

## Semiotic analysis of cultural representations in Iranian English textbooks

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### Abstract

The Peircean semiotic approach suggests a non-linear and dynamic view of culture to examine it through signs, sign systems and meaning-making processes. This approach emphasises that images, texts and tasks are considered semiotic resources, generating cultural meanings through semiotic processes. This study aims to reveal the concept of culture in a dynamic manner concerning the semiotic potential embedded in the Iranian EFL textbooks used in junior high schools from the perspective of a semiotic framework. Semiotic analysis showed that cultural meaning-making is directed through guided semiosis, hampering students' exploration of cultural potential meanings, cultural reflection, understanding and awareness. The denotational and the indexical relationship between texts and images also does not foster students' intercultural understanding of living and maintaining in a global community, and hence, teachers need to move towards the symbolic aspect of texts and images through unguided semiosis to develop students' cultural understanding of self and others.

Keywords: Cultural, English textbooks, Peircean, semiotic, unguided semiosis;

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## 1. Introduction

For years, the interdependence of culture and language has caught researchers' eyes in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). These two concepts are so integrated that one cannot envisage the process of language learning and teaching without the inclusion of cultural elements. Also, cultural globalisation as a phenomenon has influenced the daily lives of people and its impact on foreign/second language education cannot be unheeded. Accordingly, the issues such as cultural hybridity and pluralism and their associations with language education have come to the fore of talks and debates in the ELT field. In the field of language education, the bond between the concepts of culture and language needs to be investigated through the lens of newly generated ideas and insights into postmodernism. Recently, concerning the issue of culture and language prompted by cultural globalisation, sensitivities can be examined in the ELT community around the world to embrace the new insights, ideas and approaches that flourished during postmodernism and try to create significant transformation in every component of ELT such as policies, practices, programs, methodologies and textbooks.

Accordingly, the emphasis of alternative approaches to culture is not on the mere incorporation of cultural concepts and contents into language teaching materials (Mahmoudi, 2018). The focus should not be put on the concept as a static one including superficialities but as a dynamic entity signifying cultural consciousness and understanding. Indeed, the purpose of education should be based on the liberation of education from the transmission of pre-determined top-down knowledge and information into students' minds (Oyarzo, Hellman, & Williamson, 2022). The negotiation and construction of cultural contents, concepts and discourses should be done concerning the situationality of language learning and teaching process while at the same time, the pluralism and multiplicity of cultural ideas and insights at the global level are well embraced (Sartono, Ambarsari, & Herwin, 2022). Thus, due to the development of new approaches toward exploration of the relationship between culture and language in ELT, there is recently a great interest on the part of researchers to analyse the cultural concepts and contents embedded in the textbooks from the perspectives of the respective ideas (Farahani & Kaleybar, 2018).

### 1.1. Literature review

#### 1.1.1. Culture and language in textbooks

Language textbooks maintain their 'enduring centrality in classrooms around the world' (Gray, 2013, p. 2). They are often viewed as artefacts of language pedagogy that can be reached easily and become subject to analysis and evaluation (Weninger & Kiss, 2014). When it comes to school textbooks, they 'can be understood as an important form of the cultural object' (Weninger & Williams, 2005, p. 161) and as the springboard for 'socialisation into the practice of language teaching and learning for students' (Chappell, 2016, p. 2).

Furthermore, Kramsch (1988) believes textbooks as an artwork and a construct represent publishers' and authors' perceptions of culture, language and education, and how they interpret a unified world of foreign language facts for educational purposes (Alexandrache, 2019). They also act as time capsules to use texts and visual materials as the samples representing culture and language and offer insights into ideologies and values or the hidden curriculum (McGrath, 2002; Snyder, 1970, as cited in Weninger & Kiss, 2014). The embedded culture in textbooks needs to be (re)negotiated, (re)interpreted and (re)shaped as socially constructed meanings through meaning-making processes that ask for key agents' (teachers, students, materials) involvement of different views and ideas (Kramsch, 1993).

Over the past decades, English textbooks in Iranian public schools were manoeuvring on memorisation of decontextualised words and structures, translation of texts and sentences and oral

repetition of drills and exercises (Tohidian, 2016). However, its failure to promote Iranian students' English communicative competence led to a major educational reform in late 2012, specifically in the language program and the English textbooks (Safari & Rashidi, 2015). It is believed that the promotion of Iran's scientific position both at the regional as well as international levels led to such educational reform (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014). Accordingly, higher-order authorities found that language learners should promote their communicative competence to transmit their Islamic identities, ideologies and culture to all people worldwide (Safari, 2017). Hence, the communicatively based English books (Prospect series- Prospect 1, Prospect 2 and Prospect 3 for teaching at junior high schools) were introduced into junior high schools, and teachers were required to teach them based on Communicative Language Teaching.

