ERPA 2014

Adapting a Turkish middle school textbook to develop cultural awareness

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Abstract

The locally-produced and governmentally-approved coursebook, Forward English, was launched after the renewal of the curriculums in 2012, and aims at teaching the natural use of English in authentic texts as well as developing intercultural competence. However, even an impressionistic overview of the units indicates that the texts are merely used for contextualizing language functions and cannot develop students’ ability to read in English for communication, as well as lacking depth in cultural content. Therefore, this study provides a unit analysis and suggests adaptation strategies for developing reading skills and cultural awareness in the global world.

Keywords: adaptation; cultural awareness; local coursebooks; intercultural competence; unit analysis

1. Introduction

The restructuring of the primary and secondary education in 2012 (by a law also known as the “4+4+4” formula in Turkey) has led the Ministry of National Education (MONE) to redesign the curriculums. Since English is now taught from the second grade onwards, new syllabuses for the second and third grades have been introduced, while those of the fourth and eighth grades have also been revised for ensuring continuity of instruction. MONE strongly advocates that Turkish citizens need to develop communicative competence in English, if future progress is to be made in the economic, political and social arenas. They also point out that the failure of the Turkish students in learning foreign languages can be related to the presentation of language as an ordinary school subject rather than a medium of communication. For the above reasons, MONE has launched a new coursebook for eighth graders,
entitled “Forward English”. As opposed to the allegations to the contrary made by the Turkish author in the foreword of Forward English, the local coursebooks cannot present authentic language use in natural contexts, but rather teach “a pure language” deprived of its original usage (Çakır, 2010). Tomlinson (2008) went so far as to claim that many ELT materials should be held responsible for the failure of language learners to use it successfully due to their undue attention to the teaching of linguistic items.

This deficiency can be related to the dissociation of language from its context of use, which corresponds to culture as the context of the whole language system. According to Risager (2012), it is impossible to separate language and culture because language practices are related to other cultural and social practices in the real world. Brown (2006), too, emphasized that language and culture are interrelated and would lose their significance if separated. Having been identified as the fifth dimension in the language classroom (Damen, 1987), culture is accepted as a valuable component of all foreign-language programs, and should be incorporated into language teaching (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1994). Risager and Chapelle (2012) especially drew attention to the key position of textbooks in foreign language teaching, as they are the foremost provider of knowledge on the target culture. Also, it is not merely the culture of the target language that learners need to know and comprehend. In order for them to become effective communicators in today’s shrinking world, they must develop understanding and empathy for the outsiders. That is, they need to develop cultural awareness – a “gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people’s cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5). It is only through cultural awareness that tolerance and international communication can be achieved (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5).

Seeing that communicative competence is inextricably tied to cultural awareness, MONE (2013), with renewed instructional materials, aspired to build up intercultural competence and to appreciate cultural diversity by presenting elements of target and international cultures as well as celebrating their native values. Yet, despite the concerted efforts of the authors, these governmentally-produced and giveaway books fall short of expectations, as they have always received much criticism for their unattractive designs, lack of authenticity, contextualization and topicality, as well as non-compatibility between syllabus and textbooks. Furthermore, the texts at large are made “pedagogical”, not only for practising a focal language item or function, but also for acculturating learners into the local rather than the international situation. In a recent study, where İşık (2011) analyzed the MONE-approved coursebooks, he found out that they were deficient in presenting international cultures, while the presence of the Turkish culture was limited to the use of the Turkish names and places. He (2011) also noted that the sole purpose of those cultural references was to present and practise the target language items in question. Similarly, when the new local coursebook, Forward English, is analyzed, it is observed that the cultural content is reduced to tourist information and varied stereotypes. Sercu’s (2000) distinction between the outsider-tourist- and the insider-family-perspective is worth mentioning here. The former focuses on the cultural differences, provides positive views predominantly, and presents flat characters and typicalities of the target culture, whereas the latter focuses on both similarities and differences, provides positive and negative views, and presents round characters (Sercu, 2000). In this respect, the case of MONE’s new coursebook can be said to represent the outsider-tourist perspective, as it is hard to represent different cultures and to present cultural content without making use of stereotypes at the same time (Reimann, 2009). For this reason, a unit from the widely-used local coursebook was chosen for showing how to adapt a gender-biased, stereotypical material, so that learners can be sensitized to the cross-cultural differences, critically question cultural stereotypes and have tolerance for cultures other than their own.

