English Language Teaching at the Educational System of Syria: An Analysis From a Cultural Perspective

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□ ABSTRACT □

The ultimate goal of this study is to enhance the cultural competence of the Syrian students at both the school and university phases throughout the teaching of English. The first part of this study provides what many researchers think about the roles of the textbook and the teacher in strengthening the relationship between the learner and his/her own culture and/or the other cultures including the target culture. In the second part of this study, an analysis from a cultural perspective of the Syrian context is provided. This analysis focuses on the English language textbooks used at the Syrian schools and at Tishreen university. Then it moves to both the Syrian teachers and leaners. The last part of this study gives some suggestions that could be helpful in strengthening the cultural awareness in the Syrian educational system.

Keywords: cultural competence, target culture, textbook, teacher, learner

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تدريس اللغة الانكليزية في النظام التعليمي السوري:
تحليل من وجهة نظر ثقافية

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□ ملخّص □

إن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تعزيز الادراك الثقافي لدى الطلبة السوريين في مرحلتي المدرسة و الجامعة و ذلك من خلال تدريس اللغة الانكليزية. يحتوي الجزء الأول من هذه الدراسة على رأي بعض الباحثين فيما يخص دور كل من الكتاب التدريسي و المدرس في تقوية العلاقة بين المتعلم و ثقافته من جهة و الثقافات الأخرى من جهة ثانية بما فيها الثقافة الهدف. و أما الجزء الثاني من هذا البحث فهو يحتوي على تحليل من وجهة نظر ثقافية للبيئة التعليمية السورية بحيث يسلط الضوء على كتب اللغة الانكليزية المستخدمة في المدارس السورية و جامعة تشرين. و من ثم تنتقل هذه الدراسة لتسلط الضوء على كل من مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية و الطلاب في سورية. يحتوي القسم الأخير من هذه الدراسة على بعض الاقتراحات التي قد تكون مفيدة في تعزيز الوعي الثقافي ضمن النظام التعليمي السوري.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: الادراك الثقافي، الكتاب التدريسي، المدرس، المتعلم، الثقافة الهدف.

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Introduction

Language is defined in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as 'the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area'. In the same dictionary culture has many definitions like i). a way of life, ii). a country or group with its own beliefs, iii). art/ music/ literature, and iv). beliefs and attitudes. Many researchers like Brown (1994) believed that language and culture are highly attached to each other. Furthermore, teaching a language cannot be free from teaching the culture of the society where it is used. Such an idea has been raised by many researchers and linguists like Wang (2011) and Hinkel (1999). They have found out that a culture can be acquired in the same way as a language can be acquired. This is why Hymes (1972b) added cultural competence to the four types of communicative competence:

[C]ommunicative competence included both 'speaking' and behavioural competence and 'interpretation' of speech and behaviours according to the norms of speech community.
(Hinkel, 1999: 4)

Awareness of one's own culture is not enough. A person should be able to understand others' way of thinking and that the others have their own norms and beliefs which are justified in their own way of thinking. This is what raised the notion of the intercultural competence which is considered in the teaching of foreign languages as:

The ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures.
(Meyer, 1991, cited in Cortazzi and Jin, 1999: 198)

Reaching intercultural competence, which is usually understood as the understanding of the *target* culture in the same way as a person understands his/her *source* culture, should be the second step in raising the cultural awareness on the learner's partasKordes (1991) puts it.Kordesconsiders that the *monocultural* stage, which is one's understanding of his/her own culture, comes first followed by the intercultural stage and then the *transcultural* (*cross-cultural*) stage. The *transcultural* or *cross cultural* competence is defined as:

Cross-cultural competence refers to your ability to understand people from different cultures and engage with them effectively. And not just people from the one culture that you've studied for years. Having cross-cultural competence means you can be effective in your interactions with people from most any culture.
(Rasmussen, 2016)

This means that one has to understand his/her own culture first, then understands the target culture, and finally moves to understanding other cultures. However, is it not safer for the English language learner's own cultural identity that the *cross-cultural* competence shouldbe a stage between the *mono-cultural* stage and the *intercultural* stage? In this way, learners, and after they understand their own culture,may becomeable to understand so many cultures all over the world in the same way as they understand their own culture. Furthermore, they become able to find justifications for the behaviours of the people of the other cultures as they justify their own behaviours in the frames of their own culture without being driven by inferiority or superiority feelings towards any other culture. The last step should be working on raising the learner's *intercultural competence*.

