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# Culture in English Language Teaching: A curricular evaluation of English textbooks for foreign language learners

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A critical assessment of the current systematical planning and an in-depth review of the teaching materials efficiently improve fine educational materials to the benefit of developed learning and teaching contexts. In some countries, such as Iran, that belong to the expanding circle, local book writers provide English teaching materials that may ignore sociopragmatic language components, particularly culture. There is a blind spot and massive gap in the related literature regarding the inclusion and organization of cultural knowledge in these textbooks. This study investigated culture in Iranian schools by conducting a nationwide survey to fill the gap. The investigation was based on the components of the curriculum administered and used in Iran, namely *Vision Series*. The evaluation was aimed at two prospects; firstly, to interpret whether the English textbooks taught at high schools in Iran have standardized principles and elements regarding *Communication* and *Culture*. Secondly, to investigate the extent to which cultural knowledge and technology as the curricular components are implemented in the *Vision Series*. In this respect, the 5Cs checklist developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages was employed. The evaluation done by 120 English language teachers reveals that the textbook *Vision 3* is more preferable and desirable than *Vision 1* and *2*, yet not significantly. The evaluation based on the seven curricular components indicates that *Vision* textbooks have standards at a low level and are not designed and developed to enhance language learners' cultural competence in the target language. This study highlights the role of enhancing language learners' cultural awareness in the expanding circle of World Englishes.

KEYWORDS

EFL textbooks, curriculum design, material development, teaching, learning, culture, education

## Introduction

Curriculum analysis is based on assessing the components within a curriculum to improve and identify possible problems in the early learning stages. In addition, formative assessments and summative assessments can implement curriculum analyses. The former assessment may recommend potential measures while the latter supports decision-making for the prospective continuation of the curriculum. Furthermore, scholars (e.g., Zare-Behtash and Banaruee, 2017) discuss whether such parts can still support one another or maintain their goals. Teachers may

also aim to identify the strengths and achievements to strengthen them. It is also very analytical to examine every underlying assumption of the defensible and valid curriculum to identify the unforeseen areas and biased perspectives; to highlight the curriculum's value to its target beneficiaries. Teachers' awareness of the design and curriculum plus a sense of ownership in classrooms may contribute in courses' success (Acosta and Slotta, 2018). Iranian schools are textbook-centered; presumably, the current teaching and learning quality depends on the designed and developed curriculum. Hence, the analysis of these textbooks will provide deep insight into the teaching and learning process and lead the advocates to the appropriate and necessary changes (Inal, 2006). We aimed to investigate the inclusion of culture and its role in fine curriculum development. The focus of this study was on the analysis of curricular components to help teachers increase their ability to develop their curricula goals, methods, materials, and assessments. Therefore, it is critically important to find practical solutions for possible problems that might hinder the language learning process and designing a program, course structure, teaching method, and choosing materials. With a focus on curricular components and associated problems, this study aims to examine culture in three textbooks currently being taught in Iranian high schools.

## Textbooks for English as a Foreign Language in Iran

Besides the practical activities deployed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, textbooks in Iran are the basis for most of the language students receive. For most teachers, textbooks are considered the primary source of information for the readings. Moreover, the language components and the types of proficiency exercises supplied for classroom involvement are balanced. These learners consider textbooks the primary contact source with the language regardless of whether the instructor provided the input or any other means. In Iran, average students learn English within a seven-year curriculum, starting from junior high school, mainly in high or middle school. However, public education has failed to enable EFL learners to reach complete competence in using English. Besides, it has failed to encourage them to interact confidently. We focused on three English textbooks employed throughout a three-year high school. This study observes how far the prescribed textbooks can prepare learners with the language requirements to meet the foreign culture. English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks have a dominant position in the context of both Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). They represent the right primary tool for investigating the teaching content, particularly at a discoursal level or a pragmatic one (c.f. Nguyen, 2011; Meihami and Khanlarzadeh, 2015; Rashidi and Ghaedsharafi, 2015). Ndura (2004) contends that instructional materials impact learners' mindsets and tendencies toward themselves, others, and society. Different voices are louder *via* ELT textbooks when they address cultural perspectives (Shin et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the attention to representing various cultural values regarding a synergy of target cultures is not comparable in these books (*cf.* Tseng, 2002; Yuen, 2011). ELT materials contain some hidden curriculum explicitly addressing different cultural messages (Littlejohn and Windeatt, 1989). Curriculum investigations include issues such as a framework for planning curriculum, basic knowledge of pedagogy, prior knowledge of learning, the role of

practice, learning as a developmental process, current approaches and practices, current practices in ELT curriculum, collaborations and partnerships, evaluation and curriculum, and issues and directions. Even training programs need curriculum evaluations to reach an effective content-relevant and feasible curriculum (Downes et al., 2017). Pedagogists should see the curriculum means differently from things to things and people variously. Accordingly, curriculum analysis is believed to unpack the curriculum to clarify the plans and the syllabus. Needs analysis is an evaluative review of English materials (an integral part) that requires different factors, such as providing sufficient attention to all contexts involved in English language learning.