The exploration of culture through a critical perspective is evident in Asian researchers' studies (e.g., Dahmardeh, 2012; Yuen, 2011). This study, however, takes a critical-based semiotic approach to explore the cultural potential in Iranian junior high school English textbooks. Undoubtedly, the insightful findings of this research can provide constructive feedback and insights to policymakers, curriculum developers, textbook writers and English teachers to unearth how culture can pertinently be addressed in language classroom contexts (Giaconi, Bianco, D'Angelo, Halwany, & Capellini, 2021).

### *1.1.2. Semiotic approach toward exploration of cultural meanings*

A semiotic approach to exploring culture 'will not teach us what meaning must be attributed to a work; it will not provide or even discover a meaning but will describe the logic according to which meanings are engendered' (Barthes, 1966, p. 66, as cited in Bal & Bryson, 1991, p. 184). As Beaujour and Ehrmann (2008, p. 152) put it, 'semiotics is the study of signs, and in the semiotic approach, the objective is to interpret natural language signs into whatever cultural signs may be implicit'. The notion of a sign might indeed resemble a sound, an image or a word that represents or symbolises some meaning (Gaines, 2010). Each sign process involves a sign, a meaning and an interpreter who conveys the meaning. According to Posner (2004, p. 3), the interpreter's response is called interpretant, 'which amounts to construing a message in perceiving the sign'. So, based on Peircean semiotics, Tseng (2002) states that through the process of semiosis, a person sees a sign and then generates an interpretant or a mental image showing what the sign is represented for in his or her mind. The use of the semiotic approach aims at exploiting the meaning-making resources and modalities representing culture in the textbooks.

Weninger and Kiss (2013) in their study show that it is not just the text and image (sign) or the interpreter (learner) that is significant, but how they interact with each other to generate meaning or an interpretant. In Weninger and Kiss's (2013, p. 3) sense, 'texts, images, and tasks that form an activity should be treated together because it is their interplay that facilitates learning and creates opportunities for cultural messages to surface in the lesson'. In sum, a semiotic approach is a useful tool that does not consider image and text as signs in the form of isolated and pre-identified meanings but rather as cultural meanings comprised of complicated interrelationships.

### *1.2. Purpose of study*

This study, then, attempts to analyse the cultural contents of the locally produced Iranian junior high school English textbooks through a semiotic approach as a qualitative/interpretive approach developed during postmodernism with a focus on the exploration of cultural meanings and understanding while taking into account tasks, texts and images as cultural potentials with which students and teacher are dynamically engaged to generate cultural ideas. Thus, in this study, while analysing the cultural concepts from the view of semiotic analysis, we try to answer the question:

Can the cultural contents of the Iranian English textbooks based on the semiotic analysis respond to the needs of Iranian students concerning cultural globalisation and awareness in the globalised world? Accordingly, in this study, we approach the analysis of textbooks concerning students' engagement with the materials, including various resources such as texts, images and activities.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### *2.1. Data collection*

This study is qualitative/interpretive research that does not approach the analysis of culture concept as a quantifiable object; rather through a critical/semiotic lens, it tries to take into account interpretations, meanings, values and ideologies emerging in an actual socially situated language learning context. The data analysis of this study mainly focuses on the relations between the signs through the semiosis process and the way they are interpreted based on triadic relations such as whether there exist iconic, indexical and symbolic relations between the signs. Accordingly, based on Peircean philosophy, when a sign resembles or is associated with an object concerning its likeness, it is iconic. For instance, photos are iconic in the sense that they are the exact copies of the signs. Signs become indices when the signs have adjacent parallels to the extralinguistic environment through deixis, signifying the linguistic expressions concerning the context. In addition, a sign can become a symbol when its reference is an object utilising law or convention. The connection of a symbol with the object occurs through a system of conventions, without this system, symbols do not exist. For example, words are considered symbols since the relationship between sound strings and their representation is based on convention.

The instruments included the observation and the use of recorders on the researchers' mobiles which recorded the oral discourse between the teachers and students occurring through three lessons for 12 hours. Then, the teachers' and students' voices in the form of naturally occurring discourse were transcribed for analysis. Sometimes, the recorded data were in Persian, the native language of Iranian students, we translated all the sentences into English in such cases.

### *2.2. Participants*

The researchers also represent the discourse data of 3 classes including 93 female students with the age range of 13–16 and 3 female English teachers aged 29, 36 and 47 as the whole population in this study. The teachers majored in ELT and English translation.

### *2.3. Procedure and analysis*

To analyse the English textbooks of junior high schools in Iran, we draw on the principles of the semiotic approach as 'a conceptual and methodological middle ground between critical analyses of cultural representations and studies of how meaning emerges in situated interaction' (Weninger & Kiss, 2013, p. 7). The researchers of this study were two colleagues teaching English in public schools for many years. The first researcher in this study is a Ph.D. holder of ELT and teaches as an English teacher in different universities, teacher education universities, language institutes and public schools for 20 years. The second researcher an M.A. of ELT is also an experienced English teacher teaching in different high schools and language institutes (El-Ouali & Mouhadjer, 2019). In advance of doing this research, the researchers got permission from the principal of the school and teachers to participate in the classes and have an observation. The teachers and students showed consent to take part in this study and their voices were recorded. The researchers promised not to reveal their real identities when they share the data and wherever needed, use anonymous names.

