media and internet (Devrim and Bayyurt, 2010). Consequently, the status of English changed in the Lebanese education system as well. Therefore the growing need for this particular language, in the world of business, economy, tourism, media, internet, and world trade, motivated Lebanese students to study it from a very young age (Diab, 2000).

In summary, in a country whose culture considers English language a twin mother language the reality of the Lebanese culture is that it encourages the employment of foreign languages and pursues the increase of their role in the education system. This then might help to explain how using foreign language textbooks became the normal practice in private schools. In the next section of the paper the textbooks role in teaching foreign languages will be critically explored and the reasons behind their popularity will be considered. It should be noted here that the importance of Lebanese culture and cultural belief is brought into sharp focus through employment of these foreign textbooks. Not least in the difference between the textbooks and the students in language acquisition but also in relation to intercultural competences.

1.4. On the importance of textbooks

It is important to note from the outset that in the Lebanese education system, textbooks are essential tools employed by teachers in the classroom. Textbooks here, as in many schooling systems, are a common 'tool of the trade' (Wigginton 2005, pg. 197) in achieving curriculum aims (Luke et. al. 1989, pg. 245). The importance of textbooks, as Olsen accounts (1989) cannot be under estimated, as in some countries students, during their school career, encounter at least 32,000

textbook pages and spend 75 per cent of their classroom time engaging with the material presented within. However, this reliance on textbooks is not without criticism. Indeed, such critique details that textbooks are based upon 'specialised forms' of institutionalised school knowledge (Dowling 1996, 49). For instance, Taxel (1981, 33) argues that textbooks are created using specialised knowledge that is 'dominated by the world view and the ideological perspectives of those occupying positions of socio-economic pre-eminence in society'. Crawford (2004) supports this contention accounting that textbooks are social constructions, which employ a 'selective tradition' (Williams 1961) to introduce students to the cultural and socio-economic order of society and its inherent relationships of power and dominance. Stray (1994) goes further, considering that textbooks are the focal element in the process of cultural transmission. Stray argues that textbooks are instruments of socialisation whose purpose is to convey and inform an 'approved, even official version of what youth should believe' (Poddeh 2005, 2). Indeed, in relation to foreign language teaching itself, Kalmus (2004) relates that school textbooks are seen as important tools for transmitting knowledge but also values to students.

This premise of cultural transmission is heightened within Lebanon as many schools select textbooks that are formulated within distinct and distinctive cultures that are 'alien' to Lebanese history and its culture. Textbook, selection and adoption therefore becomes an important issue for educators and students alike. In the Lebanese context many textbooks are written by American or British authors and were never intended to be employed by Lebanese students. These students though have widely differing cultural and linguistic needs from those of the authors' intended students. It is interesting to note here an analysis, from 2011, of textbooks as cultural artefacts. Ahmed and Nancy-Combes in their research study stressed the need for textbooks to be culturally sensitive. They examined the textbooks employed in Pakistan to teach English as a second language; those which had been authored by foreign authors. The research details that when students interpret stories in a foreign language, they bring their world knowledge into the text. They concluded that when the authors are not very familiar with the culture of the learners the textbooks might contain some

cultural contradictions, which will affect learning and motivation. A textbook can only be effective, they suggest, if there is harmony between cultures.

In another study on the effect of text navigation by Sayegh (2009), important implications in relation to intercultural issues were noted. The study concluded that pre-reading activities are very important to help students develop and activate background knowledge. The study further concluded that students who read culturally familiar texts displayed greater text comprehension. This evidence suggests the 'best' textbooks are ones where authors and learners are brought into close contact with one another. Baker (2003) supports this contention suggesting that good textbooks allow for materials that enable students to experience English culture as well as their own. Researchers (Bacha & Bahous, 2011) from Lebanon further support this claim asserting that texts, which bridge the gulf between West and East, are the most successful.