However, in some cases, this vital factor is entirely removed from the ideas of principal stakeholders (or at least limited to it). Previous research (c.f Rashidi and Kehtarfard, 2014) addresses evaluating an English textbook taught at Iranian high schools for the third graders. The results revealed that the textbook could not support all of the language components and skills fully at once or altogether. Eventually, textbooks were suggested to be modified or enriched by additional instructional materials. Textbooks are considered the heart of ELT programs (Sheldon, 1988) that must be fully accomplished. The positive and influential role that textbooks recreate in English as a second or foreign language has been researched by several ELT scholars (see Hutchinson and Torres, 1994; Cunningsworth, 1995; Riazi, 2003). Textbooks are crucial when teaching and learning languages (Riazi, 2003) and are associated with critical factors in ELT after teachers as the primary source. Furthermore, textbooks can be effective for autonomous learning, mental representation of content, provoking ideas, and providing student reference sources (Cunningsworth, 1995). Textbooks are the icons where syllabuses reflect preordained learning and teaching objectives and where less experienced teachers need support. Cunningsworth (1995) contended that the approval and suitability of textbooks rely on meeting learners' needs. Cogent textbooks reflect learners' needs to a great extent (Zare-Behtash and Banaruee, 2017). A textbook can be determined entirely or be pre-prepared thoroughly. A certain amount of well-established material, based on equality with various instructors and students, benefits the program's accountability and effectiveness. Evaluation of teaching materials ascertains the relevance of those materials to learners' specific needs (Hutchinson and Waters, 1983). In addition, the evaluation of the materials provides the right path for teachers to enhance their awareness of the nature of language teaching and learning. He likewise proposes that teaching materials ought to be selected wisely. Furthermore, Sheldon (1988) argued that all textbooks in the field of ELT should have some criteria such as effectiveness, marked features, and fitness.

## English teaching in Iran

To comprehend the significant features of this study, providing some initial facts about the educational scenario of schools in Iran, which are comprised of three nonharmonic levels, is a mandate. Primary school is considered to be the first stage and lasts 5 years. The pupils at this level begin their journey when they celebrate their seventh birthday. This stage precedes junior high school (or middle school), which consists of 3 years of direct education. Secondary school (or senior high school), which involves 4 years of study, comes next. Twelve years of education are planned before students compete in the national university admission examination to enter their

favorable university. Regarding ELT, English is considered a foreign language in Iran and fits in Kachru's (1986) third concentric circle, namely the expanding circle of World Englishes. Schoolers learn English in the first year of middle school at eleven as a compulsory curriculum subject for 7 years. The Ministry of Education is the chief principal for all schooling sectors. The Ministry of Education designs all school books without any alternatives. Indeed, whether state-run or private, schools are compelled to teach these textbooks. Iranians consider English so crucial that the quality of the English language program and the skills of educators or teachers working in each school can define a family's choice of language of sending their children to one school or another (Zare-Behtash and Banaruee, 2017). According to Dubin and Olshtain (1986), students' desires and states of mind play an essential role in foreign/s language learning. Considering teaching English, typically, as a foreign language in Iran, textbooks are the mere source of education. Entire materials enclosed in the books were critically scrutinized and evaluated for this study. In this respect, cultural and ideological issues involved in teaching or learning are significant as they also lead to cultural concerns in parents.

## Role of textbooks in EFL contexts

EFL textbooks include published books developed to improve learners' language and communication mastery (Sheldon, 1988). Textbooks serve as a learning tool and teaching support tool. In this vein, Sohail (2011) frames that textbooks are an integral part of teaching for several compelling reasons listed below:

- To assist the learner with content,
- To assist them in self-teaching,
- To deliver the lowest fundamental Knowledge in one place,
- To provide logical and ample material,
- To secure uniformity of sound benchmark,
- To deliver confirmation and upkeep,
- To equip the system with a base where all teachers and learners initiate and continue to work.

As evident, textbooks play a crucial part in language education and learning domains and are considered a paramount vehicle for outside dialect learning. A book has numerous parts in an EFL classroom to be a specific teacher, outline, asset, coach, specialist, and ideology (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). Ellis (1997) also emphasizes the need to evaluate textbooks. Consequently, the researchers carried out several textbook evaluations using checklists and questionnaires. Therefore, examining the suitability of various textbooks appears to be of utmost importance in illustrating the use and selecting the most functional, beneficial, and productive materials for the context. Instructional materials and tools, particularly textbooks, form the skeleton of many language programs (Richards, 2006). Without their relevant textbook, Hutchinson and Torres (1994), teaching and learning conditions are not complete. Riazi (2003) stated that only teachers involved in language education might create ways to utilize their materials and understand how valuable they can be. It is widely believed that textbooks provide a clear framework for education. The opposing side contends that different needs promote interests and learning methods. A specific textbook, as a result, cannot account for such differences. Moreover, these textbooks' topics may not always

apply and intrigue their students. Consequently, teachers' creativity is limited or inhibited, choosing the right topic is a motivational strategy to engage learners (Dornyei, 2001; Farsani, 2022). The sequence and structure, a planned one, of a textbook are non-realistic or relatively valuable for all contexts. There is a rationale behind every book. Looking at books as the mediating object between teachers and learners, scholars such as Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989) argue that a course's structure should bring uniformity and standardization. Learners who study in institutions that work under similar educational systems may familiarize themselves with the content to be checked up. Prepared textbooks may also be beneficial to the teachers and their classes. Recently, the number of ELT materials in the market has dramatically soared. As a result, selecting an appropriate and cogent textbook, seemingly, has turned into a formidable task. Despite the importance of its appliance, ELT materials evaluation has been a revived tendency in language teaching; it is believed not to have a long history, in any case. The study of how to develop materials did not receive enough attention earlier, but after 1990, academic textbooks on this topic started to be published (Tomlinson, 2003).