Thus, based on Peirce's semiotics, we provide an account of the semiotic relationships that exist between the texts and images while considering the interactive discourse. We also make some suggestions about the semiotic processes of cultural potential embedded in the textbooks. The visual

and textual materials are the semiotic resources in this research study. In these textbooks, each lesson has a focus on a communicative function or a theme (Appendix A). As each lesson of these prospect series involves specific types of activities and exercises such as a conversation, practices, spelling and pronunciation, listening, speaking, reading and writing activities and role play which repeatedly appear in other lessons, we focus on the lessons in which cultural representations are more highlighted. Accordingly, I have chosen lesson 8 (Prospect 1), lesson 5 (Prospect 2) and lesson 3 (Prospect 3) respectively to analyse cultural meanings, interpretations and understandings as semiotic resources.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Lesson 8 of prospect 1

As in this study, the various sign resources as the potential cultural semiotics are considered, only do we take into account the texts and tasks associated with images. Lesson 8 begins with the introduction of a topic entitled My Favorite Food, which is immediately followed by a conversation, practice 1 and 2, sounds and letters, listening and reading, speaking and writing and your conversation. Of all these activities, we focus on conversation at the beginning of the lesson, Practice 1 and Sounds and Letters as all these three activities or texts are associated with images.



Figure 1. Lesson 8-My Favorite Food. Source: Khadir Shorbiyan et al. (2013, p. 42)

Lesson 8 titled My Favorite Food immediately begins with a conversation. It is a listening text that two students are talking about their favourite food. No pedagogic purpose is delineated to students as they are just aimlessly required to listen to the conversation while they do not know the purpose. It is interesting to consider teacher talk and students' responses in an observed class of grade 7 of junior high school:

Teacher: Class, listen to this conversation carefully.

Zahra (one girl sitting in the middle and started talking loudly): Just listen to it. Nothing to do!

Teacher: Yes, be quiet and just listen carefully.

While the main goal of newly developed textbooks is to promote students' communicative abilities as it has also been claimed that all the embedded tasks and activities in textbooks pursue communicative purposes (Safari & Rashidi, 2018), students do not know what to do with this listening text. They are required to listen but listen for what (purpose) is not clearly illustrated. At the end of this conversation,

no pedagogic activity or task is assigned to promote students' language learning, conversational skills and listening abilities. Concerning the picture, the teacher draws students' attention as follows:

Teacher: Look at here girls. We have a picture. What do you see in the picture? One by one tell me about the picture (some students talked in Persian as they were not competent enough to use structures correctly or make sentences).

Mina: Two girls are talking about homework.

Zahra: A mother and her daughter in the kitchen. The mother asks about her daughter's lessons, teachers, and school.

Teacher: No, your guesses are not right. They are hungry and talking about what to eat.

The image shows two girls in a house sitting at a desk and talking about something which is not clear from the image. The image does not involve any food or drink to guide students toward the appropriate garden path while the visual mode should involve some affordances yielding linkages and connotations concerning the text and tasks.

The topic is My Favorite Food but the image as a semiotic resource does not prompt students to make any relevant interpretations or meanings regarding the topic. Neither the iconic nor the indexical relationships exist between the image and the text. The hypothetical scenario is that students as interpreters are expected to open their books. Then, they take a look at the picture with the hope that the image as the icon or symbol facilitates the process of meaning-making and leads them to make interpretant the topic and listen to the text. But what do they see? The picture as a semiotic sign trigger anything except the food as was examined in the above excerpt. Therefore, students might interpret the picture as a mother and a daughter talking to each other about lessons, teachers and school since one of the students seems to be much older than the other one or as two girls talking about homework or even two friends as one of them asks another some questions about the lesson. Concerning the text as another sign complex, students expect to hear something about food but in the text, small meals like milk and cake or tea and cake are introduced. In this class, students were surprised after looking at the picture and listening to the text. They expected to see food in the photo and hear about the food, as students in the listening text were hungry. Here, it is interesting to quote one student's feedback. Romina, after listening to the conversation, said:

'Sorry teacher! The topic is My Favorite Food and these people in the conversation are hungry. But what they are talking about are small meals like tea, milk, and cake. These make no sense in our culture. Do foreigners consider tea, milk, and cake as their favorite food?'