Whilst the above researches are of importance it is also of interest to this study to note, in relation to the development of intercultural competence, the statement made at the Braunschweig Conference (See Pingel, 1999). Here, it was detailed that if foreign language learning was to avoid bias and stereotyping of populations, what Weinger & Kiss (2013, p. 694) might identify as 'monolithic conceptualisations of culture', then intercultural competence must be based on the 'the development of insights into foreign culture and positive attitudes' to such cultures (Pingel, 1999, 76). Here we believe that the textbook has an important role to play. Not least in the content that textbooks actually contain but also how such content is mediated by the people that use them. As Bishop (1992, p. 188) maintains

'no aspect of . . . teaching can be culturally neutral. The cultural messages in the educational enterprise are created and manifested by people . . . people bring their cultural histories into the classroom, and people interpret and reconstruct the various messages'.

Bishops' contention therefore is that in order to understand the importance of textbooks, we must re-evaluate our understanding of the interactions between teachers, learners and the materials they employ. Problematically, though, little

research generally into textbooks or specifically into textbooks development of intercultural competence has involved the analysis of such interactions (Sunderland et. al. 2000). Research has though focussed upon what Lambert (2002) termed textbook pedagogy in relation to teacher decision making and teacher style (Horsley and Walker, 2006). As Horsley and Walker (2006) detail it also important though to understand how teachers mediate the knowledge contained within textbooks and how they create a context for their use in their classrooms. As Luke et al. (1989, p. 291) reminds us, the school text is always the object of teacher mediation and it would therefore seem important to understand how learners are introduced to the cultural geography contained within the textbooks they use.

Helpfully, some studies, (for example Alverman, 1987; 1990, Sikorova, 2003 and Sator, 2004– see Horsley, 2006) and others such as Pepin (2001), Sikorova (2011), Sunderland et. al. (2011) and Weninger & Kiss (2013) have specifically analysed the manner in which teachers employ, adapt and change textbooks to suit the needs of their learners. Of real interest to this research is the work of Sikorova (2003). This study specifically analysed how teachers' adapted learning materials in mathematics and the resources they employed to teach the Czech language. An important finding from this research was that whilst mathematics subject content was adapted to meet curricular requirements, textbooks relating to the Czech language were altered to make them more interesting to the learners. The study identified a number of ways in which teachers altered the textbook's subject matter. These being:

- making the subject matter more comprehensible for students (e.g. more examples, other ways of presenting, illustrations)
- making the subject matter better organised, more transparent (e.g. networking, mapping)
- making the subject matter more interesting (attractive to students)
- selecting the core subject matter
- simplifying the subject matter, making it easier
- reducing the subject matter

- leaving out complicated matters and tasks
- producing teacher prepared text

(Cited in Horsley and Walker, 2006)

However, despite such studies it appears to be the case, as Sunderland et. al. (2000) contend, that research into language teaching has simply missed the opportunity to explore how teacher behaviour in relation to their employment of textbooks constrains learning about other cultures. If it is the case as Pepin (2001) relates that classrooms are shaped not only by teacher's pedagogic principles but also by their cultural traditions. We, like Sikorova (2003, 2011) and Bishop (1992) believe the manner in which teacher pedagogy, learner interaction, and textbook use are intertwined should be the subject of further examination. Therefore, what we want to ascertain is how teachers, within the unique educational environment of Lebanon, are employing English language textbooks to study other cultures. We want to ascertain not only *how* they mediate such textbooks but more importantly *why* they choose to adapt the learning materials they employ and what cultural influences affect such choices.

2. Methodology

The research methodology employed a qualitative case study approach in which semi-structured phenomenological interviews and questionnaires were employed to gather data in relation to the exploration of the research question. This data gathering technique was chosen because it allowed participants to tell stories and express their own views of their world and allowed the researchers an opportunity to probe such understandings. The study then was based on teachers and coordinators' beliefs and attitudes. During the interview phase, participants were asked the research questions directly. Such discussion was necessary to stimulate responses and draw attention to what the participants felt were important issues. In the interviews the participants described, in detail, some of the experiences they encountered in their classrooms while using the English and American textbooks. The interviews were conducted in English except for one which was in Arabic. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed and 'scanned to generate categories

of phenomena' (Cohen et. al., 2007: 472) and then categorised into themes (Cohen et. al., 2007). Questionnaires were based upon such themes as a means of double-checking the data and determining whether teachers agreed with the findings of the interview. The approach to the data analysis then was interpretive and took as its foundation that all human action is meaningful.