Moreover, Wang (2011) believes that a language and its culture are inseparable and that teaching both the language and its culture is the same.In the same way, Hinkel (1999) considered that language and culture are attached to each other and that understanding the culture of a language paves the way for the proficiency of this language. However, such a process is not an easy one because the second language learner's understanding of the

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foreign culture could be mainly affected by his/her own culture. In other words, the *mono-cultural* stage might be a hindrance in reaching the intercultural stage:

[A] second language learner's understanding of conceptualizations and constructs in second culture is fundamentally affected by his or her culturally defined worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions.
(Hinkel, 1999: 6)

This is what holds Byram and Morgan (1994) to suggest that teaching the culture should be explicit in the second language curriculum. Nonetheless, such a task is not an easy one because teachers themselves might not be aware of the presence of the cultural issues in the course they teach. This may lead to confusion for both the teacher and the learner and as a result the English course might not achieve its objectives:

[T]he teaching of culture often represents an aspect of language teaching which is unfamiliar to language teachers whose professional training largely focuses on structural facts of language.
(Hinkel, 1999: 6-7)

The following pages of this research are going to argue that i) raising intercultural awareness for second language learners comes as a result of the interaction between the teacher, the learner and the textbook; ii)the way the cultural issues are presented in the English language school textbooks.

. The Cultural Content in Language Teaching Materials

Since many writers and researchers like Hymes (1972b), Hinkel (1999) and Wang (2011) noticed the strong relationship between language and culture, many textbook designers have started to give more attention to presenting cultural information in their textbooks. Nonetheless, another problematic point was raised again. Which culture should be presented to learners: the target culture or the source culture? Moreover, the aim of presenting cultural information in the textbook is to strengthen the learner's cultural identity and at the same time to strengthen the learner's acceptance of other cultures without holding him/her to adopt the norms, habits and beliefs of other cultures. Many researchers have tried to tackle this problem and have come up with many interesting points of views.

Concerning textbooks, Cortazzi and Jin (1999, cited in McKay, 2002: 88) presented three types of textbooks that could be used for teaching English as a foreign or a second language:

- 'source culture materials' that draw on the learner's own culture as content.
- 'target culture materials' that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language.
- 'international target culture materials' that use a great variety of cultures in English- and non-English speaking countries around the world.

McKay (2002) related textbooks strongly to both the teacher and the learner. She also presented the positive and the negative points that may accompany each of the following groups. First, both the teacher and the learner are related to the source culture, and the textbook presents the target culture. Though some students might be very much attracted to the target culture, some cultural information might cause real threats to most of the students. The teacher who is considered as the source of information to the students might become unable to help students because of his/her lack of the cultural information and sometimes because of his/her unawareness of some of the cultural issues in the text. Such a thing might cause a threat to the students' cultural identity. In case there is no awareness in presenting some of the cultural information, some of the students especially the young learners might adopt the foreign culture. (McKay, 2002)

Second, McKay (2002) refers to another kind of materials where the textbook presents the source culture and both the teacher and the learner are related to the source culture. Here, learners' awareness of their own culture will be raised, butno awareness of the other cultures will.

Another case is that the textbook reflects an international culture while both the teacher and the learner come from the same culture. The case here is not different from the case of the textbooks that represent the target culture. Students' identity might be threatened and the teacher might be puzzled while presenting some of the cultural information that s/he is not quite familiar with.