Here, it should be noted that none of the semiotic relationships of Peirce's (1980, 1998) philosophy for sign and cultural meaning-making such as iconic, indexical and symbolic is triggered by the text-image constellation. In other words, the stream of semiosis cannot easily flow through the visual and textual semiotic sign since there is no vivid connection between the text and image and thus, if the teacher does not say anything about this, the image does not make any sense to them. It means a lack of relevance between the topic, image and text leads to students' confusion regarding the cultural component. In Weninger and Kiss's (2013) sense, as students cannot get the meaning from the image itself, guided semiosis, their background knowledge and how the teacher contextualises and presents it is effective. In this example, while the image has an incidental relationship to the topic and through guided semiosis, they cannot find any association between the instruction, the image and the text, the teacher is required to push students towards making the cultural interpretant through unguided

semiosis and focusing on students' cultural knowledge. This can be done through the provision of an interactional space to express their voices and discuss the associations between these elements through unguided semiosis (Kiss & Weninger, 2013). Doing so also requires a smart, skillful and proficient teacher who paves the way for students' linguistic and cultural enhancement (Safari, 2017; Safari & Sahragard, 2016); otherwise, the 'pedagogical value as support for English learners is thus limited or absent' (Stranger-Johannessen, 2014, p. 11).

Now, we focus on another example of this lesson for further understanding. Figure 2 shows Practice 1 through which students are required to talk about their favourite food and drink.



Figure 2. Practice 1. Source: Khadir Shorbiyan et al. (2013, p. 43)

In this exercise, students are required to talk about their favourite food and drinks by listening to some example models. This listening text and the task are associated with some images including different food and drinks. Among the images, fruits and desserts are also seen although they were not mentioned by the author. The topical focus of this exercise is mostly on Iranian food and drinks as all of them are used by Iranian people. Students are required to listen and practice these questions and answers through the use of suggested things in the images (Zhabykbayeva, Sanay, Bekish, Zhylybekova, & Kasymbekov, 2021). Here, the focus is on denotational meaning and indexical semiotic connection as the listening text (textual information) and image (visual information) are connected by deictic contiguity and hence, they do not serve the exploration of connotative cultural meanings. In the respective observed class, the teacher just focused on the guided semiosis and students listened to questions and their answers and then worked in pairs.

In this activity, the author's purpose has been the reinforcement of lexical and referential meanings and linguistic knowledge not exploiting the creative and symbolic use of language which generates cultural meanings. In this example, as students took part in guided semiosis commenced by the teacher, the process of the exploration of cultural concepts and meanings was curtailed and students were restricted in their attempts to focus on cultural connotations.

The words such as rice, kebab, cake and milk which occur in the answer part of questions are near the image. When the visual and linguistic modes (image and text) are utilised together, the interpretation becomes narrower and is directed toward the intended path or the focus on linguistic forms and vocabularies. According to Weninger and Kiss (2013, p. 12), the primary goal of English

textbooks 'is [more often] to reinforce denotational meaning' and students are assumed to form the suitable interpretant. In fact, by dint of the indexical anchoring and denotational relationship between text, activity and image, different cultural meanings are clogged, not allowing for the exploration of connotative meanings which focus on a culture of us and others to make students prepare for the global cultural flows and concerns. This does not prompt students to use language in a creative way (Rahimi & Karimi, 2021). Therefore, although the activity based on the image and text creates an interactional space for students, this denotational work is unlikely to lead to the construction of cultural meanings and new interpretations at the symbolic level since it solely focuses on students' enhancement of linguistic knowledge.

This kind of language learning and cultural awareness is 'a linearly-structured educational experience' (Kiss & Weninger, 2013, p. 24) which is far away from language and culture as complex systems (Safari & Rashidi, 2018). According to Finch (2001), the educational context of language classrooms is a complex system in that events do not happen in a casual linear fashion therein, rather a multitude of factors and forces interact in complex ways and affect it in unpredictable ways (Nas, 2018). Concerning example 2, it should be said that a linear process of education is presumed through the language curricula as students are required to pursue a linear route to acquire language such as listening to the example questions and answers and then asking and answering with a friend based on the pictures of the book (Silva & Alves, 2019). This activity is a controlled form of language practice that focuses on lexical meaning and vocabulary and hence students cannot move beyond the level of mechanical language production to explore cultural meanings.



Figure 3. Sound and Letters. Source: Khadir Shorbiyan et al. (2013, p. 44)

Through Sounds and Letters as the next exercise of this lesson which includes the semiotic budget of text, image and activity, students are expected to practice the pronunciation of English words along with their spellings. At first, students are required to listen to a conversation between two Iranian characters named Majid a student who does not know the English equivalents of some Persian fruits, and his teacher as the knower who tries to fill the students' empty minds with English equivalents, pronunciation and spelling of the words. In this class, after listening to the text, students were persuaded to listen to the teacher as the model and ask her to spell the words that they have learned so far or to say the English equivalents of the names of other types of fruit, vegetables and food which were asked in Persian. The following shows a conversation between Fatemeh and the teacher:

Fatemeh: Teacher! What is *bademjan* in English? (*bademjan* is a Persian word)

Teacher: It is eggplant.



