

## EVALUATING THE CULTURAL CONTENT OF ALGERIAN EFL TEXTBOOKS: THE CASE OF EFL TEXTBOOKS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL PUPILS

تقييم المحتوى الثقافي للكتب الجزائرية للغة الإنجليزية كلفاء أجنبية: حالة كتب اللغة الإنجليزية لتلاميذ المدارس المتوسطة

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the content of four Algerian EFL textbooks in terms of their cultural content and intercultural tasks. The analysis is carried out through using Sercu's framework (2000) which is mainly based on quantitative methods, namely content analysis for the cultural content and Sercu's (2000) typology and De Corte's taxonomy of intellectual involvement for the tasks. The main criterion for the analysis is realism that is operationalised in the balanced and comprehensive representation of culture. This includes the depiction of culture at three different levels of culture, from positive and negative sides, from mono or multiple perspectives. It also includes the representation of different cultures as well as different contact situations. Results have revealed that the textbooks analyzed have mainly focused on the target culture and underestimated the presence of the learner's own culture and other cultures. The textbooks have given an imbalanced representation of the target language culture, which can hinder their acquisition of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and their

readiness for future intercultural encounters. Textbooks require some improvements to increase their potential for teaching ICC.

**Key words:** Cultural Content; Culture; Intercultural Task; Realism; Textbook Analysis.

## ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في محتوى أربعة كتب جزائرية للغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية من حيث محتواها الثقافي وقضايا التداخل بين الثقافات. يتم إجراء التحليل من خلال استخدام إطار عمل سيركي (Sercu)(2000) الذي يعتمد بشكل أساسي على الأساليب الكمية ، أي تحليل المحتوى للمحتوى الثقافي وتصنيف سيركي (Sercu) و ديكورت (2000) (De Corte) للتداخل الفكري للمهام. المعيار الرئيسي للتحليل هو الواقعية التي يتم تفعيلها في التمثيل المتوازن والشامل للثقافة. وهذا يشمل تصوير الثقافة على ثلاثة مستويات مختلفة ، من الجوانب الإيجابية والسلبية ، وكذا من وجهات نظر أحادية أو متعددة. ويشمل أيضًا تمثيل الثقافات المختلفة وحالات الاتصال المختلفة. كشفت النتائج أن الكتب المدرسية التي تم تحليلها ركزت بشكل أساسي على الثقافة المستهدفة واستهانت بوجود ثقافة المتعلم والثقافات الأخرى. لقد أعطت الكتب المدرسية تمثيلاً غير متوازن لثقافة اللغة الهدف ، مما يمكن أن يعيق اكتساب المتعلمين للكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات ويعيق استعدادهم للقاءات مستقبلية بين الثقافات. تتطلب الكتب المدرسية بعض التحسينات لزيادة إمكاناتها لتدريس الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المحتوى الثقافي ؛ ثقافة؛ مهمة بين الثقافات ؛ الواقعية؛ تحليل الكتاب المدرسي.

## 0. Introduction

Recently, concepts such as intercultural communication, intercultural understating, cultural dialogue etc. have appeared as a result of the new social, economic and political realities imposed by globalization (Byram, 1989; 2011). The daily contacts among people with different languages and cultures and the use of English as the language of international communication have influenced many language policies in different countries (Byram, 1989, 1997). In fact, education policy makers in many countries have faced the challenge as to the question of incorporating culture teaching in foreign language classes; especially that research has highlighted the interrelatedness of language, culture and communication

(Byram, 1989; Doyé, 1996; Gao, 2006; Fong, 2006). According to them, language learners need to acquire, along with the foreign language, new skills that help them cope with the newly-emerging situations of misunderstanding due to cultural differences (Byram, 1997; 2011). In Europe, for instance, the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) that encompasses these skills is considered as the ultimate objective of foreign language teaching since the 1990s. To acquire this competence, learners need to learn about the target culture(s) and its practices, develop positive attitudes, and acquire intercultural skills (skills of discovery, interpreting and relating etc. (Byram, 1997), which helps improve the quality of intercultural communication. If ICC is viewed as the learning outcome of foreign language teaching, teaching materials should provide knowledge of culture (target culture, learner's culture and other cultures) as well as tasks developing skills useful for effective intercultural communication (Byram, 2011, Risager, 1991). In the foreign language context in which direct contact with the target language speakers is limited, textbooks are used as the core material (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015) that provides language and cultural input learners need to carry out classroom activities and develop ICC.