Cortazzi and Jin (1999: 199) considered that the textbook is not the only way for introducing students to other cultures. Different forms of media like television, cinema, and magazines can introduce L2 learners to other cultures, but the textbook has the real role in raising students' awareness of how to communicate effectively in different situations. They also considered that the role of the textbook could vary in the classroom depending on the teacher's experience and many other factors. The textbook could be 'a teacher', 'a map', 'a resource', 'a trainer', 'an authority', 'a de-skiller' and 'an ideology':

> 1. a teacher: the textbooks contain the materials that instruct the students about the English speaking cultures.
> 2. a map: the textbooks give the overview of a structured program.
> 3. a resource: the textbooks give a set of materials and activities from which the most useful items will be chosen.
> 4. a trainer: the textbooks guide the an inexperienced teacher and untrained teacher accomplishes step-by step instruction.
> 5. an authority: the textbooks are valid and written by the expert and carry the authorization of important publishers or minister of education.
> 6. a de-skiller: the textbook gives the interpretation, critical approach to use the materials as the teacher isn't trained to do.
> 7. an ideology: the textbooks reflect a worldview or cultural system, a social construction that maybe imposed on teachers and students and construct their perspective of a culture. Also, English textbooks may function as a form of cultural politics.
> (Ekawati and Hamdani, 2012: 55)

Concerning the idea of seeing the textbook as an ideology, this is one of the ideas that matches the real situations in many countries, including Syria, the context of this study, for they have noticed the importance of English for many instrumental purposes and also for some political purposes. One of the things that cause a real threat to cultures in general and to those countries' own culture in specific is Globalization. The US and Britain are two of the strongest countries in the world in terms of power, science, technology and education and many other aspects.Therefore, their cultures influence most of the countries all over the world directly and indirectly. Moreover, most of the young generation all over the world adopt these cultures due to the attractive way the west presents itself in the media and even in the language textbooks which play a major role in paving the way for linguisticand cultural imperialism (see Phillipson, 1992 and Pennycook, 1998). Maybe, this is one of the reasons that hold the authorities in charge of education in many countries like Syria, to design textbooks for their schools that are compatible with the students' cultural identity. These textbooks contain a cultural content that dependson topics and pictures taken from the source culture's daily life and art like food, clothes, museums and celebrities. This may save the students' cultural identity from being threatened:

> English textbooks can function as a form of cultural politics by inclusion (or exclusion) of aspects of social, economic, political, or cultural reality. The country of origin, commercial interests, and the views of interest of decision makers who choose a book can be important factors leading to changes in cultural content. This is shown in the efforts of newly independent countries to produce their own textbooks.
> (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999: 200)

Cortazzi and Jin (1999) tried to represent the negative and the positive sides of using textbooks that depend on the target culture and textbooks that depend on international cultures. They considered that the textbook that depends on the target culture enables learners to reach proficiency in the communicative situations, but it might not be motivating for some students who might find no use in learning English. On the other hand, the textbook that represents international cultures might help students to understand others' ways of thinking, but such textbooks need 'a methodology of cultural learning'. What is worth mentioning is that Cortazzi and Jin (1999) gave Lebanon as an example where textbooks represent the target and that the cultural identity of the Lebanese students is not negatively affected or threatened:

> There are also counter examples that demonstrate how widespread inclusion of foreign culture elements in textbooks does not necessarily threaten ethnic identity.Lebanon is one example. Lebanese people, like other groups, have their own personal and social identities, and perhaps different loyalties to different groups within the country. They suffered 16 years of war (1975-1991) but there is a strong feeling among the Lebanese that their cultural identity is Lebanese. At every level of schooling, students learn two languages: Arabic (the official language and native language of nearly all students) and French (75 % of students) or English (25%). Many learn to use a third or a fourth language. Most school textbooks (not only the foreign language ones) are in French or English largely imported from Europe or the United States. The cultural content of these textbooks is that of the country of their origin, not Lebanese. As a result more than half of the Lebanese are bilingual; they are familiar with other cultures and are generally regarded as very cosmopolitan, yet very few think of themselves as French, or American, or British; their ethnic identity as Lebanese is basically not in question, nor felt to be under threat-certainly not from source culture textbooks. (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999: 206)

Cortazzi and Jin (1999) gave the correct description of the system of education in Lebanon in which in addition to the public schools, the education system in Lebanon depends heavily on private schooling which mostly is 'established by western clerics (French, Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and Italians)'(Lebanon - Educational System— overview). In addition, English and French are mandatory courses in addition to Arabic at the Lebanese schools.