In summary, the aim of the research was to explore and explain practice in the applied setting and to describe its complexity, and, in phenomenological terms to gain 'a first person description' of this domain of experience. (Max van Maanen 1990: 9). The overriding aim was to understand why, how and if the adopted textbooks facilitated the teachers' work and whether they were suitable to the cultural environment in which they were employed. This explorative research did not intend to impose, find truths or attempt to prove something to be right or wrong. An attempt was made merely to interpret this reality to help understand this human experience.

2.1. Contextual setting

The case study was set in the South Lebanon district of Trye which is located 80 km away from the capital Beirut. Three coordinators and five teachers participated in this research. The 'teachers' taught in three schools which catered for students of the same social and financial class; considered to be the highest class in the area.

An important point to note here is that the textbooks employed within this study did not include topics related to the students' cultural background. Indeed, the textbooks were designed for Western students and as such reflected this culture. They included topics about science, technology, space, global issues, and general moral values. There were no topics relating to Lebanese costumes, beliefs, values or heritage. This 'cultural insensitivity' in the books had implications for the students' cultural awareness and on the learning process from the very outset of the research.

Topics included in the textbooks represented the main attraction and motivation of teachers to use them in support of their teaching. The participants described such texts as current, rich, interesting, and various in the fields of knowledge they covered. They explained that the materials were rich because they satisfied the

learners' thirst for knowledge. The topics were current in a sense that the lessons within them addressed the latest discoveries in science, space and technologies. Among the interesting topics they mentioned were media, capital punishment, and human rights. Older students, the teachers observed, were more 'concerned with technology, with scientific topics, but that they sometimes [found] difficulty in understanding the topic.' Younger students in the elementary classes, on the other hand, 'always liked stories, more than scientific texts'. They were interested in topics about animals, wild life, and different countries. The variety of topics these books included was also important in that they covered all literary genres such as narrative, non-fiction, fiction .etc, which appealed to all the tastes of the readers. Although the topics detailed in the textbooks were rich and current the participants of the research considered some to be insensitive to the Lebanese and Muslim culture. Others texts were considered inappropriate, some being of no interest to the students and a few topics were difficult for the teachers to explain.

3. Findings and discussions

This paper analysis centres upon three main research questions, these being:

1. What are the cultural issues that arise when employing American and British textbooks in Lebanese schools?
2. What is the teacher's role in detailing mediating and remediating such cultural issues?
3. How is intercultural communicative competence applied while using these books?

1. What are the cultural issues that arise when employing American and British textbooks?

For most teachers and parents alike topics which addressed the Jewish peoples were deemed unacceptable. Parents considered it inappropriate for their children to read topics about the Jewish religion and Jewish people because they feared that it might make their children more tolerant of the idea of the Jewish state in Israel. It should be noted here that Israel is considered by the Lebanese Government to be an

enemy state. The inclusion of this topic drove some schools to ask the publishers to simply cut it out from the textbooks as a precursor to textbook adoption. Other teachers said that they simply skipped these lessons. Two participants though did detail that they would like to teach their students about 'the Jews', as general information about a religion. Interestingly, and of some concern, was that another participant added that it was rather important to learn about the Jewish culture since this would help their students better understand the enemy. They commented,

'I think it is better for the students to read about the Jews. They are your enemy fine, they are our enemy fine, not Jews the Israelis, but it is better to read about them, it does not tell anything actually hurting (sic).'