## Need for textbook evaluation

Scholars conduct evaluations to decide the extent to which a curricular system is practical. Financial gain has become the primary goal of the textbook publisher. Rather than positively contributing to the development of students' language acquisition, many textbooks lead to language acquisition failure and, at worst, include serious pedagogical and functional deficiencies (Litz, 2005). Subsequently, choosing the right textbook is becoming increasingly relevant to all tiers of ELT. Textbook assessment and choice have advanced into an efficient activity through the exertion of textbooks. Even though most classroom teachers will not be included in the generation of reading material, all instructors have the obligation for course reading assessment, choice, and adaption. With this in mind, we need to instruct EFL textbook assessments to ensure that EFL textbooks support the achievement of our teaching goals (Mukundan, 2007).

## Presentation of culture in ELT textbooks

Chastain (1988) links 'culture' as a relatively intricate notion to second language instruction in two groups: small c culture and large C culture. The former relates to the method of people's lives. In contrast, the latter relates to a country's financial, community, and political history, including its renowned politicians, idols, scientists, and artists. Based on the connection between language and global culture, several hypotheses were proposed by Smith (1976, as cited in McKay, 1980). Students learning an international language do not require accommodating to the cultural patterns of native speakers of that language: the reign of an international language changes into dominance. The educational purpose of studying an international language is, for learners, to be able to pass their beliefs and traditions, and lifestyles to others. Using ELT methods is one of the techniques to cope with the cultural inflection of studying English is to use ELT methods. These methods describe English as an international language (Modiano, 2001). He recommended various teaching methods in English classes to elevate cultural correspondence and provide a

perspective on the language associated with a comprehensive collection of people and cultures.

Cortazzi and Jin (1999) distinguish between three cultural presentation groups in books and language content. Originator culture, this type applies students' individual culture as content, objective culture, the culture of the group of domestic countries is included in this type and global target culture which employs different cultures all over the world. Accordingly, English is the most used language worldwide, contends McKay (1980). The information from the culture-based context may not be limited to native English countries and should include regional cultural ideas. In addition, an appropriate ELT approach requires regional assumptions about teacher and learner roles. McKay (ibid) collects information on teaching methods appropriate to local conditions. He also emphasizes the power of bilingual English teachers as they are familiarized with the regional community. Primarily, learning is a sort of information reception and is typically a form of information exchange in actual educational settings (Vuong et al., 2022). Hence, the accessible information in English textbooks along with cultural values provide input for language learners' mental information processing. Regarding language learning, meaning attachment is especially important when examining the information filtering processes. Here, culture is crucial for creating connections between newly received information and prior knowledge (existing trusted values in the mind). In this vein, the perspectives of information processing have benefits for language learning research, particularly in the modern digital era [for detailed discussion regarding information processing, refer to Vuong et al. (2022)]. Arguably, textbooks lack successful L2 practice (Cook, 2008), and this shortage is highlighted when it comes to information reception and exchange. Schematizing England and the United States as a black canvas, EFL textbooks rarely offer English speakers in multiple languages, even in multicultural settings. Thus at the end of the language program, students will never apprehend that L2 users are communicating with native speakers, let alone other L2 users. Crawford (1995) admitted some shortcomings of textbooks. He stressed that textbooks (a) could misinterpret the content, providing a perfectly white and average picture of the world and avoiding controversial topics (b) most textbooks ignore the individual needs of students with a specific background since they are listed as a world bazaar (c) can also make students dependent.

There are many benefits to incorporating local culture into ELT textbooks. Even though utilized reading materials have increased the quality of textbooks lately, the procedure involved in selecting an appropriate text has not been facilitated to teachers or, in particular, to administrators (Wen-Cheng et al., 2011, p. 54). In the context of Iran, growing willingness among the youth to acquire English has turned the evaluation of such books into a fundamental everyday matter in all areas, academic and non-academic. Almost unlike universities or colleges that typically follow a fixed schedule and suggest using predetermined textbooks. This prescription is ruled from the governmental organizations to all parts of state-wide curricula. By contrast, the private sector, consisting of institutes and language schools, has a high degree of versatility to benefit from instructional materials. Consequently, a wide variation is not what they adopted, but great purpose-designed corporeality is appropriated for all institutions providing language education. This vast multiplicity, which is also diverse, is currently faced with textbooks. In the current study, it is considered unfeasible to comprehensively evaluate the textbooks

available in the market. Institutes across the country for different proficiency levels have methods to imply and convey. Zare-Behtash and Banaruee (2017) state that it is necessary to initially establish the robust steps, the following stages will take care of themselves. In their research, they compared the efficacy of Advanced Headway and Iran Language Institute (ILI) advanced series using American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL, 1996) checklist. Their findings revealed that Headway published by Oxford University Press edited by English native authors was highly preferable and acceptable in all criteria compared to ILI series which was developed by Iranian authors and publisher. Raseks et al. (2010) evaluated four ELT textbooks (Headway, Interchange, On Your Mark, and Top Notch) post-use or post-treatment in the context of Hong Kong. It was concluded that these textbooks introduce intangible cultural issues to EFL students in Hong Kong at the elementary level of proficiency. ELT materials being developed worldwide aid linguistic knowledge and cultural messages altogether (Gray, 2000, 2010). Students identify such cultural messages through two channels. Primarily, they reflect distinct ideological beliefs and values offered in societies that are implicit and essentially invisible. These ideological etiquettes are known and researched under the term 'hidden curriculum.' Such a hidden curriculum aims to provide EFL learners with a unique worldview ignoring the presence of such awareness among teachers and learners (Gray, 2010). Next, the provided teaching materials are believed to specify a specific language learning culture in various forms, such as the teaching methodologies, approaches, techniques, and the roles teachers and learners perform in education (Richards and Renandya, 2002).

