



## THE FREQUENCY OF CULTURE-SPECIFIC ELEMENTS IN THE ELT COURSEBOOKS AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN TURKEY\*

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**Abstract:** Providing cultural elements within the textbook contents is crucial for foreign language learners so that they can attain the authentic language appropriately involving some culture specific expressions that are commonly used in communication. Therefore, it is important for Turkish English learners to understand target culture for effective intercultural interactions. However, most of the course materials at elementary education in Turkey avoid including culture specific expressions as most of the course book writers are not native speakers but Turkish. The present paper pins down this issue by figuring out how much the course books focus on the culture specific expressions in foreign language teaching. To do this, three different randomly selected course books from the 6th, 7th and 8th grades at elementary education in Turkey have been evaluated in terms of the culture specific expressions. After analysing the course books the list and percentage of the cultural expressions will be portrayed.

**Key words:** Course book, culture, idioms, cultural expressions, teaching a foreign language.

**Özet:** Yabancı dil öğrenenlere yönelik hazırlanan ders kitaplarında kültürel unsurlara yer verilmesi hedef dili tam anlamıyla öğrenebilmek açısından önemlidir. Etkili bir kültürlerarası iletişim kurabilmek için Türk öğrencilerinin hedef kültüre ait bazı kavramları öğrenmelerinin faydalı olacağı düşünülmektedir. Hâlbuki Türkiye’de birçok ders kitabının bu tür kültür içeren ifadeleri kullanmaktan uzak durduğu ve bunlara çok fazla yer verilmediği görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı ilköğretimde İngilizce dersinde kullanılan ders kitaplarında bu tür ifadelere ne kadar yer verildiğini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bunun için Türkiye’de ilköğretim 6, 7 ve 8. sınıflarda kullanılan ders kitaplarından üç tanesi seçilip incelenmiştir. Yapılan içerik incelemesi sonucunda elde edilen bulgular tablolar halinde sunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ders kitabı, kültür, deyim, kültürel ifadeler, dil öğretimi, yabancı dil öğretimi.

### Introduction

Most of the EFL coursebooks specifically designed for the students at elementary schools in Turkey are chosen by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. This ready-made materials, which unquestionably must be followed by foreign language teachers, do not always fit the needs of the learners and teachers expectations. As the writers of these course materials are mostly from Turkey, they are, as expected, unable to present the authentic language in natural contexts, which unfortunately leads to teach a pure language abstaining from the original usage. This reality is not valid only for Turkey, but it is true to encounter this fact all around the world where English is taught as a foreign language. Tomlinson (2008) claims that “many ELT materials (especially global course books) currently make a significant contribution to the failure of many learners of English as a second, foreign or other language to even acquire basic competence in English and to the failure of most of them to develop the ability to use it successfully. They do so by focusing on the teaching of linguistic items rather than on the provision of opportunities for acquisition and development. And they

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do this because that's what teachers are expected and required to do by administrators, by parents, by publishers, and by learners too (p.3).”

Needless to say, the teacher in class has a right to adapt and modify the teaching material at hand depending on the needs and levels of the learners. Foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers; therefore, they need to have the ability to experience and analyse both the home and target cultures (Byram, Morgan and Colleagues, 1994). However, most of the teachers are not willing to do this due to many reasons such as lack of time, too much extra work, lack of information about the target culture etc. Moreover, they feel secure with the ready made materials at hand. In this respect Hutchinson & Torres contend that the danger with ready-made textbooks is that they can seem to absolve teachers of responsibility. Instead of participating in the day-to-day decisions that have to be made about what to teach and how to teach it, it is easy to just sit back and operate the system, secure in the belief that the wise and virtuous people who produced the textbook knew what was good for us. Unfortunately this is really the case (1994: 315).

To Wei (2005) language is used both as a means of communication as well as a culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language. Peterson and Coltrane (2003), likewise, assert that learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, disagree with someone, express gratitude or make requests. Although linguistic competence does not always lead learners to be competent in that language, most of the courses are designed to teach the linguistic aspect of the target language rather than its way of life, traditions etc. Furthermore, it is pity to state that most of the foreign language teachers, a great amount of whom are not ELT graduates, are not aware of the exploiting course materials or developing the new teaching materials. As Williams (1983: 251) attests, in situations where there is a shortage of trained teachers, language teaching is very closely tied to the textbook. Then, teachers who have no background of exploiting and modifying the course materials feel unsecure and become reluctant to touch any single item in the course book. On the other hand, it is highly recommended that culture should take place in foreign language teaching so that learners can be aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, as well as it should provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture (Thanasoulas, 2001).