Fatemeh: Please spell it.

Teacher: e-g-g-p-l-a-n-t.

Fatemeh: Thanks, teacher.

Here, the teacher goes beyond the guided semiosis and provides students with the opportunity to focus on the symbolic aspect of language. Otherwise, like the previous exercise, the same linear pedagogical fashion is reiterated as no purpose for listening is designated in advance and students just listen to a text which leads to no destination. As in semiotic investigations, the combination of modalities such as text and image create potential meanings (Weninger & Kiss, 2014), and the pictures associated with texts are of utmost significance. In Figure 3, the image associated with the listening text involves a teacher and many male students in a class. As the topic of the lesson is food and drinks, students need to make the relationship between the text and the image.

Due to the incidental relationship between text and image in addition to the lack of iconic and indexical relationship between them, students are not able to construct interpretants and make sense of cultural meanings and explorations unless the teacher as the facilitator of cultural meanings encourages them through unguided semiosis to explore their cultural understandings. This can be done by moving away from top-down pre-determined specific goals towards 'a clear pedagogical intent for the class' that can be 'negotiated through the interactions brought forth, acknowledged, and responded to by the various members of the classroom community' (Clarke & Collins, 2007, p. 167).

Here, the confusion like in the first exercise first occurs as the teacher asks questions about the picture, but then, she pushes them towards the right path:

Teacher: Class, can you tell me about the picture?

Narges: Teacher! They are students and their teachers.

Teacher: What are they doing?

Zohreh: The teacher is teaching and the students are listening.

Teacher: What is the lesson about?

Nasim: Food, drinks, fruits, and vegetables.

Teacher: What is the teacher's question?

Maryam: Maybe, what fruits do you like the most?

Arefeh: I like teacher to talk about Iranian food and other countries' food.

Sajedah: Have you eaten foreign food?

### *3.2. Lesson 5 of prospect 2*

In lesson 5 of prospect 2, we see a conversation, practice 1, 2 and 3, spelling and pronunciation, listening and writing, reading, speaking and writing and role play.



Figure 4. Lesson 5-Conversation. Source: Khadir Shorbiyan et al. (2014, p. 42)

This lesson entitled My City proceeds in an expected manner and bears a resemblance to other lessons as it begins with a conversation in the form of a listening text in which Morteza as an Iranian and Phanindra as a tourist are talking about Isfahan. This tourist has arrived in Iran and intends to visit this big city which is famous for many historical places, mosques, palaces, squares, houses, museums, gardens, and parks like Ali Qapu Palace, Khaju Bridge, Naghshe Jahan, Si-o-Se Pol, Aquarium, Birds Garden etc. The conversation specifies no clear pedagogic task for students as in the instruction, listening aimlessly to the text is the sole task. Thus, based on the respective conversation, the teacher is expected to assign a task to students such as pair work, discussion questions or writing a summary. Here, as reiterated before, no attention has been given to the specification of a task while it is the amalgam of image, task and text which constitutes an activity where the cultural meanings and messages flow smoothly. The image is comprised of four detached pictures of different historical and religious places in Isfahan. Concerning the relationship between the image and the topic, the most likely interpretant that students, at first blush, make might be the concentration of text on introducing the different places of my city, Isfahan. The relationship between text and image is somehow indexical since through looking at the pictures as the sign, their attention is automatically drawn to Isfahan and its historical and religious places. The interactional discourse between the teacher and students can also show the matter:

Teacher: what is the lesson about?

Negin (one student among other students who answers the question): Isfahan.

Teacher: How do you know that?

Negin: We have visited these places in Isfahan.

Teacher: Oh, so good. Now, tell us about some places of this city.

Negin: Teacher! I can tell about Si-o-Se Pol, Alighapou Palace, Naghshe-e-Jahan, Pol-e-Kgajou.

Teacher: Ok. Well-done, Negin! Now, class, let's listen to the text.

However, while listening to the text, students reach to the understanding that although the conversation is centred on Isfahan, the talk occurs between an Iranian Individual and a tourist who has come to Iran and is eager to see Isfahan. The image as the sign does not fully exploit the semiosis process to trigger students' construction of cultural meanings related to the actual social interaction and context since this image resembles a body without a soul as no people, no tourists, and no life are depicted in the image. Before moving to the text, the focus of the talk was on Isfahan and introducing the different places of this city. However, the scope of talk becomes limited which in turn narrows the process of semiosis and meaning-making and the construction of connotatively-based cultural meanings unless the teacher jostles them to move forward by posing symbols-induced questions. Thus, the fact that the affordance of an image as a sign can yield associations or connotations is particularly crucial, both in its own right and in connection with exercises and text (Stranger-Johannessen, 2014).