2. Context

In the handbook of English curriculum for primary and middle schools, MONE (2013) defined the model English language curriculum, and stated that the seventh- and eighth-graders will receive a theme-based or content-based instruction and be introduced into reading and writing, which used to have only limited place and be practised at the sentence level at lower levels. The students, whose ages are ranging between 12 and 14, are believed to have established the essential basis in literacy, and categorized as A2 level students among the proficiency groups of the Common European Framework (CEFR). As a result, they can be exposed to “language usage and lexis centered around the topic”, as well as participating in communicative activities, where subject matter and skills-study are integrated (MONE, 2013, p. 5). However, the efforts for a more contextualized presentation of language items,
authentic use of language, situation-based practice of four language skills, and culturally-diverse content could be met with appreciation, if they could have been actualized in the organization of the units. Therefore, in this section, a detailed unit analysis is first presented with the accompanying instructional activities, and then, adaptation strategies for improving a typical unit are offered.

2.1. Description and analysis of the unit

The widely-used, MONE-approved coursebook, Forward English, is formed out of 16 thematic units focusing on varied topics ranging from friendship (universal topics), success stories (international topics), good language learners (language-related) to Ataturk and the Turkish War of Independence (local topics). Unit 8: Cooperation in the family, running errands, and a representative sample of all the other units, embodies the theme of household chores and labourdivision, and aims at developing the communicative functions of “requesting others to do something, instructing or directing others to do something, requesting assistance, refusing, apologizing, talking about recent activities and completed actions, expressing gratitude” (Durmaz, 2013a, p. 92). The students are required to learn the structures of “present perfect (ever/never/just/already/yet)”; “too/either”; expressions like “Can you do that/Could you give me a hand/Will you organise that?, and “I’m sorry I can’t./I’m afraid I can’t” with “I’m really sorry, but.../Thanks a lot./Thank you very much” (Durmaz, 2013a, p. 92). They are also expected to complete the task of “comparing the two pictures given and finding the differences by saying what the person has or hasn’t done” (Durmaz, 2013a, p. 92).

Throughout the unit, students will be engaged in reading, speaking, writing, and listening consecutively. It is worth mentioning that despite being identified “primary” in the curriculum, the listening and speaking skills do not take as much time and focus as the so-called “secondary” reading and writing skills (MONE, 2013, p. 5).

Unit 8 begins with a matching exercise, where students look at 14 different pictures illustrating types of housework and choose the right verb describing each action: “make the beds, do the washing-up, do the washing, do the ironing, set the table, do the shopping, vacuum the carpet, clean the windows, do the cooking, pay the bills, take the rubbish out…” (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 91). The meaning of the unknown words is conveyed with the help of the visual clues. It is also recommended in the teacher’s book that the teacher demonstrate the meaning by wearing an apron and miming the housework, while the students are finding out the word from the list (Durmaz, 2013b). After introducing the thematic vocabulary, the unit moves onto the reading section, where the students look at the four pictures and guess what happens in the story. However, this is rather difficult, as the pictures are crammed with the lines from the characters’ dialogues. The story is about the row between a traditional man (John) refusing to help his exhausted wife (Abby) with the washing and their reconciliation after the husband is advised by a male friend (Mac) to share the housework. The text, as it is, displays the second of Schmitz’s (1984, p. 7) forms of bias in textbooks, “stereotyping”, that is, drawing a “distorted, simplistic, limited, or even degrading” image of such groups as women, minorities, the old and the disabled. More precisely, it can be called “sex stereotyping”, because the housewife in her shabby clothes is nagging her husband about chores at home, while the man is seen first sitting idly in front of the TV, then with a male friend at a café, and finally in the kitchen chopping the onions for help.