Another teacher reported an incident they had experienced when trying to teach about Judaism:

'Yes, actually I had a problem, I was teaching grade four and you know in Lebanon we are anti-Jewish, and there was Hanukah day which is a holy day for Jewish people and as for me, as personally for me, I would include it in my book, I would say Easter for Christians, Eid Fotor for Muslims and Hanukah day for Jewish, but the coordinator had stopped me and he said I can't have this conflict with the parents, with the Muslim parents, and I said maybe you are right, so cancel it from the book and we had to tear the page.'

Another coordinator related that in one of the books a picture about American celebrations included a Jewish character and that use of this image had brought a parent into school to complain. This mother argued that teaching her children about 'Jews', was not acceptable. The coordinator tried to explain that teaching about Jewish people in this case did not mean teaching about Israel but only about culture. The schools resolution to this issue was to cut the picture out of the textbook.

Topics which addressed homosexuality and sex in general were also observed to be an issue. This was because of the embarrassment caused to teachers and students alike. As Lebanon is a deeply conservative country, such topics are considered taboo and so cannot be taught. A teacher gave two examples from her own experience of such issues:

‘A topic was about porn magazine and we have to explain for the students what a porn magazine is, and since our culture is conservative, we say it is a magazine of nude women, pictures of nude women, in a fast way not allowing them to laugh’

‘Another topic was about a gay minister and we have to explain what gay is, and that is somehow weird in our culture, although that it is found in our culture but we can’t speak freely about it because parents might come and argue with me, are you talking about sex in your period?’

While topics about Jews and sexuality might be sensitive, there were other topics which were just not interesting to the children. Among these were those which dealt with institutional themes specific to the United States such as mayors or the government, or indeed American history. As one teacher recounted:

‘But if you talk for example about American Revolution, what do we have to do with American Revolution?’

‘I had to read every story think of it, then decide on it, should I give it or not? I had a whole theme I just delete it, The American Revolution’

She explains her reasoning:

‘why should I teach them about something which is not our history. It could be good for them to know as knowledge, general knowledge right, but not stuff them with that, and I think this could be studied on more later when they grow up. Why at this age nine, ten, eleven, stuff them with something they don’t need, they don’t need it for now. So when we work with this book you have to be very careful which subject to use because I always try to use stories or topics a little bit related to our culture. A little bit something funny, entertaining.’

Similar, then, to the findings of Sikorova (2003) these teachers actively adapted and omitted language learning materials to make lessons more interesting to the learners.

It was also difficult for teachers to explain other cultures in relation to specific areas. As one teacher complained, 'how can I work with the map of America in Lebanon, it is not easy, it is very difficult, names of streets and cities are different.' Despite such a lack of knowledge some teachers did relate that they employed the internet to search for information before elaborating some of the topics to students.

Students though were much more interested with topics that are related to their own lives. For example, a teacher commented 'If something is related to you, something you like, it would be much easier to study, but related to something you have nothing to do with! . . . They [*the students*] dislike very strange topics that have nothing to do with them, despite the fact that they always love to learn something new and discover new things that they have never heard about before'.

It may be concluded therefore that the richness and variety of topics in these books represented an attractive element to the teachers, who wanted their students to be exposed to a wide range of knowledge. Meanwhile, the fact that these books were designed to serve in a different cultural and geographical environment had significant implications in the Lebanese setting. Teachers though in the main agreed that the American and British first language teaching books were effective to teach English as a foreign language.

2. What is the teacher's role in detailing mediating and remediating such cultural issues?

This section addresses the role of the teachers in the employment of these textbooks in the classroom. Teachers in this research were observed to be the mediators of culture as well as the facilitators of the foreign language in the classroom. The success or otherwise of these texts therefore relied heavily on the teachers' capabilities in explaining as well as communicating the foreign culture inherent in the texts. As this teacher commented:

'It is according to the way of the method the teacher follows. If the teacher is able to work on these books properly, he can communicate with the students, he can have the ideas reach to the students, he can help the students grasp

the concepts, the ideas, the rules he wants, but if he can't work on them properly, I think that the students will find them very difficult, and it will of course be a failure, according to the teacher himself, to the coordinators' methods or to the school's strategy, it depends.'