Another point that needs to be taken into account is that in the global world, 'cultures are in closer contact now than ever before, and are influencing each other in complex and complicated ways' (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 4). In this text, even though Phanindra comes from a foreign country, nothing is mentioned about his nationality, the country or the city he lives, and the famous places of his hometown. Accordingly, through this conversation, students' cultural and global awareness in the postmodern era is not raised. In sum, the narrower and indexical relationship between the text, image and topic does not allow students to take a step onto a path that opens into the symbolic and connotative world. The pursuing talk after listening to the text can confirm the above point:

Teacher: Ok. What did you get from listening?

Zahra (as she raised her hand): Teacher, it was about a tourist and an Iranian. But, why are they not in the picture? If they were in the picture, we could about the tourist's nationality, language, and country.

Teacher: Unfortunately, the author of the book hasn't included it in the picture.

Nazanin: Teacher, I think, the author doesn't want students to know the world!

In this lesson, there is just one more exercise which consists of the association of pictures, text and tasks as semiotic resources which might promote semiotic processes and cultural meanings. In Practice 3 (Figures 5 and 6), after listening to some examples, students are expected to do the pedagogic task of asking and answering the same questions appearing in the text with a friend. The text involves some yes/no questions in which new words such as a library, a metro system, a restaurant, a museum and a stadium are embedded. These words are associated with their counterpart images through indexical linking of image and text. This exercise is an example that shows the profound denotational semiotic relationship between the text, image and activity. It means, the focus is on learning and reinforcing the lexical meanings and linguistic forms which are preselected by the author in a top-down manner. This linear process is unlikely to promote the interactional space in class where cultural interpretations and meanings are triggered by the symbolic use of language as a sign system. Based on the observation of the grade 8 class, students solely focused on practicing questions and answers from the book and did not move a step further.

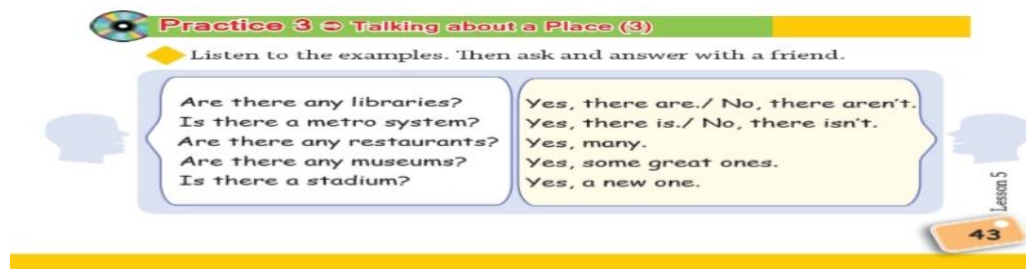


Figure 5. Practice 3-Talking about a Place. Source: Khadir Shorbiyan et al. (2014, p. 43)



Figure 6. Extract taken from prospect 2. Source: Khadir Shorbiyan et al. (2014, p. 44)

### 3.3. Lesson 3 of prospect 3

Lesson 3 proceeds in the same way as lessons of Prospect 1 and 2 do. The focus is on festivals and ceremonies starting with a conversation in which two female students are talking about national ceremonies. As the semiotic analysis of this part resembles the similar part in Prospect 1, we just consider other exercises composed of pictures, texts and tasks. In Figure 7, students are expected to listen to some yes/no questions and answers which focus on the theme of the lesson. The purpose of this activity has vividly been articulated in the instruction as it requires students to practice the same questions along with the use of some vocabulary and phrases in Figures 8 and 9. In practice 1, some words, information and customs concerning the national celebration of Iran, Norooz are embedded.

In Iran, Norooz which is celebrated on March 21st is the symbol of the rebirth of nature and marks spring approaching. This annual ceremony as the ancient cultural festival roots in Zoroastrian religion and tradition remained among Iranians for thousands of years. In Eduljee's (2005) sense, the concept of renewal is crucial as it shows the renewal of individuals, houses and friendships. Iranian people become well-prepared to embrace Norooz and Spring by cleaning their houses and surroundings, buying seven symbolised things beginning with S to set Haft Seen as an integral part of this ceremony (these things are Sib or apple, Sabze or green grass, Sir or garlic, Samanoo or a type of food made out of wheat, Serke or vinegar, Senjed or a type of berry and Sekke or coin), buying goldfish, baking and buying different types of pastries, cookies and confection, as well as wearing new clothes during Norooz. Some moments

before New Year, Iranians usually read the Holy Quran, other religious books, or even poems of Hafez and say prayers. Then, New Year Pray is also nationally broadcasted on all TV channels and is read by all members of families as soon as New Year is announced. Immediately after that, people hug and kiss each other, and money or Eidi as gifts are given to children by adults. During this 13-day-ceremony, people go and visit their relatives. On the last day of the New Year holidays known as Sizdah-be-dar or Nature Day, families go to nature and spend this day outdoors.