The reading text is followed by a typical true/false activity, where students simply tick the correct statements of the given ten: e.g. “Abby is John’s husband” or “John talked to Mac, but Mac didn’t want him to help her” (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 94). Since the text merely serves to present the target language items and allows plain sense reading, the students cannot just go beyond retrieving facts from the text. The comprehension questions, being dichotomous items, are also problematic in that the students are not even supposed to supply reasons for the incorrect statements. As for the form-focus of the reading activity, the students complete a table, where they indicate who has just/already/never done something in the story. The superficiality in the presentation of content is also present in the teaching of the adverbs with the present perfect tense. The table completion is presumed to develop the capability of “locating specific information in lists and isolating the information required” (Durmaz, 2013a, p. 94). However, there is nothing like a list except the wife’s first lines of reproach in the dialogue and Mac’s advice: “I’ve already done the shopping, made the beds, made the breakfast, done the washing since we woke up, but you haven’t done anything…”, “…Yes, I’ve done the housework since I was a child. For example, I’ve just done the ironing and vacuumed the floor. I’ve already done the washing” (Durmaz, 2013b, pp. 92-93). It is evident from these extracts that
the dialogue also lacks authenticity and is struggling to contextualize the grammatical items. In the vocabulary section, there is another matching exercise, where they find the right definition for the highlighted word by using contextual clues: e.g. apologize – “admit one’s mistake(s) and make an expression of sorrow” (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 94). However, the definitions provided are harder to understand than the target word, whose meaning is mostly hinted by the use of a synonymous expression: “John came back home and apologized to Abby… I’m really sorry, I know I was wrong...” (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 93).

The unit ends with a speaking and writing activity done in groups. In the speaking task, students share the roles of the husband, wife and friend and role-play the same dialogue by following these instructions in the “Train Yourself” box: “Ask for and give some information about personal experiences, ask if someone has done something or not, use your own words, use gestures if you need, make a request, accept or refuse a request, give thanks” (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 95). In the writing task, groups of four write a similar story about the housework by following similar instructions: “Write short dialogues about your characters’ personal experiences, make your characters ask for help, offer, thank, request, accept or refuse a request, … ask if someone has done something or not, … use ‘and’, ‘but’, … ‘because’, pick out the keywords, phrases or sentences from the story…” (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 95). These imperatives are presupposed to help students develop speaking and writing skills, but can be of little help for practicing language functions, because different ways of requesting, rejecting, accepting, and apologizing are not modelled, and need presenting in a listening activity, which could have been a more appropriate medium of communication (rather than reading aloud the same dialogue). Also, there is no genuine interest and communicative value in such limited, controlled situations as establishing a similar conversation or writing a similar story on the row between family members.

In short, although the author, at the very outset, claims to have “emphasized communicative activities”, to present “interesting and engaging topics”, “written in a lively style”, to teach grammar and vocabulary in context, and also to involve students in both controlled and freer activities (Durmaz, 2013b, p. 7), the sample unit has shown that (1) the meanings of the words are conveyed with either pictures or synonyms, (2) the grammatical items are treated without systematic attention and in isolation, and (3) speaking and writing tasks are hardly communicative, if we are using the term in the same sense as Nunan (2005, p. 10): “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form”. To make matters worse, the text displays a stereotypical Turkish couple (though being given Anglo-American names), and the cultural content may confirm students’ misconceptions about gender roles in the family. To raise students’ awareness of stereotypes and to lead them into making cross-cultural comparisons, the adaptations suggested in the following section can be made.

3. Procedure

Among Maley’s (2011) eight adaptation strategies, the following five have been used in this study respectively: addition, modification, omission, reordering, and replacement. Another reading is included, and is rewritten with true-false items for communicative and cultural appropriacy. Thirdly, unproductive activities like table completion and word-match are removed. After the imitative and unimaginative speaking and writing activities are substituted by communicative tasks raising cultural awareness, an overall change in the order of the activities are made for procedural reasons. To start with, pre-teaching vocabulary, via pictures and demonstration, is good, but rather than gambling at answers, students can be led to make correct guesses, by pointing at the unknown word and then performing the action in the matching exercise. Also, comprehension can be checked by asking one to dramatize the housework and another to guess the action verb. Alternatively, students in single-sex groups can make a list of tasks that are typically done by men and women at home: male students brainstorm male tasks, and female students female tasks (Redstone, Marchand, & Cunningham, 2007). In this way, the students can draw on from their worldly knowledge and activate their own cultural schema. Such consciousness-raising activities might give learners a head start in noticing stereotypical roles for men and women in the society.