## Method and design

To accomplish the study's goal, the researcher analyzed three English textbooks. This research inquired about the purpose of communicative language education curricular elements of three momentous textbooks, the *Vision Series*, widely studied in Iran. To this aim, the participants rated a checklist with five Cs standards and seven curricular constituent assessments established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL, 1996) (see the Appendix). Evaluating a textbook is not a mere content analysis browsing through readers and judging its components; it is a subject of frequent instructing and re-instructing the exact text, and obtaining feedback from a population of teachers with relevant experience. For our research, we employed the ACTFL textbook evaluation checklist. This investigation has resulted in the revelation to judge to what extent the textbooks taught in Iran are preferable and desirable considering communication and cultures in all situations. The research method applied throughout the study was content analysis. We considered both external and internal aspects of textbooks for the evaluation. Littlejohn (1998) urged that a discernible image of the target culture encouraged by EFL textbooks requires a thorough analysis of internal and external aspects of the textbook. It is argued that (see Cunningsworth, 1995; Littlejohn, 1998) external aspects comprise the general design of books, such as the sequence of items, its table of contents, and pictures. On the other hand, the language and linguistic components, learning content, and exercises form the internal aspects. Concerning the scale of this research, it is unattainable to examine and discuss all these aspects disparately. Hence, an overall rating by teachers may suggest an in-depth analysis of internal and external aspects altogether.

## Participants

According to controlled quota sampling, we non-randomly selected 120 experienced English teachers at high schools in Iran. As the rating required special requirements, we controlled the study population in favor of some particular features. To this aim, we recruited a homogeneous group of participants actively teaching in Iran. They had a minimum 3-year-experience of teaching at high schools and a 3-year teaching experience at language schools in the private sector (at language schools, international books published by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press are taught; thus, these teachers have an international worldview). Since gender was not considered a variable in this study, participants were selected, disregarding this factor. As the country enjoys a great variety of cultural societies with diverse language varieties, we selected six teachers from 20 states. The sample consisted of an equal number of teachers for each book (two teachers to evaluate *Vision 1*, two teachers to evaluate *Vision 2*, and two teachers to evaluate *Vision 3* in each province). This non-probability sampling supported the study's all-encompassing geographical tendency in Iran. It provided the population with equal opportunity, reduced skewness in the data distribution, and increased our findings' generalizability.

## Materials and data collection procedure

Three English textbooks taught in high schools in Iran, *Vision 1*, *Vision 2*, and *Vision 3*, were under content analysis. The instrument to evaluate the textbooks was ACTFL Questionnaire. To this aim, all teachers were asked to fill out the questionnaire for the appointed textbook. The researchers contacted the teachers *via* Skype, expounded on different aspects of culture, and instructed them on how to rate the questionnaire. Meetings, on average, took 30 min, and the questionnaires were filled out within 14 days. The teachers were recommended to revisit both internal and external aspects of the book for meticulous analysis. Every participant was gifted 500,000 Iranian tomans (equal to 20 US dollars) for their generous contribution. All questionnaires were analyzed, and the mean values' result was subsequently evaluated.

## Data analysis

The submitted checklists by 120 EFL teachers were accumulated, and detailed analyses were calculated. The mean value obtained as descriptive statistics represented checklists filled out in three groups of 40. The five C's curricular components were investigated and analyzed in details. A score for each item is suggested to judge the books based on the standards' organizing principles and elements. To reach a convincing result that shows the quality of the desirable and culturally-influential textbooks, the highest the scores, the better.

## Results

This section presents a descriptive analysis of data in two parts. The first part provides a clear illustration of the evaluation of the data of the three English textbooks regarding Communication and Cultures. The aim is to present a detailed picture of the extent to which high school textbooks observe the guidelines of ACTFL. Subsequently, the second part of the analysis displayed the data attained from the questionnaire regarding evaluating three English books according to the seven curricular components (See the Appendix) that were analyzed and interpreted in two sections of Cultural knowledge and Technology. Finally, the result has been discussed in detail. The first component is 'Communication.'

## Communication

This section of the evaluation focuses on assessing subjects related to communication. Communication in this evaluation represents subjects such as structures of vocabulary and grammar in developed materials, the balance between the four essential skills, the type of activities regarding the involvement of learners, activities based on the age of the learners, the linearity of the curriculum, and the transition of teaching materials. In general, it delivers what makes communication possible linguistically and in conversation (as observable from Table 1).

