

Cultural Exophoric References in English Textbooks Used at Four Common English Textbooks Used at Iranian English Language Institutes: A Comparative Discursive Study of the Degree of Referential Burden

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to find out cultural exophoric references in four common English textbooks, namely Touch Stone, American File, Top Notch, and Total English series used at Iranian English language institutes and to compare the frequency of occurrence of such references in these coursebooks. In order to compare cultural exophoric references used in these coursebooks, the researcher extracted all the cultural exophoric references used in these course books and found out their frequency rates. Since the number of books in each series was not equal, the mean for each book of the series was computed. The textbooks were also evaluated by both students and teachers based on administering cultural section of the Shatery and Azargoon's (2012) nativized checklist. To this aim, 366 students and 76 teachers participated in this study. They were selected from various language institutes of Gilan and Mazandaran in which the coursebooks under investigation were taught. Data analysis indicated that American File series used more cultural exophoric references ($M = 62.4$) than the other coursebooks under investigation. In addition, teachers and students had the same idea and believed that American File series is culturally biased and is a vehicle to advertise the Anglo-American culture. The researcher does not propose that one coursebook should replace another but that teachers should be well aware of cultural sensitivities of the coursebook they teach.

Keywords: Cultural Exophoric reference, Referential burden, Checklist

1. Introduction

The sentence is the focal goal of investigations in textual studies. However, the study of sentence can obtain results related to intra-sentential and inter-sentential relationships. Sentences can be examined regarding their own elements, or in regard with other sentences in the text. The latter one comprises the foundation of Halliday's cohesion theory. Therefore, Halliday and Hasan (1976) limit cohesion's study to inter-sentential relationships.

As an aspect of linguistic description, cohesion is so useful in textual studies. Cohesion can be applied to various levels of language such as lexical, syntactic, and phonological when the independent selections in different text points are connected to each other to form a sequential relation network. It is this characteristic of cohesion by which separate units of language blend into stretches of meaningful discourse that has been taken into account as a feature which is unique to all text types.

According to Newmark (1987), the subject of cohesion has always appeared to be the most beneficial part of discourse analysis. In a text, cohesive devices' analysis gives us a real insight into the ways writers put into structure whatever they wish to say and might be regarded as important factors in our judgments of whether a text is well-written or not. Different languages may display a tendency towards making use of some specific types of different cohesive devices to create texts. Such tendencies can be clarified by cohesion analysis (Rahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012). Grammatical and lexical cohesive devices are two types of cohesion. There exist four types of grammatical cohesive devices; reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

As mentioned earlier, reference is a type of grammatical cohesive devices. Reference refers to the relation between a particular item in a text with another one by reference to which it is understood in the given instance (Castro, 2004). Halliday and Hasan (1976) state there are two types of reference; exophoric and endophoric. Exophoric reference, which is of focal importance in the present study, directs the readers out of the text. In other words, the reference item is outside of a text.

Taking ELT textbooks into consideration, coursebook developers should closely consider the number of cultural exophoric references employed in the texts with regard to the degree of comprehensibility of the contents. McCarthy (1991), for instance, believes that the greater the number of cultural exophoric references in a textbook, the greater the degree of referential burden on language learners. The reason for this result is elaborated by McCarthy (1991):

Exophoric references will often be to a world shared by sender and receiver of the linguistic message, regardless of cultural background, but equally often, references will be culture-bound and outside the experiences of the language learner (e.g. British references to *the City* [financial and business center in London], *the Chancellor* [the minister who is responsible for financial affairs], and so on). (p. 40)

Therefore, coursebook developers and language teachers are suggested “to monitor the degree of cultural exophoric references in texts chosen for teaching to ensure that the referential burden is not too great” (McCarthy, 1991).

The present study is an attempt to find out cultural exophoric references in four common English textbooks, namely Touch Stone, American File, Top Notch, and Total English series used at Iranian English language institutes and to compare the frequency of occurrence of such references in these books. The purpose is to find out which of the series of the books under investigation impose a greater referential burden on EFL learners as far as their reading comprehension of the text is concerned. The study, therefore, seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the proportion of cultural exophoric references in four common English textbooks, namely Touch Stone, American File, Top Notch, and Total English series used at Iranian English language institutes?
2. Which one of the four English textbooks imposes a greater referential burden on Iranian EFL learners?