In Figure 7, there exist two drills through which students are required to practice some yes/no questions along with their answers in pairs. The text is a typical example that shows language learning occurs linearly and in a deterministic way. It means cultural concepts are considered static not dynamic or non-linear since students' cultural meaning-making and understandings are not tapped through this process. Here, it is assumed that students pursue a linear route such as listening to the sentences, reading and practicing them in pair work. Concerning the semiotic relationships in Figures 8 and 9, it should be said that any question regarding each picture has a specific closed-ended answer.

While I observed the class, I listened to students' practices and whispers. For instance, Pardis asked her friend this question: Does he set the table? And her friend, Mobina, answered: Yes, he does. The purpose is to enhance denotational meanings and indexicality and thus, the focus is on the deixis or 'here and now' relationship between the text, activity and pictures. It means, all the cultural concepts relating to Norooz are embedded in the pictures and the text and thus, the respective lexical items and linguistic forms are reinforced since the pictures point to the text and vice versa. This type of activity which is based on guided semiosis does not allow students to activate their imagination and creativity to go beyond the level of the materials in the book.

**Practice 1** Talking about Festivals and Ceremonies (1)

Listen to the examples. Then ask and answer with a friend.

Do you buy new clothes for the New Year?	Yes, I do.
Do you and your cousins set the Haft Seen table?	No, we don't.
Do young children color the eggs?	Yes, they usually color them.
Do Chinese people buy gold fish for the New Year?	No, they don't buy gold fish.

**Practice 2** Talking about Festivals and Ceremonies (2)

Listen to the examples. Then ask and answer with a friend.

Does he recite the Holy Quran at the turn of the year?	Yes, he does.
Does your father give you New Year gifts?	No, he doesn't.
Does she have many friends?	Yes, she has many friends.
Does your mom make a special food for Norooz?	No, she doesn't make a special food.

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Figure 7. Talking about Festivals and Ceremonies. Source: Alavi Moghaddam et al. (2015, p. 51)



Figure 9. Extract taken from prospect 3. Source: Alavi Moghaddam et al. (2015, p. 53)  
It is interesting to note that at the end of this activity, Sara as one student in this class said:

‘Teacher! That’s better to talk about Norooz. All of us love Norooz. This exercise doesn’t tell us about beautiful Norooz’.

Figure 10 shows a picture of Shab-e-Yalda or Shab-e-Chelle (Yalda Night) as another ancient Iranian festival and Iranians celebrate it as the longest night of the year in autumn, exactly before the beginning of winter. This traditional ceremony dates back to the Zoroastrian era. Ancient people of Persia believed that forces of evil were dominant on this night and that the following day belonged to Ahura Mazda or the Lord of Wisdom (REAL IRAN, 2016). During this long night, people get together, stay awake, read Hafez’s (a great Iranian poet) poems, drink and eat. It is customary to eat the summer fruits such as watermelon and pomegranates as well as nuts since it is believed that they are less likely to become ill on winter days. The following exercise involves listening, reading and writing tasks. In Figure 10, the association of the listening text, the picture and the questions constitutes the semiotic resources that might promote students’ cultural interpretations and understandings.

An imaginary scenario is that students open their books and through guided semiosis, focus on this exercise. The image vividly depicts Yalda Night as it involves what Iranians do, eat and drink. It also shows Hafez’s book including nice poems on the table. By just looking at the picture, students can answer the questions as the image, text and task are indexically and denotatively related to each other. Here, the image is near the text and task, showing that cultural meanings and words are feasibly understood by the students. With the presence of the picture or listening text, students can answer the questions correctly and provide the appropriate vocabulary. The conversation between the teacher and students also shows this issue:

Teacher: Class, look at the next exercise. What is that?

Students: Yalda Night.

Teacher: Ok, listen to the audio file and answer the questions. It is about Yalda Night.

After listening to the text, Maryam asked this question:

Maryam: Teacher, the listening part is tiring and ridiculous. What is the use of this listening? The speaker just reads the questions. We can read the questions and have no problem.

Teacher: It is for your pronunciation.

Nasrin: Teacher, let’s talk about this night first then we ask and answer questions.

Teacher: Ok, that's a good idea. What do you do at Yalda Night?

Zahra: We invite our friends and relatives to our house. We set a table and put fruits like watermelon and pomegranate on it.

Nasrin: We buy sweets and nuts, too.

Negar: We read Hafez's poems.

Mahdiyeh: By the way, Yalda Night is not in other countries. What ceremony do they have?

Here, it would be better to include in the picture another festival celebrated by another country. Doing so along with unguided semiosis would help students focus on symbolic aspects of language through its creative use while at the same time they try to enhance the cultural understanding that is urgent for survival in the world of communication.



Figure 10. Extract taken from prospect 3. Source: Alavi Moghaddam et al. (2015, p. 58)

#### 4. Discussion

This study focused on the exploration of cultural meaning potential embedded in English textbooks of Iranian junior high schools which have been published through an occurrence of educational reform in the educational system of Iran and claimed to enhance students' cultural understanding and smooth digestion of concepts related to Islamic-Iranian culture (Safari & Rashidi, 2015). To give an account of culture as a dynamic and fluid entity, I made use of a semiotic approach and analysed the examples of three lessons from these books. All the examples encompass semiotic budgets of images, text and tasks forming the semiotic process and facilitating or debilitating the construction of cultural meanings and interpretations.