The attitude of the teachers and the learners also seemed of importance in foreign language learning and in the mediation of other cultures. Apart from the issue of the Jewish People detailed above, many of the teachers felt that it was their responsibility to try to develop a positive attitude towards the cultures represented in the books. For example:

'If you present it, as a teacher, you present it in a way where we have to know about others and accept others, we are different, then you will develop a positive attitude towards it, but if the teacher has a negative attitude and present it in that way definitely the students will develop that.'

In light of the statement from the Braunschweig Conference, detailed above, this form of teaching would seem to be of real merit in the development of inter cultural competence.

Teachers also believed that they should be prepared and trained properly to meditate the foreign culture to make the best out of the first language books to teach the foreign language. Since all of the teachers were Lebanese and had never had the chance to experience the foreign culture at first hand, they found it uneasy to explain it to the students:

'I've never been in America, I've never been in London before but sometimes I have to go through research to find more about this place or what has happened in this place to explain to students'

Teachers reported that they were not prepared and trained to teach culture. They also stated that their knowledge solely depends on their personal efforts to educate themselves and complete research on Western culture. Many learned about the western costumes and values while preparing lessons in which they were going to employ the American and British books.

3. How is intercultural communicative competence applied while using these books?

This section relates to cultural issues that arise with the employment of American and British textbooks, which include representations of everyday life that are different from those of the students. As stated above teachers agreed on common strategies they employed such as; skipping lessons that are purely representatives of Western culture and might not be of an interest to the students, and the cutting out of pages from textbooks, which related to 'sensitive' issues. However, with the rest of the topics, teachers helped the students to draw comparisons and try to find commonalities between the two cultures in an attempt to facilitate learning. The first advantage they mentioned in using these books was that they enabled learning about other cultures to take place. One coordinator gave an example of a lesson about owls to illustrate this point,

'The Owl Moon, it talked about the owl and the importance of the owl and how the child and her father went through all the night looking for the owl, considering it something optimistic, they felt that it has a hopeful omen, while in our culture you know very well that we feel that the owl has or gives a bad omen, here we teach our students that there is a difference in culture.'

Teachers, then, did try to explain to the students what representations meant in other cultures not only to draw parallels but to highlight and explain difference. Another example of where differences were highlighted was in relation to the treatment of pets. In some Western cultures the students were told, pets are very popular and are treated like humans. For example, students were shown pictures of people bathing pets, taking them to vets and having them inside houses. In the culture of the students though pets do not have the same status, this is because of Islamic beliefs where, for example, dogs are not allowed in the house for hygienic reasons. A teacher reported how students were surprised to observe a character in a story keeping a dog inside the house. Teachers in such cases tried to explain the differences in cultures so students would develop an awareness of the other culture. Teachers also expressed that despite culture differences that they wanted to do their best to teach about other cultures. They thought therefore that it was important the

students should be exposed to different cultures through the media and internet. However, they also thought it best that students studied other cultures 'properly' at school to prevent the development of negative attitudes or the imitating of other cultures blindly. This evidence strongly suggests therefore that the practice of intercultural competence is very dependent on the teacher's knowledge, understanding and attitude towards the Western culture detailed in the textbooks.

The teachers also related how the first lesson on a new culture was the most important. They accounted that when introducing new topics they start with the native cultural context, then relate this to the foreign cultural before drawing comparisons between the two cultures. In this manner, the teachers attempted to make sure that students understood their native heritage as well as accepting the foreign culture. This pedagogical approach was adopted by the teachers for several reasons. They said that this initial comparing of cultures was essential for understanding the stories in the textbooks, which in turn facilitated the proper learning of the foreign language. In addition, this pedagogical technique helped to preserve the respect of the native culture by the students. However, such comparative comparisons were only promulgated through oral methods and were not assisted with written literature or illustrations. Here, then it would appear that the development of intercultural competence by the students was wholly dependent on the teachers, their training and their willingness to immerse themselves in other cultures.