According to the provided data, all books (*Vision 1*, *2*, and *3*) received low polls (7.25, 6.50, 9.25, respectively) out of 20 points. This number was achieved out of the mean of 40 participants on each textbook. All three books have the same syllabus, while materials' content and difficulty level change ascendingly based on school grades. As observable, the activities in the textbooks do not support cooperative learning and the exchange of information. Thus, learners do not meet actual learning which is the reception, process, and exchange of information according to Vuong et al. (2022). New words were introduced at the beginning of the textbooks in each unit, followed by matching exercises. Some more vocabulary words were reported to be presented through conversations and reading sections. It is said to be primarily due to consolidated and delimited lesson plans and curriculum design throughout the *Vision Series*. It appears this curriculum makes the learners study grammar intensively. *Vision 3*, remarkably, there are some explanations of their functions with the introduction of the new vocabulary terms. The vocabulary layout is impressive as three to four sections focus on words and collocations per unit. The vocabulary load expressed in each section exceeds the *Vision 1 and 2*'s. Moreover, some listening tasks clarify their practicality and functions. Moreover, as the unit's language focus, the grammatical constructions are recursively presented in the following tasks in a spiral mode. All the textbooks present the four skills in four separate sections, and it seems the activities are planned to move from directed to transitional to communicative comparatively. However, it lacks balance between the presentation of four skills, and the book appears oriented toward writing and reading. Likewise, the distribution of time and drills related to specific teaching subjects is not well-allocated. Teachers must follow the teaching methodology and syllabus submitted to them. An exemplary syllabus for one unit is outlined below:

- Get Ready
- An Introduction to some Words
- Conversation
- Post task questions
- New Words and Expressions
- Reading

TABLE 1  Evaluation of *Vision Series* textbooks based on communication.

| Communication (Section total: 20 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Are students introduced to essential vocabulary and grammatical structures? (4pts.) | 1.25 | 1 | 2 |
| 2. Do the activities move from controlled to transitional to communicative? Is there a balance between listening, speaking, reading, and writing? (4 pts.) | 1 | 1 | 1.75 |
| 3. Are there a variety of meaningful activities that provide opportunities for individual, paired, cooperative learning, and information gap activities? (4 pts.) | 1.50 | 1.50 | 1 |
| 4. Are the activities set in an age-appropriate context and level-appropriate? (4 pts.) | 1.50 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. Is there a spiraling presentation of concepts that builds in a perpetual review of vocabulary and grammar concepts? (4 pts.) | 2 | 1 | 1.50 |
| Subtotal | 7.25 | 6.50 | 9.25 |

- Post Task Reacting Questions
- Vocabulary Development
- Grammar Introduction through Passage
- Grammar Exercises
- Listening and Speaking
- Speaking Exercises
- Listening Exercises
- Pronunciation
- Writing (Explanation of a linguistic component)
- Writing Exercises
- What You Learned (A self-review of what the students studied throughout the unit)

## Connections

Textbooks provided for language learners may pay considerable attention to connecting language learning with the school subjects and the socially heated topics. Obviously, young learners are in need to learn more about their school subject matters with a prospect of future academic success. Hence, providing language learners with cross-disciplinary texts and the related vocabulary has always been compelling and considered a big advantage. This would also provide more space to bring more tenses and linguistic component into the material development and the syllabus. The enquiries in the connection section investigated whether the students were provided with the opportunities to use English within other subject areas such as math and science. As the data in Table 2 represents, all of the three textbooks included texts in these school subjects and created a convenient connection. The provided texts consisted of popular topics, such as business, advertisement, nature, earth, politics, theater, schooling and socio-economic issues.

## Comparisons

Comparing the culture of English-speaking countries with the Iranian culture from the linguistic perspective can be of great attraction for language learners. Discussing the similarities and differences between their L1 and the target language can encourage them to explore the target culture. Besides, it can enhance their knowledge of the learning culture.

Another interesting aspect that can be the basis of comparison between Persian and English is the structures of the two languages.

This can be the subject of a lot of discussions in the classroom and can make students more conscious of structures of English. Hence, it enhances students' explicit knowledge of English structures. Traditionally, this approach is considered contrastive analysis. According to two contradicting views, this could have positive and negative aspects. According to the first view, it is better not to discuss the structures of the first language in foreign language classrooms, as it might interfere with the process of learning. According to the second view, discussing these subjects can raise the level of consciousness among learners. Depending on the needs of learners, a balance can be created between activities that are conducted in the classroom and activities that are conducted outside by the students themselves. In this way, students can develop different aspects of their language in a balanced manner. Here, the key to success is to manage the process of learning by employing a variety of activities.

As Table 3 shows, none of the textbooks provides the learners with the linguistic features their native languages with target language to compare with. The *Vision Series* does not ask the students to compare the target culture with their native culture, only one task was observed in the textbook questioned the learners to answer whether similar research done in their country, would have similar outcome as the one in the USA. There was a big lack and gap of posing questions, introducing comparable topics, and making challenges between cultural concepts and patterns. The collected data in this study shows that contrastive analysis of English and Persian has mainly been ignored in books at Iranian senior high schools.