The examples illustrated that the authors have endeavoured to unequivocally accentuate representations and concepts of local culture without considering the significance of intercultural citizenship and global cultural awareness (Byram, 2008, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Safari, 2016, 2020). A critically culture-sensitive education can in deed promote critical self-reflective and informative students who can 'evaluate their and others' cultural value systems' (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 43), ideologies, and ideas to cultivate their cultural consciousness necessary for use of English for global communicative purposes without giving up their national identities, values and beliefs.

#### 5. Conclusion

The analysis showed that cultural meaning-making is directed through guided semiosis, impeding students' exploration of cultural potential meanings, cultural reflection and awareness. This can be due to the inappropriateness of activities as sources of semiotic budgets to facilitate the process of cultural meaning-making and interpretation. The type of relationship between image, text and topic is

incidental or mostly based on deictic, indexical and denotational connections. This process shifts the focus of attention toward 'here and now' language, and linguistic or lexical knowledge, restricting activity scope and sanctioning it as a springboard for the construction and interpretation of meanings and concepts. This linguistically oriented language program contrasted with reflective involvement and cultural flow of information does not tap the full potentiality of students and does not make them prepare for demanding communicational contexts at the global level.

The results of this study are beneficial both at local and global levels as it suggests teachers be sensitive to the enhancement of students' global cultural understanding and their transformation as culturally informed reflective learners. This leads to the realisation of language as a social practice that constructs and is constructed by the ways language learners understand themselves, their surroundings, their histories and their possibilities for the future. Equipped with such kind of sensitivity and understanding as the key feature of reflective transformative practitioners, teachers need to furnish opportunities for students to be fully challenged with creative dimensions of language which highlight the cultural concepts. This, in turn, requires them to move away from focusing on trivialities in the name of linguistic knowledge towards unguided semiosis where students' cultural understanding and awareness of self and others in the modern world are triggered. The findings of this study offer an emphasis on symbolic aspects of language and the ways by which students construct and shape their cultural knowledge as a socially shaped experiential process.

This study also provides enlightening insights for textbook writers, educators and policymakers of education. Textbook writers need to reconsider the issue of culture embedded in the contents of textbooks, taking into account the expansion of global cultural awareness through the development of activities that promotes students' critical knowledge of culture and helps them not only survive through existing challenges, realities and possibilities of today's world but also 'preserve local linguistic and cultural identities'. Through pre-and in-service language programs, educators can enhance teachers' consciousness and sensitivity about 'linguistic, cultural, and educational demands of the global society'. Hence, furnishing educative opportunities and professional practices for teachers to experience the culture as a fluid and dynamic concept is necessary if the aim is to educate culturally reflective learners.

Further, policymakers of education are required to open-mindedly contemplate this crucial issue that empowering local cultures and identities does not mean building impenetrable walls around education, language pedagogy and society to be immune to the influence of global cultures. Thus, absolute and deliberate neglect of others' cultures and the world of Englishes which have been mistaken for cultural invasion, imperialism and colonisation rob students of critical skills and cultural understanding required to encounter complexities and challenges of language and cultural globalisation.

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Appendix A. The lessons and functions of each lesson in the prospect series

	<b>Lesson</b>	<b>Function/Theme</b>
<b>Prospect One</b>	Lesson 1: My name	Introducing yourself /Greeting
	Lesson 2: My Classmates	Asking someone's name/Introducing others
	Lesson 3: My age	Talking about your age/ Talking about dates
	Lesson 4: My family	Talking about your family
	Lesson 5: My appearance	Talking about appearance
	Lesson 6: My house	Talking about where people are/Talking about what people are doing
	Lesson 7: My address	Talking about your address/Phone number/Telling time
	Lesson 8: My favorite food	Talking about your favorite food/Making suggestions
<b>Prospect Two</b>	Lesson 1: My Nationality	Talking about nationality
	Lesson 2: My week	Talking about daily activities
	Lesson 3: My abilities	Talking about abilities
	Lesson 4: My health	Talking about health problems/ Giving health advice
	Lesson 5: My city	Talking about a place
	Lesson 6: My village	Talking about a place/Talking about weather
	Lesson 7: My hobbies	Talking about hobbies/talking about free time activities
<b>Prospect Three</b>	Lesson 1: Personality	Talking about personality
	Lesson 2: Travel	Talking about travel
	Lesson 3: Festivals and ceremonies	Talking about festivals and ceremonies
	Lesson 4: Service	Talking about services
	Lesson 5: Media	Talking about media
	Lesson 6: Health and injuries	Talking about health and injuries