The following null hypotheses have been proposed for the research questions:

- H_0 (1). The number of cultural exophoric references used in four common English textbooks, namely Touch Stone, American File, Top Notch, and Total English series used at Iranian English language institutes is the same.
- H_0 (2). None of the four English textbooks impose a greater referential burden on Iranian EFL learners.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were selected from various language institutes of Gilan and Mazandaran in which the coursebooks under investigation were taught. For each coursebook, three institutes were selected randomly. 366 students and 76 teachers (American File, 100 students and 20 teachers; Top Notch, 100 students and 20 teachers; Touch Stone, 73 students and 16 teachers; and Total English, 93 students and 20 teachers) participated in this study. The range of teachers' experience of teaching the coursebook was between 2-6 years and the range of students' experience of studying the coursebook was between 1-3 years.

2.2 Materials

As the study is of text analysis type, four types of materials were used in the present study. They consist of four common English textbooks, namely Touch Stone, American English File, Top Notch, and Total English series used as coursebooks in several English language institutes in Iran.

The checklist employed in the present study was taken from Shatery and Azargoon's (2012) nativized checklist. Sheldon (1988) states "any culturally restricted, global list of criteria can never really apply in most local environments, without considerable modification" (p. 242). That was the reason that the researchers used a nativized checklist.

2.3 Procedure

In order to compare cultural exophoric references used in Touch Stone, American File, Top Notch, and Total English series, all the cultural exophoric references employed in these coursebooks were extracted by reviewing the texts sentence by sentence to identify any references used in the texts exophorically. In addition, the researchers found out the frequency rates of the cultural exophoric references and compared them to find out which of the above mentioned coursebooks used more cultural exophoric references in their texts. To do so, the number of exophoric references used in ten thousand words in each text was computed.

Moreover, in order to find out which of the four series impose a greater referential burden on EFL learners, the cultural exophoric references extracted from the series were categorized according to their type: That is, whether they refer to people, places, natural resorts, and cultural/historical heritage. Furthermore, the researchers specified the books which made use of the least and the most cultural exophoric references among these four series.

Also, the coursebooks were evaluated by both students and teachers based on administering cultural section of the Shatery and Azargoon's (2012) nativized checklist.

3. Results

3.1 Research Hypothesis 1

In order to compare cultural exophoric references used in the two series, all the cultural exophoric references employed in these coursebooks were extracted by reviewing the texts sentence by sentence to locate any references used in the texts exophorically. To do so, the number of exophoric references which has been used in ten thousand words in each coursebook was computed. This makes it possible to compare frequencies of cultural exophoric references in the selected coursebook series in a reliable way. Therefore, the numbers in tables are directly comparable which facilitates comparing our findings. The mean of cultural exophoric references in ten thousand words for the four series are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *The Frequency and Mean of Cultural Exophoric References used in 10000 Words in Each Coursebook Series*

Coursebook	Frequency	Mean
Touch Stone series	154	11.64
American File series	1668	62.38
Top Notch series	118	10.81
Total English series	242	14.47

As it is indicated in Table 1, with regard to cultural exophoric reference, for *Touch Stone* series, the mean score was 11.64, for *American File* series, the mean score was 62.38, in the case of *Top Notch* series, the mean score was 10.81, and for *Total English* series, the mean score was 14.47. It was concluded that *American File* series made greater use of cultural exophoric references in comparison with the other coursebook series under investigation. Therefore, it can be claimed that the first hypothesis is rejected.

3.2 Research Hypothesis 2

In the case of second research question, in order to find out which of the four series impose a greater referential burden on EFL learners, the cultural exophoric references extracted from the series were categorized according to their type: That is, whether they refer to people, places, natural resorts, and cultural/historical heritage.

Table 2 indicates the frequency and percentage of cultural exophoric references which refer to people in each series.

Table 2 *The Frequency and Percentage of Cultural Exophoric References Referring to People in Each Series*

Coursebook	Frequency	Percentage
Touch Stone series	43	27.92
American File series	489	29.27
Top Notch series	30	25.42
Total English series	43	17.76

As it is displayed in Table 2, 27.92% of cultural exophoric references in *Touch Stone* series, 29.27% of cultural exophoric references in *American File* series, 25.42% of cultural exophoric references in *Top Notch* series, and 17.76 of cultural exophoric references in *Total English* series refer to people. Therefore, it can be concluded that *American File* series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners regarding the reference to people.

Table 3 indicates the frequency and percentage of cultural exophoric references which refer to place in each series.

Table 3 *The Frequency and Percentage of Cultural Exophoric References Referring to Place in Each Series*

Coursebook	Frequency	Percentage
Touch Stone series	46	29.87
American File series	404	24.14
Top Notch series	37	31.35
Total English series	89	36.77

As it is displayed in Table 3, 29.87% of cultural exophoric references in *Touch Stone* series, 24.14% of cultural exophoric references in *American File* series, 31.35% of cultural exophoric references in *Top Notch* series, and 36.77% of cultural exophoric references in *Total English* series refer to place. Therefore, it can be concluded that *Total English* series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners regarding the reference to place.