## Communities

The data that were collected in this study indicated that high school textbooks provide role models for students to use foreign language in their lives for personal interest and enjoyment. This is particularly the case with conversation activities that are presented in a separate section in each unit. These activities can support students with gaining the necessary skills to participate in conversational exchanges in the real world beyond the context of classroom. The represented data in Table 4 suggests that neither the *Vision Series* provides role models, nor ample samples of everyday situations to practice the language. The textbooks were found profound with texts from various topics which do not follow communicative, content-based, task-based or post method criteria. The texts and tasks show that basically students are about to get the language and its content, not its usage in practice. Besides, the data collected in this study indicated that to some extent, high school textbooks provide examples

TABLE 2  Evaluation of *Vision Series* textbooks based on connections.

| Connections (Section total: 10 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Are the students afforded opportunities to utilize the target language in conjunction with other subject areas such as math and science? (5 pts.) | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. Are there themes that encourage cross-disciplinary projects? (5 pts.) | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Subtotal | 5 | 6 | 7 |

TABLE 3  Evaluation of *Vision Series* textbooks based on comparisons.

| Comparisons (Section total: 10 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Are students asked to look at their own native language and compare it linguistically to the target language? (5 pts.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. Are students asked to compare their own culture and make comparisons with the target culture to discover similar and different cultural concepts and patterns? (5 pts.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Subtotal | 0 | 0 | 0 |

TABLE 4  Evaluation of *Vision Series* textbooks based on communities.

| Communities (Section total: 10 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Are students provided with role models or individuals who use foreign languages in their lives for personal interest and enjoyment? (5 pts.) | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| 2. Are students given examples of ways they can use their foreign language in the future beyond the school experience? (5 pts.) | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Subtotal | 2 | 4 | 7 |

of the ways for students to use their foreign language beyond the school experiences. This may be an important part of every language program, as the aim of any educational course is to prepare learners for real life activities. In order to improve the quality of language teaching in high schools, this aspect can be at the focus of attention of textbook designers.

## Cultures

The inclusion of culture in language teaching programs is an issue that has raised many debates. The data collected in this study indicated that cultural issues have largely been ignored in Iranian high school textbooks. Several factors must be considered when discussing the inclusion of culture in language teaching programs. The first one is that the inclusion of cultural topics in the language classroom depends on the course's goals. Some language programs such as English for academic and occupational purposes specifically focus on academic and occupational objectives. These courses do not usually need the inclusion of cultural topics, as the main objective is to communicate in an academic or occupational setting. However, the main objective of some courses is to prepare learners for living among people whose first language is English. Such a course needs to be different from the courses mentioned above in terms of the inclusion of cultural topics. Since this course aims to prepare learners to live among people and to have daily interactions with them, learners need to gain some cultural knowledge. Otherwise, they will not be able to communicate effectively with others (as observable from Table 5).

Notably, the *Vision Series* does not present that much authenticity due to the failure to meet the readers with English culture and up-to-date visual images of the target culture. It appears

this series delivers a narrow range and inferior representations of countries. Meager diverse cultural topics are introduced, mainly presenting general information about big C such as art and general science. Little c culture concerns how people live, as Chastain (1988) argued, while big C culture has to do with the economic, social, and political history and the great politicians, heroes, writers, and artists of a country. Such cultural knowledge can be essential to every language program, as any educational course aims to prepare learners for real-life activities. Designers must heed to the target culture to improve the quality of language teaching in high schools. Results obtained in this study indicated that the content of textbooks in Iranian high schools does not observe the guidelines of ACTFL in terms of culture.

## Cultural knowledge

Textbooks at Iranian high schools have been specifically designed to improve the general linguistic skills of students. They do not have the aim of improving the cultural knowledge of students. The primary objective of these books is to improve linguistic skills rather than cultural knowledge. Therefore, the element of culture is almost absent in most parts of high school textbooks. In order to fill this gap in high school textbooks, teachers can introduce some supplementary materials as further reading for outside classroom activities. Such activities can improve students' reading comprehension proficiency and cultural knowledge. Unfortunately, such activities are not taken seriously in many Iranian high schools. Presumably, part of this problem originates from teacher-training courses. It seems that high school teachers need some training in order to become more prepared for teaching this aspect of language.

TABLE 5  Evaluation of *Vision Series* textbooks based on cultures.

| Cultures (Section total: 10 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Are there wide varieties of authentic, up-to-date visual images of the target culture? (2 pts.) | 0 | 0.50 | 0 |
| 2. Is the cultural information age-appropriate to stimulate interest? (2 pts.) | 0.25 | 0.50 | 025 |
| 3. Is a broad range and diverse representation of countries presented? (2 pts.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. Does the teaching of the target culture incorporate the learners exploring their own culture? (2 pts.) | 0.25 | 0.25 | 0.25 |
| 5. Are all "Little c" and "Big C" culture represented? (2 pts.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Subtotal | 0.50 | 1.25 | 0.50 |

TABLE 6  Evaluation of *Vision Series* cultural knowledge according to ACTFL.

| Cultural Knowledge (Section total: 5 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Is the cultural content accurate and current? (3 pts.) | 0.75 | 0.5 | 1 |
| 2. Are the cultural notes/readings interesting, significant, and appropriate for the age level? (2 pts.) | 0.25 | 0.75 | 0.5 |
| Subtotal | 1 | 1.25 | 1.5 |

As observable from Table 6, the *Vision Series* are far from accurate cultural content and do not contain local or targeted cultural texts. Students in any of the books do not encounter content unconditionally related to pressing cultural problems. There is no text related to the big culture; topics such as Arts, Gender differences, and Freedom are absent. The lack of imagery components to introduce the target culture and lifestyle of people is distinguished. Apart from ignorance of the target culture, no single unit points to a clash of cultures, stereotypes, and nationalities against other nations, not even in exercises and events. Overall, the data collected in this study shows that cultural issues are largely ignored in Iranian high school textbooks.