Schools in Lebanon are divided into many kinds and most importantly are the American schools, British schools, French schools and Lebanese schools. The question is how Cortazzi and Jin came to the conclusion that the cultural identity of the young learners in Lebanon is not under threat. It is most possible that many Lebanese studentsmay have subconsciously adopted the British, American or the French cultures in which some Lebanese have started to see 'their identity as European not as an Arab' (Davis, 2007: 25) . Those students' high proficiency of English and French may in a way or another turn them into bilinguals of English and French, while Arabic (the supposed-to-be their native tongue whether it is their Lebanese Arabic or Standard Arabic) would be out of the game (see This can be noticed when watching most of the Lebanese TV channels and when meeting most of the Lebanese people especially the young ones in which ' it is not uncommon for Lebanese people to mix Lebanese Arabic, French, and English languages into their daily speech.' (Lebanese Arabic, 2017). In other words, Lebanese young learners who study in the foreign schools are under the threat of losing their mother tongue at the expense of learning the foreign languages (see Davis, 2007). Losing the mother tongue means losing an important aspect of their cultural identity because language is one of the factors that form the cultural identity:

> "Lebanon was split at its very soul…at the crossroads of West and East", immediately illuminating the depth of the conflict over the Lebanese nation. Indeed, Lebanon, arguably more than any other Middle Eastern state, has been wracked by conflicting narratives of identity and nationhood. At the most philosophical level of this conflict, the civilizations of East and West struggled for ownership of Lebanon's identity. (Larkin, Connor P, 2011: 1)

By giving the Lebanese example, it could be inferred that using textbooks that represent the target culture may have negative results that may cause a threat to the learner's own cultural identity—something that many countries like Syria want to protect its learners from.

.The Teacher and The learner

Students' response towards learning the foreign language may vary. Some students might be very much interested in the culture which holds them to learn the language. Other students might believe in the instrumental benefit of the foreign language in the future and they become motivated to learn it. The other kind of students is those who find no point in learning the foreign language or being introduced to the other culture. Also, they might find no target needs related to their future careers that may hold them to learn the foreign language. (see Gardner and Lambert 1972, Gardner 1985, Ellis 1994, and Cook 2000)

Prodromou (1988) considered that some materials might function negatively in introducing students to other cultures. Textbooks might talk about strange places far from the learner's own experience and might make the learner feel him/herself as an outsider in the classroom. This makes the learner draw back to his/her own culture where s/he can understand everything. Moreover, students might not be aware that some cultural points might be presented in the textbook which makes them focus mainly on the linguistic features such as grammar and writing, for example (see Byram *et al.,* 1991).

In the classroom, the teacher's role might also affect the student's perception of the second culture. Some teachers might be familiar with the target culture and give students sufficient information about the other culture which may raise students' interest in the language. Teachers' unfamiliarity with cultures presented in textbooks may have a negative effect on students' acceptance of the target culture which may lead to students' refusal of the other cultures. On the other hand, students' visits to the country of the presented culture may also have its influence over learners. In a case where people of the target culture were friendly with the learners, learners will accept to learn more about the language of the target culture and as a result the culture. In cases where the people of the target culture were not friendly, learners will react negatively towards learning the language and the culture (Byram *et al*, 1991).

Teachers have their own role in the classroom where they have sometimes to depend on their own experiences to facilitate some of the difficult cultural points that students may face. If the teacher comes from the target culture and the textbook presents the target culture, his/her task becomes a bit easier for s/he can provide learners with all the information that might be needed about the target culture. In a case where the textbook presents the source culture, the teacher, here, can provide learners with all the linguistic knowledge they lack and learners can provide the teacher with all the cultural information s/he lacks. These discussions between the teacher and the learner maylead to an increase in the students' awareness of their culture and at the same time increase their motivation to learn the foreign or the target culture (see McKay, 2002).

. Methodology

The growing recognition of teachers as researchers has given teachers the confidence to do research based on their classroom observation of learners' interaction with both the textbook and the teacher.

There has been growing acknowledgement of the need for the empowerment of teachers through researching their own practice, for teachers to become more aware of the complexities of the school environment, and of teacher research being the self reflection of one'sown professional practice (Fueyo&Koorland,1997; Henderson, Hunt &Wester, 1999; Kemmis, 2001; Keyes,1999; Patterson, Sumsion, Cross,McNaught, Fleet, Talay-Ongan& Burgess,2002;

Rodgers, 2002).