The lack of teaching culture or involving culture specific elements in teaching materials leads to failure to understand and communicate the target language and societies. It should be kept in mind that learning the target culture does not mean to be assimilated or denial of one's own culture and accepting a foreign culture as ideal. On the contrary, learning the target culture and being aware of the similarities and differences would help to overcome potential negative attitudes students may encounter when they learn about a new set of norms at odds. Thus it is expected that learners will recognize and appreciate the differences between the two cultures for the benefit of successfully combining form and meaning in language learning.

As aforementioned, in foreign language teaching, culture should be integrated into the activities in the textbooks. Some teaching materials may not include culture specific elements within the syllabus. So the language teachers should be able to exploit the materials and penetrate these exercises into to the teaching activities. Prodromou (1988) and Alptekin (1993) advocate that the use of the target language culture as a vehicle for teaching the language in textbooks is foremost important for language teachers. To them, it is not really possible to teach a language without embedding it in its cultural base. They argue that such a process inevitably forces learners to express themselves within a culture of which they have

scarcely any experience and this may result in alienation, stereotyping, or even reluctance or resistance to learning. Swaffar (1992) acknowledges the contribution of culture to developing the ability to put into question and evaluate the cultural elements L2 texts are suffused with. Kramersch (1993, 1987) also believes that culture should be taught as an interpersonal process and, rather than presenting cultural facts.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the current study is to analyze English Language coursebooks used at the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades of elementary education in terms of culture-specific expressions. To do this, the books in question have been scanned and related items have been categorized accordingly.

### **Data Collection**

In this case study, the method of the descriptive content-analysis has been employed to present the necessary information about the research topic. As Merriam suggests this type of case study method raises a question about something that perplexes and challenges the mind (1998:57). In this study, to propose a valid representation of the course books, the course books are chosen at the elementary schools in Kayseri. The results obtained from the document survey have been analyzed through distributions of the cultural expressions. The course books chosen by the researcher are listed below. All these three course books are designed for the students at public elementary schools, and approved by the National Ministry of Education, and they were all published in 2010.

1. Spring 6 (for the 6th grade learners) by Güler Şilit and Yalçın Arslantürk, Özgün Publications, Ankara, 2010.
2. Spring 7(for the 7th grade learners) by Güler Şilit and Yalçın Arslantürk, Özgün Publications, Ankara, 2010.
3. English Net 8 (for the 8th grade learners) by Ela Karapınar, Evrensel İletişim Yayınları, Ankara, 2010.

### **Data Analysis**

It is suggested by many theorists that language is culturally bound, so language teaching and culture are interwoven which cannot be separated from each other. Therefore, it is highly probable that foreign language learners will be exposed to some elements of the target culture in the syllabi of the ELT course materials. To be fluent in foreign language students should be able to attain communicative competence which will be provided with the activities and exercises encompassing not only linguistic aspect of the language but also cultural understanding of the target language. For that reason, it is the course book that needs to portray an accurate representation of the target language culture. To present target language culture, subject and content of the books should incorporate culture specific topics. In addition while presenting the topics under interrogation realistic social settings, authenticity in regards to the target culture should be designed as required and accordingly. On the other hand, in presentation of the target culture it is possible to confront with the problem that the course books cannot establish the realistic contexts and thus comprehension problems or cultural misunderstandings may occur. The reason for this problem might stem from the lack of the proper schemata to interpret these new and foreign concepts appropriately. In this respect, what should be done is to provide students with explanations obtained from a native

speaker. Furthermore, the aim should not always be to teach target culture but to enrich students' cultural awareness and experiences.

To be aware of the target culture students should be able to familiarize with the culture specific expressions which can be defined as the expressions and have cultural referent that pertain to a language. They frequently take place while communicating in the forms of idioms, proverbs, superstitions, festivals, celebrations etc. Learning to understand a foreign culture should help learners to use such words and expressions more skillfully and authentically. As they constitute the language and are the components of it, they need to be learned if we want our students to communicate adequately and be aware of the target culture as much as their own. In this study culture specific expressions used at the elementary school English course books will be analysed and their frequency in the course materials will be portrayed.

## Findings

Each course book is composed of 16 units which were specifically designed for the elementary school learners at the 6th, 7th and 8th grades. The books under interrogation have been scanned in terms of culture specific expressions and the findings have been revealed in the tables below.