## Technology

Technological tools have recently become across-the-board in language teaching programs worldwide. Iranian high schools have been no exception to these positive developments; they have not been equally equipped. The future of education is dependent on how effectively we implement the technology devices in teaching and learning. Hu and Guo (2021) argue that an effective course in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) must enjoy four contents of (1) education goals, (2) curriculum content, (3) STEM teaching, and (4) formative and summative evaluation. Hence, technology may support every kind of learning. Technology can provide learners with open sources so that they enjoy state-of-the-art tasks without considering and worrying the expenses. Open educational resources may motivate and encourage students to engage themselves in learning (Nusbaum and Cuttler, 2020; as observable from Table 7).

The data collected in this study indicated there is a severe lack in implementing technology in English education in Iran. The teachers stated that many high school students use technological tools outside their school curriculum participating in extracurricular programs provided by the private sector, which is unaffordable for a vast majority of the students. Employing such tools is particularly useful for improving productive skills such as writing and speaking. This shortage has been previously observed in studies in the context of Iran [refer to Zare-Behtash and Banaruee (2017)]. If language learners

appropriately use these tools, a lot of time and energy can be saved as students do not need to be physically in the classroom for multiple activities. Therefore, it is necessary to take significant measures to develop these tools in Iranian high schools. In order to achieve this objective, special training courses can be held to train teachers and students to use such software. Unfortunately, many students are unwilling to use these tools because they do not have the necessary computer skills to use such software. Therefore, holding special courses for introducing technological tools such as software and training students seems necessary in Iranian high schools. The *Vision Series* contains a few listening exercises in textbooks; however, listening is not practiced in classrooms as they are not equipped with players. This listening is included in only one section of each listening unit and is not linked to any other skill. No CD-ROM is provided, and its website is a commercial platform and does not provide educational support for language learners. The benefits of technology-based education may be multifaceted. The results of the study by Tran et al. (2021a) revealed that a curriculum based on science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics enhance learners' creativity. Moreover, technology in such curriculum can help students maintain education (Tran et al., 2021b). It has been argued that culture also shapes creativity to a great extent (Shao et al., 2019).

## Organization and applicability

Learning essential lexical items is a fundamental part of language learning. Therefore, it is critically important to pay special attention to these parts of the language. In textbooks taught in Iranian high schools, a list of new vocabularies is presented in each unit. These words are used in the context of the first part of each unit. Seeing new vocabularies in context is the best way to learn. This feature of high school textbooks corresponds to the guidelines of ACTFL. However, this part of the textbook is concise, and each new item is usually used in just one sentence. Although this method is effective for teaching new vocabularies, the number of sentences used in this part of each unit seems to be small. This is problematic in two respects. Firstly, presenting new vocabulary items, complicated ones, does not

TABLE 7  Evaluation of *Vision Series* technology according to ACTFL.

| Technology (Section total: 5 points) | Vision 1 | Vision 2 | Vision 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Does the program have listening activities in the pupil's edition? (1 pt.) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 2. Does the program have a video that is integrated with the text? (1 pt.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. Does the program have a CD-ROM that provides meaningful and interactive practice? (1 pt.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. Does the program have a website? (1 pt.) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 5. Does the program suggest engaging, worthwhile Internet activities? (1 pt.) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Subtotal | 2 | 2 | 2 |

guarantee that the students will learn them effectively. It would be better to present every vocabulary in several contexts to ensure they are practiced effectively. Secondly, a new vocabulary item may have several meanings. Some of these meanings are closely related. For example, the noun and verb of a lexical item may have identical forms. These are very subtle differences that need to be learned. Presenting a new vocabulary item in just one or two sentences does not guarantee that such minor differences are met. One of the best ways to teach such minor differences is to present several sentences simultaneously. In addition, some words have several meanings that are entirely unrelated. For example, the word 'bark' has several meanings that differ from each other. In the majority of texts in high school textbooks, just one of the meanings of such words is used in a single sentence. If such words are instructed in several sentences in one part of the textbook, students can learn all of them in one part. This synthesis can help students learn a word's meanings more effectively.

Another problem relates to the methods students use to learn new words. Many Iranian high school students habitually memorize new words in a list of single words with their Persian translations. Unfortunately, this method of learning new words is widely used by many students. Therefore, many students have difficulty using words in the production in an authentic context. When words are memorized in a list of single words with their Persian translations, the students do not acquire the ability to use them in speaking and writing because, in the best case, they are learned passively. The passive learning of words is one of the most common problems of Iranian language learners. When words are learned passively, learners can remember them by seeing or hearing them, but they cannot use words in the production. It seems that textbooks in Iranian high schools have partially been responsible for strengthening this terrible habit among high school students. Some changes can be made in the textbooks to encourage students to employ more effective methods for learning new vocabularies. One of the possible changes is to enrich texts with more content and sample sentences. This propelling gives students the chance to have more exposure to words in the proper context.