(Gray and Campbell-Evans, 2002)

In this research, all the English language textbooks used in the public schools of Syria from the first grade in elementary school until the last year in secondary school have been analysed. This analysis is presented from a cultural perspective in which the main focus is on

- Which culture is presented in the English language textbook: the source culture, the target culture or international cultures?

- How are the cultural aspects presented in the textbook concerning people (their names, the way they look, and their clothes), food, places, and art?

- Are there any mistakes or stereotyping in presenting cultures in the textbook?

- How do the teachers deal with the presented cultural elements?

- Have these textbooks played a role in raising the Syrian students' cultural awareness?

Findings

This part of the study provides an analysis of the Syrian context in terms of English textbooks, teachers and learners from a cultural perspective. This analysis covers different phases: the primary and secondary phases.

.1The Textbooks

By studying the cultural aspects of the English language elementary phase textbooks, it seems clear that this series, *English for Starters*, that consists of six textbooks is designed in a way that presents the Syrian culture. This can be noticed by looking at the different sides of the Syrian culture like people, names, clothes, food, places, and art. The presentation of the Syrian culture is a gradual one in which in the first grade there is a mixture of people and teddy bear characters in a form of coloured drawings. The people are given Syrian names like Salama, Zeina, Hassan, and Reem. On the other hand, the teddy bear characters are given for an unknown reason English names like Bobby, Sammy, Tippy, and Colin. People, in a form of stereotyping, have dark hair and brown skin. They wear modest clothes with no veils from the women's side, and children wear the Syrian school uniform. The food presented in the textbook is all that can be found in every Syrian house.

Like the first grade, the same cultural aspects likepeople, names, clothes, food, places, and art are presented up to the sixth grade. The Syrian culture seems to be more introduced as the students move up in the grades. The textbook designers, who are English, use authentic pictures from different famous Syrian modern and historical places like modern restaurants and Plamera (an ancient city in Homs). There are even some pictures of traditional Syrian food like Kubbeh and Bikdash ice- cream.

By looking at the elementary English language textbooks, it seems clearly that these textbooks represent the source 'Syrian' culture. Therefore, they are supposed to strengthen the Syrian learner's awareness of their own cultural identity an to protect their cultural identity (see McKay 2002). One might argue that learners are already aware of their culture and that they do not need their culture to be presented in the English language textbook to raise their mono-cultural awareness. This could be true; however, teaching the source culture is recommended to be explicit in the English language textbooks as it helps in raising their awareness of their culture which is the first step in understanding the other cultures including the target culture :

> Even though learners were born into the culture and are familiar with it, they need to require a more distant and general look on their culture together with some information in these analyses. Byram urges teachers to start with reflecting on learner's own culture and only later introduce the target culture.
> (Choudhury, 2014: 10,11)

However, it seems there are some minor mistakes and stereotyping in the designing of these textbooks and maybe this is because the textbook designers are English and are not aware of all the aspects of the Syrian everyday life. Some of these mistakes are mostly in the pictures. For example, the houses in the pictures are of the Victorian style (see figure 1) with their details like the doors, the windows and even the water taps. In one of the pictures, there is a teacher that teaches students how to use maps to find an address—something that the Syrian schools do not teach. One aspect of the stereotyping is showing the mother and the daughter working in the kitchen, the father watching TV, and the boy

watching   a   program   on   the   computer.

(figure 1)) (*English for Starters 5*(figure 2) (English for Starters 1, Nasr and Dallas, 2010: 51), Loader, 2010: 50)

Another problem that these textbooks have is that the way they present the Syrian culture is to some extent artificial in which it presents aspects of the daily life which is only one aspect of culture. However, these textbooks do not go deeper to represent other aspects of culture which is shedding the light on the values of the Syrian culture. In other words, the learner can see pictures of the Syrian food, but there are no discussions of how Syrian people eat. They do not show how Syrian people greet each other and what is accepted and not accepted when it comes to the norms of greeting. Nothing in these textbooks talks about the dos and don'ts in the Syrian culture. Rules about how to walk in the streets, how to drive your car, or even how to understand traffic signs and lights could be important to be presented explicitly to the Syrian young learners. They should also be aware of what is accepted and what is not accepted when it comes to body language in the Syrian culture. If these English language textbooks can raise the Syrian learners' awareness about their own culture including its everyday life and norms and habits, the Syrian learners will be ready to the next step which is being introduced to other cultures.