**Table1. Classification of the culture specific expressions in the course books**

IDIOMS		SUPERSITITIONS		CULTURAL REFERENCES		TOTAL	
n	f	n	f	n	f	N	f
12	36 (%)	8	23(%)	7	21(%)	27	100(%)

The analysis of the content of the course books revealed that most of the teaching activities do not contain sufficient cultural elements. Language is presented mostly by dialogues and visuals into which teaching points are penetrated with a simple and plain language. The utterances do not involve culture specific expressions adequately. As can be seen in Table 1, in three course books learners are introduced with 12 idioms, 8 superstitions and 7 cultural references. The number and frequency of such expressions is quite less and do not help learners to be exposed to the authentic and realistic situations in the target language. As many theorists claim linguistic competence does not lead learners to communicate in the target language. Even communicative competence itself does not enable learners to convey the message across or to get the gist of the communication unless it is furnished with cultural value of the target language. That is to say, nowadays as many linguists and theorists claim students should be able to achieve pragmatic competence of the target language. To do that, they need to be equipped with culture specific concepts in target language.

**Table 2. Distribution of the culture specific expressions**

COURSE BOOK	UNITS (n)	UNITS WITH CULTURE SPECIFIC EXPRESSIONS (%)		CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS (n)
Spring 6	16	7 Units	30%	12
Spring 7	16	4 Units	20%	12
English Net 8	16	2 Units	16%	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>21%</i>	<i>27</i>

As is seen in three course books there are about 27 culture specific expressions included in 13 units out of 48 units. It is not possible to confront with such expressions in each single unit.

For example in *Spring 6*, seven of the sixteen units present such expressions whereas this number is four in *Spring 7*. In the eighth grade learners' course book, *English Net 8*, the percentage is quite less, which is 16%. The frequency of these expressions reveals that the authors do not focus on the target language culture. When considered language teaching and integrating cultural values and expressions in the course syllabus the number of the items (27) is not satisfactory enough. In other words, it should be mentioned that to develop cultural awareness alongside linguistic awareness, materials need to provide culture specific expressions as much as cultural referents such as Thanksgiving Day, Easter day etc. It is advocated that to learn culture specific expressions such as idioms or proverbs beautify the speech and lead learners to have self-esteem.

**Table 3. List of the culture specific expressions in the course book *Spring 6***

<b>BOOK FOR THE 6th GRADE STUDENTS, SPRING 6</b>	
<i>CULTURAL REFERENCES</i> 1. Junk food 2. Fast food shop 3. Hot dog 4. Soap opera 5. Pumpkin pie 6. Thanksgiving day	<i>IDIOMS</i> 1. What is <i>the matter</i> with you? 2. <i>Keep</i> it away from children. 3. <i>Calm down</i> . 4. To be an <i>outgoing</i> person. 5. To be <i>in a hurry</i> . 6. To <i>slip in</i> pyjamas.

In the course book *Spring 6*, it is seen that there are totally 12 cultural elements six of which can be regarded as cultural references such as Thanksgiving Day, pumpkin pie, hot dog, junk food, soap opera and fast food shop. Along with the cultural references some idioms are introduced in the activities. Idioms are one of the components that take part in that context and most frequently used in every language. As they are frequently used in every language they deserve to be learned in foreign language teaching, and therefore, course materials should incorporate as many idioms as possible while presenting the new topics.

**Table 4. List of the culture specific expressions in the course book *Spring 7***

<b>BOOK FOR THE 7th GRADE STUDENTS, SPRING 7</b>	
<i>SUPERSTITIONS</i> 1. Finding a four-leaf clover 2. Wearing blue jeans 3. Seeing a black cat 4. Breaking a mirror 5. Hanging up a horse shoe 6. Seeing a falling star 7. Catching a bride's bouquet 8. Walking under a ladder	<i>IDIOMS</i> 1. A friend will <i>cheer</i> you up. 2. A nice surprise is <i>on the way</i> . 3. You are always <i>in a hurry</i> . 4. I can't sing because people <i>make fun of</i> me.

It is noteworthy that learning to understand a foreign language requires being able to use words and expressions more skillfully and authentically. One of the expressions that pertain to a target language and a foreign language learner needs to understand is superstitions. They are generally considered as a part of a language community's culture. Simply put, in some cultures owls are looked upon as a sign of good luck, while in other cultures, especially in Turkey, they are felt as bad fate and death. When an owl is seen on someone's roof, it is interpreted as the sign of death. In the course book *Spring 7*, it is observed that superstitions supplied with several activities. When the superstitions are examined, it can be said that they are perceived in the same way both in the native and target language. In both languages, it is

believed that these two superstitions *Finding a four-leaf clover*, *Hanging up a horse shoe*, bring good luck, whereas *Seeing a black cat*, *Walking under a ladder*, *Breaking a mirror* mean misfortune, etc. Apart from the superstitions, the course book in question offers four idiomatic expressions such as *to cheer up*, *on the way*, *to be in a hurry* and *to make fun of someone*.