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of cultural exophoric references which refer to natural resorts in each series.

Table 4 *The Frequency and Percentage of Cultural Exophoric References Referring to Natural Resorts in Each Series*

Coursebook	Frequency	Percentage
Touch Stone series	8	5.19
American File series	438	26.23
Top Notch series	24	20.33
Total English series	76	31.40

As it is displayed in Table 4, 5.19% of cultural exophoric references in *Touch Stone* series, 26.23% of cultural exophoric references in *American File* series,

20.33% of cultural exophoric references in *Top Notch* series, and 31.40% of cultural exophoric references in *Total English* series refer to natural resorts. Therefore, it can be concluded that *Total English* series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners regarding the reference to natural resorts.

Table 5 indicates the frequency and percentage of cultural exophoric references which refer to cultural/historical heritage in each series.

Table 5. *The Frequency and Percentage of Cultural Exophoric References Referring to Cultural/Historical Heritage in Each Series*

Coursebook	Frequency	Percentage
Touch Stone series	57	37.01
American File series	340	20.34
Top Notch series	27	22.88
Total English series	34	14.00

As it is displayed in Table 5, 37.01% of cultural exophoric references in *Touch Stone* series, 20.34% of cultural exophoric references in *American File* series, 22.88% of cultural exophoric references in *Top Notch* series, and 14.00% of cultural exophoric references in *Total English* series refer to cultural/historical heritage. Therefore, it can be concluded that *Touch Stone* series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners regarding the reference to cultural/historical heritage.

The coursebooks were also evaluated by both students and teachers based on administering cultural section of the Shatery and Azargoon's (2012) nativized checklist. Since the results of the questionnaires were too long and beyond the limits of the journal, they were not included in this part. Suffice it to say that the findings obtained from the analysis of the questionnaires confirmed the obtained results of the study regarding cultural bias of *American File* coursebook in comparison with the other coursebooks under investigation.

4. Discussion

The related research questions were answered on the basis of the extracted cultural exophoric references from four common English textbooks used at Iranian English Language institutes. As the findings show, *American File* series is so rich with regard to presenting culture in comparison with *Touch Stone*, *Top Notch*, and *Total English* series .

In terms of reference to people, American File and Touch Stone series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners. It suggests that getting familiar with the well-known people and celebrities of the target culture might be more important for the authors of the two coursebook series in comparison with other coursebook series under investigation .

On the other hand, with regard to reference to places, Total English series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners. It might show that presenting cultural places sounded to be more significant for Total English authors in presenting their culture.

English series imposed a greater referential burden on EFL learners. In all coursebooks of Touch Stone series, only eight examples referring to natural resorts were found which probably implies that reference to natural resorts was of little significance for the authors of the coursebook. In contrast, the authors of the other three coursebooks under investigation used this kind of reference quite suitably to introduce their own culture .

Considering all these categories and the referential burden imposed by each series on EFL learners in terms of each type, it might be concluded that Touch Stone series' authors focused mostly on cultural/historical heritage and Total English series' authors emphasized mainly on places to introduce their culture. On the contrary, American File and Top Notch series' authors used various types of references fairly equally to introduce their culture which is probably more effective in this case.

5. Conclusion

Cohesion and cohesive devices are highly significant issues for teachers. They should know the value of cohesion as a helpful means for enhancing students' reading and writing skills. The results of the present study are most beneficial for EFL teachers and instructors. The results of this study might convince teachers and instructors to accept the role of cohesive devices in EFL reading. Teachers should choose texts on the basis of the factors which contribute to readability of texts like cohesion.

The present study will also be helpful for the students for easier comprehension of the text. Moreover, it can improve the findings of previous studies and might give new insights to teachers and students to develop the learning and teaching of reading skills at schools. Besides, the analysis of cultural exophoric

references can be taken advantage of as the authentic data so that the learners can practice and enhance their comprehension in reading texts.

Finally findings of this research can help the development of the area of research on exophoric reference. It is hoped that this small study will attract the interests of researchers to focus on this area in further studies.

In light of the insufficiency of the present study, some suggestions are proposed for future research. First, among many coursebooks used in private English institutes, only four coursebooks has been used in the present study. It is recommended that future research can compare other coursebooks. Another area of research that can be attempted is comparing and computing other types of cultural exophoric references such as reference to foreign cultures.

In conclusion, learners might enhance their reading comprehension by being familiar with cohesive devices, especially exophoric references. It provides learners with a better understanding of a text. Thus, for L2 learners to be good reader and writers, they need to be instructed on cohesive devices, particularly exophoric references.

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