While in the elementary phase the focus is only on the source culture (Syrian culture), other cultures, are presented in both the preparatory and secondary phases with the same series *English for Starters*. Some examples of these cultures arethe British, the Canadian, the Japanese, the Mexican, the Australian, the Egyptian, the Palestinian, and the Spanish. What is really worth mentioning is that the designers of these textbooks try to go deeper into the Syrian culture in which some aspects of the Syrian history are presented like the Silk Road which passes through Syria and was used hundreds of years ago for trading goods. More details of the Syrian culture are also presented like a picture of the Syrian national football team and some pictures of Syrian celebrities like the famous actor DoreidLaham (see figure 3). Traditional Syrian musical instruments can also be seen in this series like the 'oud and the flute.

(Figure 3) (*English for Starters 7*, **Keddle and Hobbs, 2012: 8**)

Most of the series topics seem to be interesting to teenagers between 13 and 18 which is the age of the target leaners in the Syrian public schools. These topics are within the frame of global issues like the Nobel Prize, the forces of nature, the atmosphere, and communication. Students in the series from the seventh to the twelfth see aspects from other cultures (see figure 4) as well as aspects from the Syrian culture. However, there are

no direct activities that ask students to compare between cultures. Comparing between cultures is considered as one of the most important activities for raising learner's awareness of their own culture and other cultures:

> Pulverness (2004) claims the importance of the comparative method in the learning process. This method, recommended by many scholars, employs analysis, comparison and contrast to be included in the treatment of culture content in textbooks.

(Choudhury, 2014: 13)

(Figure 4) *(English for Starters 8*, **Keddle and Hobbs, 2010: 34)**

Lack of comparisons between the learner's own culture and other cultures and the artificial presentation of the other cultures might in some cases lead to the student's inability to solve some of the tasks in the activities. For example, in *English for Starters 12: Activity Book* there is this activity in which the student has to choose between the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous:

> I've *(passed / been passing)* my driving test and I've *(had / been having)* interviews for a university place.

(*English for Starters 12*: *Activity Book*, 2011: 6)

The system of university entrance in Syria does not include interviews; as a result, most Syrian students are unable to decide which verb to choose. This means there must be some kind of comparison between the system of higher education in Syria and the other system of education, which is mainly western, in order to help students understand why to choose the present perfect continuous.

.2 The Teacher

Almost all the English language teachers in Syria are graduates form the department of the English literature. Unfortunately, they get no cultural education and training during their university study. Even if they go through post-graduate studies, they do not study or even get any cultural training to help them improve and/or protect their students' cultural identity. In the classroom, they focus mainly on grammar and translating what is presented in the textbooks from English to Arabic. One of English language teachers said,

> All what my students think of is passing the exam with good or high marks. They don't
> really care if the textbook presents their own culture or any other culture. All they care
> about is the Arabic meaning of the difficult English words, and of course, a good
> understanding of grammar, and this is what I do to be honest.*

Sometimes the teacher's misunderstanding of certain activities in the textbook that aim at strengthening the learner's mono-cultural competence may play a negative role in the classroom. For example, the English language textbook for the fifth grade has an activity about one of the tourist attractions in Syria which is Tal Shihab Waterfalls in

Daraa (see figure 5). It seems clear that the activity asks students to read and match. However, the teacher asks the students to write questions and answers about the texts. Both students and parents started complaining about the teacher's difficult task especially after the teacher threatened the students that the next test would have questions from that assignment. When I asked one of the students who had the assignment if he was interested in the placepresented in the activity or even visiting it, his answers were not surprizing. He seemed quite uninterested at all. He did not even notice that these places were in Syria. This means that his attention was shifted

from the ultimate goal of the activity which is enhancing his awareness about his own culture.