Moreover, this study's results indicated that high school textbooks observe ACTFL guidelines in teaching grammar to some extent. In each unit of these textbooks, a grammatical point is explained. Then, several written and oral exercises follow that focus on that grammatical point. Such exercises' oral part could help students use grammatical structures actively. However, the number of such exercises in the textbooks is limited. In order to solve this problem, teachers could introduce some supplementary materials. These supplementary materials can help students acquire a complete mastery of using those grammatical structures. For instance, in high school textbooks, several sentences are presented to show how gerund forms are used in sentences. Then several written and oral exercises follow. In these exercises, students have to use

gerund form and make some minor modifications to the structure of sentences. Although such exercises could help students to understand these structures, they could not be an effective tool for students to produce such structures actively in the production of language. This amount of exercise gives students a partial mastery of such structures. When discussing mastery of grammatical structures, it is necessary to consider the goal and the situation in which those structures were constructed. When using grammatical structures in writing, the student can recheck them and revise them. However, in the case of speaking, the situation is entirely different. In speaking, students do not have the chance to correct their sentences. Therefore, when an exercise teaches grammatical structures, the aim of that exercise should be considered by designers of textbooks. This inconsideration is also evident in the case of the production of supplementary materials. According to the overall data, the *Vision 3* textbook scored better (35) than *Vision 1* and *2* (20 and 24, respectively). However, the achieved scores are highly insignificant since the scores were out of 100. This indicates that they have been materialized and edited poorly. The English textbooks taught in Iranian schools; namely, the *Vision Series*, do not meet international requirements regarding ACTFL yardsticks.

## Conclusion

We conclude that, to a large extent, the content of high school EFL textbooks in Iran ignores the English culture. Two crucial issues must be considered when textbooks are designed in an expanding circle similar to Iran. Firstly, recognition of state-of-the-art topics engages learners and prepares them to meet the requirements in cosmopolitan international interactions. High school students are usually between 13 and 18 years old. Some subjects are intriguing and challenging for this age, and evidently, some are not. For example, if the content of a unit is about sports, cinema, or unusual places in the world, students may become more willing to study. This enhanced awareness can help to create a livelier and more active environment in the classroom. According to the data collected from this study's participants, many activities in high school textbooks are inconvenient and considered unsuitable for the learners' age since they lack interest. Another aspect that could be especially noteworthy is the appropriateness of activities for the level of students. If units or even single sentences are selected from technical or unfamiliar sources, students may be unable to figure out the meaning of the sentence, which may harm the students. When students do not have a clear idea of the meanings of the sentences, they may be faced with difficulties digesting the grammatical points in those sentences. Therefore, EFL textbooks' curriculum designers and material developers must be meticulous in selecting texts and

even single sentences used in exercises. This is in line with a large body of research that highlight the role of textbooks to provide a tangible world for learners (Raseks et al., 2010), to send linguistic knowledge and cultural messages altogether (Gray, 2000, 2010), and to create intercultural communication (Zare-Behtash and Banaruee, 2017). The amount of language input should not overwhelm learners' intrinsic and extrinsic cognitive loads. EFL learners must familiarize themselves with the target culture and its idiosyncrasies that do not match the source language. The logical order of controlled-transitional-communicative in the textbooks helps students to move step by step. If this order is not observed in the textbooks, optimal learning will not be achieved. Course instructors must provide an analytical balance in the presentation of materials. Students may have difficulty learning more complex items if this order is not observed. For instance, students must first learn what Christianity is and then be exposed to Easter, Bishop, Pope, Church, and the related lexicon. In other words, providing EFL learners with the big culture and small culture is significantly necessary, whereas teaching big culture should precede the small culture.

## Pedagogical implications

Without properly-designed textbooks, it would be implausible to have a successful language teaching program. Therefore, it is crucial to design textbooks with extreme care in any educational program. This study identified the weaknesses and strengths of high school English textbooks taught in Iran. The results underscore deficiencies in these textbooks and their failure to teach the essential target culture and necessary cultural knowledge for communications. Hence, some modifications can be made to high school textbooks to make them more efficient and respond to the needs of high school students. Teaching communication strategies and teaching how to employ technological tools are significant measures that can be taken to improve the quality of language teaching in Iranian high schools.

## Suggestions for further research

This study tried to identify strengths and weaknesses of Iranian high schools English textbooks on the basis of guidelines of ACTFL. There are some related studies that can be conducted in future research projects. A similar study can be conducted on textbooks that are taught in other levels in Iranian schools. Also, more focused studies can be conducted on specific skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By conducting such studies, it can be revealed to what extent textbooks taught in Iranian schools follow guidelines of ACTFL in teaching specific skills. Also, curricular components at other levels in Iranian schools can be the subject of future research projects. If such studies are conducted in a larger scale in a variety of places in Iran, more reliable results can be achieved, which can help planners of Iranian educational system to improve the quality of language teaching in Iranian schools. In future research projects, participants could be selected from teachers and students. In this way, a comparison can be made between data that are collected from teachers and students. This can give a broader perspective to future studies, and the results can be analyzed from a broader perspective.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article is available at https://figshare.com/s/890c6d33b2317f5d2d82.

## Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

## Author contributions

HB: Conception or design of the work. DF, HB, and OKh-Z: Data collection. HB and DF: Data analysis and interpretation. DF, HB, and OKh-Z: Drafting the article. OKh-Z: Critical revision of the article. DF and HB: Final approval of the version to be published.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1012786/full#supplementary-material

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