As one teacher commented, 'You can't explain about American culture to Lebanese students if you don't tell them about the difference'. Some texts however, did discuss similar issues to those in Lebanon. One such issue was that of the family and of taking care of elderly relatives. This is an issue both familiar and important to the students and their culture. One teacher related such communal issues were valuable for teaching about foreign cultures,

'Well actually the thing we are trying to do here even if we are using foreign books we try to find the most common thing between these two cultures . . . so

we try to find something so close or so common between these two cultures in order to communicate with the students, in order to have them interact with us.'

Some teachers though expressed concern as to the effect of foreign textbooks on the Lebanese culture and students' cultural consciousness. However, they felt that they could mediate this, as evidence earlier, by skipping those topics which caused issue. In addition, despite this filtering of information some teachers still saw it necessary to remind the students of their nationality,

'I love my students to know everything, but I love my students to know you are Lebanese from Lebanon. You have to be. You behave the way we behave, we don't need to imitate others. I always tell my students don't forget we are Lebanese we are learning this studying about it but we don't have to do what they are doing.'

The teachers believed that student's inculcation into foreign cultural representation should be supervised and mediated. They suggested that a teacher's role must be to categorise 'bad things' and 'good things' in Western culture and to direct students to what they should take from the foreign culture. Among the aspects they consider were positive influence from Western culture, was education and the importance attributed to employment. On the other hand, they made it clear that they preferred Lebanese family life and that they did not want the students to lose this connection with family. As this teacher commented,

'usually I draw my students' attention to the way we live to the way we care for our families, to the way we care for our children, to our togetherness, to the way we live together which are very important for us.'

Some of the teachers even debated which culture was better:

'we have like a debate in the class ok, which culture is better. Actually all students say they are better because they are free to do things, but when you have to go deep inside we say no, we can do it, but we need control, so they had big debate for me'

Through such discussion a teacher noticed how her students admired American people:

‘They like the type of people there. They like it because you know day by day here in Lebanon you find out that our students try to act, imitate, especially the American people, especially if they are good in English. So yes they like it a lot and we as teachers try to make it interesting to them.’

Differences in culture though didn’t seem to be an obstacle in learning languages. According to some teachers it was more about the topic than perhaps the actual culture that was represented and whether the students felt connected to the topic or not. In relation to the specific question of whether differences in culture affects the understanding of the texts a common response by the teachers was, ‘See, if you introduce these differences to your students, there will be no obstacle, but if you don’t help the student understand them there might be, yes’.

In the main then the teachers reported that American and English textbooks were effective in teaching communicative skills as their students did progress in speaking English through the employment of these texts. However, they also believed that cultural insensitivity, which were brought to the fore, within these texts created some undesirable situations. Teachers did try to mediate between the cultures represented in the books and that of the students so that language could be acquired easily and native culture could be preserved.

4. Conclusions

Teachers in this research expressed their satisfaction with the results they achieved through the employment of the foreign textbooks despite the many difficulties they encountered. The research though has detailed how teachers are essential to the success of students achieving intercultural competence. Teachers then act as culture mediators as well as language facilitators. Intercultural communicative competence it appears is dependent on the teachers’ attitudes towards the foreign culture and their knowledge of it. Teachers showed a great desire to help their students assimilate and moreover accept other cultures. Teachers in this research

demonstrated how they made tremendous efforts to bridge the cultural gap by oral discussion and presentation; presenting the Lebanese culture and comparing it with the Western culture. However, at the same time they always tried to help the students preserve their own culture. Problematically it seems, that in relation to some cultures and some topics the schools, teachers and parents controlled the 'culture narrative' that the students were allowed to be inculcated into. It appears evident from this research that students are capable of acquiring new knowledge from unfamiliar texts. However in order to achieve high level of comprehension and make the most educational and linguistic profit from such reading and discussion activities the texts should be culturally familiar to the students. The finding of this research supports those of extant researches that detail that 'successful' foreign language textbooks are ones which demonstrate similarity and empathy with the indigenous cultures.

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