* As long as the fact that the pages of this research are not enough for presenting further data concerning how teachers actually deal with the cultural issues presented in the English language textbooks in Syria, it would be recommended for future researches in this field to conduct a questionnaire that may cover a larger number of informants: Syrian English language teachers.
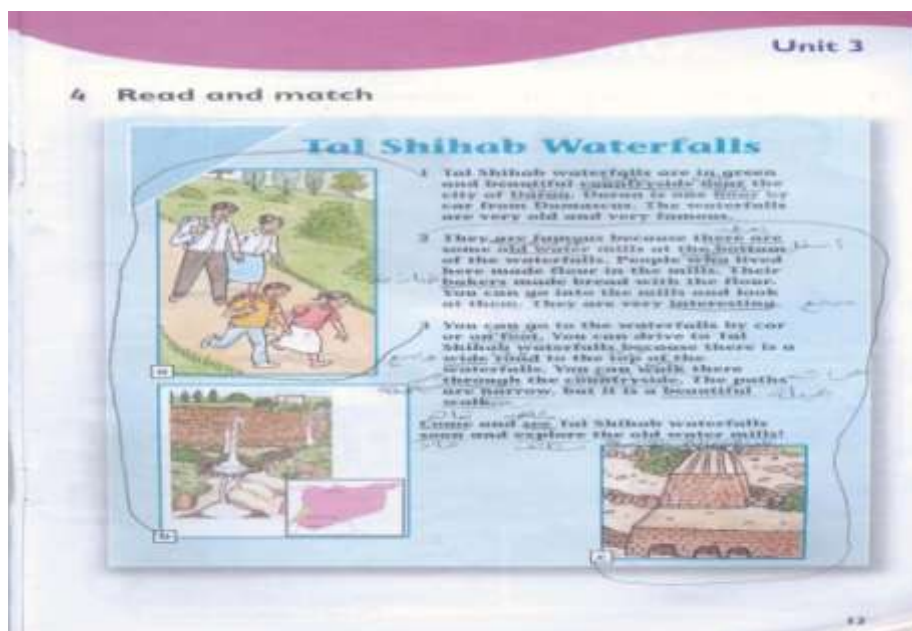
(Figure 5) (*English for Starters* **5**, Loader, 2010: 13)

English language teachers are supposed to be aware that culture could be presented everywhere in the English language textbook including vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. One word might mean something in the source culture and something else in the target culture. For example, the word ' white' is a positive word when we use it to describe someone especially women in the Syrian culture; however, in the English culture it means pale when we use it to describe a person. In the same way, lack of some cultural information in listening like idiomatic expressions could stand as a hindrance in understanding some listening tasks. The same idea could applied to speaking in which learners need to know what to say appropriately in different situations. Most of the English language learners complain about the difficulty of the reading texts. Most of the difficulty is because students are not aware of the cultural information presented in the texts including the organisations of these texts that reflect the way of thinking in the English culture which can be applied to writing as well: the topic sentence, the thesis statement, the controlling idea the paragraph, and the essay. (see Choudhury, 2014)

Lucky are the teachers who could have the chance to visit the country of the target culture and/or get introduced to as many cultures as possible. However, if not, they should carefully introduce their learners to all these aspects or the ultimate goal which is communicating effectively in the target language will not be achieved.

3. The learner

Both the presence of the textbook and the teacher are due to the presence of the learner which seems the weakest in this triangle because of many reasons.

Although, and as mentioned before, the English language school textbooks are designed to enhance the Syrian learners' mono-cultural and cross-cultural competences, they do not achieve their goal. Most teachers' lack of cultural training and their focus on translation stand as a hindrance on the learner's way of improving these competences. Getting a high mark in English also plays a role on shifting both the teacher's and as a result the learner's attention from having a better understanding of their won culture and the other cultures presented in their English language textbooks.

The exam system at both the school phases forces students to memorise information rather then analysing it. What one of the Syrian English language learners says about his stance towards both Arabic and English clarifies this point:

> Arabic! What am I going to do with Arabic? I wish I could forget
> Arabic and start thinking in English.*

These words summarise what specialists in cultural issues in ELT are trying to protect the English language learner from. Culture and language are very much attached to each other, and one's denial of his/her own language paves the way for one's denial of his or her own culture.

*Although these student's words summarised my 15 years of English language teaching and classroom observation of whether the English language textbooks play a positive or a negative role in raising learners' cultural awareness, I suggest future researchers in this field to conduct a questionnaire that may cover a larger number of informants: Syrian English language learners.

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