Secondly, students focus on the two pictures below. They find the similarities and differences between the two different types of men and deduce the meaning of the term: Guess who is a “new man”. The first picture (a) (Redston, & Cunningham, 2007, p. 81) displays a modern man caring for his child, while the second one (b)
(Durmaz, 2013b, p. 92) has a traditional man and a desperate housewife carrying cleaning equipment. Here, students are led into the theme of the reading.

Now, learners in pairs can be engaged in jigsaw reading, where they piece together different parts of a single text or share information on separate texts linked to the same situation as in the following example (Nuttall, 2000). In the adopted readings, the name of the characters (John, Abby, Mac, Sheena, Ken) are removed so that learners wouldn’t be influenced by their connotations. Student A reads about the first picture, while Student B reads on the second picture. In Text A, adapted from a gap-fill exercise (Redston, & Cunningham, 2007, p. 81), Sheena talks about her very different husband, Ken: I think men should help in the home, but women usually complain because they can’t get any help from their husbands. For example, their husbands can’t even cook a meal, but my husband can cook! He also puts our two boys to bed every evening and takes them to school in the morning. If they stay at school late, he goes and picks them up. I tell everybody that he is great – my female friends are extremely jealous. Unlike Ken, John, in Text B, refuses to help his wife Abby and storms out of the house, and comes back only when he is talked out of his wrong behavior by his male friend, Mac. After reading their share of the texts, students decide on their own whether the given five statements are true or false: (1) The man helps his wife with the housework, (2) The woman complains about her husband, (3) The man likes doing the housework, (4) The man argues with his wife, (5) The couple shares the housework. Then, they turn the statements into polar questions and exchange answers in order to find out about each other’s text. Finally, they together define the new man—one who does housework and looks after children, and tell whether Ken or John is a new man and give their reasons. As a result, rather than reading a single, bland text silently and with no real purpose, students pay “close attention” to “linked texts” and are given the chance to exchange information orally (Nuttall, 2000, p. 209).

With the purposes of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences between the target and home countries and stimulating discussion on (gender) stereotyping, students in groups build their own lists of cultural characteristics from their reading of the two texts and tell which of the cultural attributes are more close to the average Turkish people: e.g. Turkish culture: woman cleaning the house, man watching a football match, leaving home after a row, drinking tea out of a glass tea cup, asking for a wise man’s advice, chopping the onions for help; Western culture: helping in the house, cooking a meal, taking kids to school, etc. As a follow-up, students try to find a similar phrase to the term “new man” in their native language (Redston & Cunningham, 2007). In addition, they might as well tell what Turkish people would call such men as Ken: i.e. “light erkek”. Then, they can discuss whether they would like to be or marry a new man or if women should do all the housework alternatively. It might also be interesting to exchange ideas on the changing role of men in their home country (Redston & Cunningham, 2007). Bamford and Day (2004, p. 183) point out that such activities “help students develop cultural awareness” and “reflect on any preconceived notions they may have brought to their readings and discussion”. As for consolidation, students write a few sentences about labour division in their homes, read their partners’ notes and tell the class about the most interesting thing they have found about their partner’s family (adapted from Redston & Cunningham, 2007). These changes are motivated by the need for localising and personalizing content. According to McGrath (2002), the content should be contextually relevant for learners, and the degree of relevance can be increased, if learners’ interests, life experiences, and knowledge can be exploited in the activities. The original characters’ lack of credibility (cartoonised foreign names with Turkish manners) is compensated by changing the context, while the
personalization of content is maintained by drawing on from learners’ individual experiences of labour division among their family members, and eliciting their ideas on their future way of living.

4. Conclusion

Tomalin and Stempleski (1994) identify three qualities of cultural awareness: awareness of learners’ own cultural behaviour, awareness of others’ cultural behaviour, and the ability to explain their own cultural position, and adopt a task-oriented approach towards teaching culture, where learners cooperate in pairs or groups for gathering, sharing, discussing and interpreting information in view of both the target and native cultures. For this reason, the present activities are designed in such a way that (1) learners in pairs and groups work together to collect information, (2) decide whether the situation is similar or different in their own culture, (3) express their own stance toward the situation by drawing on from their real lives. Consequently, originally a sexist and unstimulating material has been reconstructed by such adaptation strategies as addition, modification, omission, reordering, and replacement, and exploited to resist stereotyping, and to develop cultural awareness and tolerance.

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