**Table 5. List of the culture specific expressions in the course book English Net 8**

<b>BOOK FOR THE 8th GRADE STUDENTS, ENGLISH NET 8</b>	
<i>CULTURAL REFERENCES</i> 1. Junk food	<i>IDIOMS</i> 1. <i>Putting oneself into someone's shoes.</i> 2. <i>Don't you know how to get rid of them?</i>

*English Net 8* is used by the eighth grade students at elementary education in Kayseri. The table above reveals that the book does not include enough culture specific expressions. There is only one cultural reference and two idiomatic expressions. In this respect, it can be concluded that the course book does not sufficiently foster learners' pragmatic competence which can be achieved with the activities and materials designed in the realistic and authentic perspective. Of the three course books the last one English Net 8 can be regarded as the one that does not emphasize the culture specific expressions.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Course books are the only materials that most of the foreign language teachers possess in the FLT classrooms, and they are automatically expected to include all aspects of language from linguistics to culture. As Arıkan argues (2005, 2008), coursebooks, with all their aspects, have the power of altering students' opinions and beliefs on many socio-cultural matters from gender and popular culture to religion and social class since the majority of classroom teaching is carried out by the use of them. Therefore, it is unavoidable for students to confront with such materials possessing all kinds of activities designed in accordance with the syllabus determined by the authorities. Sometimes these materials are student-friendly in terms of the activity variables sometimes some are indifferent to learners expectations. Some course books avoid providing learners with culture specific expressions considering that they may be misled and be confused by foreign language learners. Furthermore, according to some authors, it is not possible to integrate every element of the target language for the lower level learners. However, it should be kept in mind that successful language learners of English acquire through culturally and linguistically integrated English language instruction. Thus, learners can attain intercultural competence which is to be able to behave adequately when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures.

Since teaching culture is regarded as a fifth skill (Tomalin, 2008), it should be handled appropriately by foreign language teachers in order to raise learners' cultural awareness. While doing this, the concept of culture should not be limited only to cultural references belonging to the target language such as holidays, special days, celebrations etc. Along with these references some of the cultural expressions used in normal speech and daily life by the native speakers should also be integrated while developing language awareness. Expressions of idioms, proverbs, superstitions, similes, which are the natural components of a language, need to be involved in course syllabus appropriately. It is recommended that while EFL

course materials incorporate these expressions, language teachers should be able to attempt that students comprehend them adequately. Some of the language teachers claim that they know the importance of teaching culture but they have no time to devote this issue in the class. However, it is known that if cultural aspect of the language is not emphasized in language teaching properly, learners would not fully understand the language in context. No matter how foreign language learners are linguistically competent, they inevitably fail to understand some utterances specifically used by the native speakers for different purpose.

If course materials do not offer the culture specific expressions efficiently, foreign language teachers can utilize the following suggestions. The teacher needs to design in advance how this issue will be handled to enhance cultural awareness of learners. Being prepared beforehand will help him to choose what cultural content to be introduced and how systematically it can be implemented. Culture teaching should not be practiced on its own but needs to be penetrated into the skills that students need to improve linguistically throughout the course. Reading materials could be supplied with the expressions referring to the cultural aspects of the target language. Needless to say, the more language teachers use these expressions in classroom, the better students master such interpretations as the classroom is the only place to use target language for most of the students. Students should be reminded that it may be more useful for them to be able to understand the expressions when they hear them than to be able to produce them. Short video clips, pictures, charts, tables, real objects, role play, drawings can be a great help of learners to comprehend and students need to be encouraged to use them in meaningful contexts rather than in isolation. If possible, identical and similar ones existing in the native language can be taught firstly. It would also be beneficial for learners to improvise such expressions during the lesson working in pairs or groups.

To conclude, within this study, it has been emphasized that course books are the key elements that both teachers and students have in foreign language teaching. Therefore, they should be designed in such a way that foreign language learner should be offered different aspects of the target language from linguistics to culture. It is true that students are receiver and they absorb whatever offered. That is why, a good teacher must pay special attention to present the target language with its authentic use. Finally, and most importantly, while doing this, the teacher must keep in mind that it is not enough to be only linguistically competent, but to be able to use and understand the language appropriately where and when necessary as the native speaker does.

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