For the purpose of curricular change and design, textbooks have been subject to analysis and evaluation (Chapelle, 2010). With the increasing interest in integrating culture in foreign language teaching, the focus of analysis has shifted from the linguistic component to the cultural content of textbooks. During the modern era, from 1850s until 1990s, the national paradigm (Risager, 2007) dominated and textbooks were analyzed in terms of their realistic representation of the native speakers' culture. With the spread of English as an international language, the global or transnational approach (Risager, 2007) has been adopted since 1990's. It stresses the significance of including, in the foreign language curricula, cultures of countries where the target language is spoken as a second or foreign language (Risager & Chapelle, 2013) as well as international issues such as politics, immigration, racism, pollution etc.

In terms of methods, three major methodological approaches have been adopted to analyse textbooks, namely Content Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Semiotic and multimodal analytic approach. Based on exact counts of units (words, lines), Content Analysis examines language textbooks in terms of the reality they represent ( Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Risager, 1991; Sercu, 2000). CDA aims to uncover the power relations in texts by means of linguistic tools, quantitative and qualitative analyses, genre analysis, content analysis, positive/negative representation (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2014). Unlike Content Analysis and CDA,

semiotic analysis seeks to show how different modalities, text and visuals, work together to convey meaning, (Chen, 2010; Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2014; Weninger & Kiss, 2013).

The analysis of the cultural content and tasks of the textbooks selected for this study adopts a modernist approach and uses content analysis as an instrument of data collection. It heavily relies on Sercu's framework (2000) that evaluated German textbooks for Flemish pupils in terms of their potential for promoting the acquisition of ICC according to specific criteria provided by Byram & Esarte-Sarries (1991) and Risager (1991). Sercu (2000) used Content Analysis of textbooks' content and qualitative analysis of selected passages to examine the representation of culture according to the criteria of realism, i.e. comprehensiveness and representativeness. When investigating tasks, Sercu (2000) evaluated their potential for teaching and learning culture according to De Corte's taxonomy of intellectual operations. The main objective of the present work is to apply Sercu's model on four Algerian EFL textbooks to evaluate their potential for the acquisition of ICC.

### **1. Research Questions**

Based on the previously mentioned analytical and theoretical frameworks, the current study attempts to answer the following question: what potential do textbooks' cultural content and tasks have for the acquisition of ICC? To answer this question, two research sub-questions will be investigated:

- To what extent is the textbooks' representation of culture real?
- To what extent do textbooks' tasks help the acquisition of intercultural skills?

### **2. Methodology**

The analysis covers the two major components of textbooks, i.e., the content and tasks. The content of textbooks is to be analyzed using Content Analysis and following the criteria of realism; whereas the learning tasks contained in the Algerian textbooks of English will be classified according to Sercu's taxonomy and analyzed in terms of the extent to which they contribute to the acquisition of knowledge of the foreign culture.

#### **2.1. Methods**

This section describes the instruments to be used to collect data from textbooks, namely Content Analysis, Sercu's classification in intercultural tasks and De Corte's Taxonomy of Intellectual Operations.

##### **2.1.1. Content Analysis**

The cultural content of the textbook selected is analyzed using Content Analysis which is based on the exact counting of lines with cultural

reference. The lines are to be quantified and distributed according to the criteria of realism, that is distribution of cultural references over the types of culture (learner's own , target, and other cultures), cultural aspects, the different dimensions of culture (micro, macro, international/ intercultural), positive and negative sides, mono or multi-perspectival points of view) (Risager, 1991). The situations and types of contact with foreign people are quantified and analyzed.

### 2.1.2. Sercu's Classification of Intercultural Tasks

According to Sercu (2000: 258), intercultural tasks should invite pupils to:

- collect information on cultures,
- report on their experiences with foreign cultures,
- compare cultures,
- reflect on their cultural frame of reference, their culture processing categories, the function of stereotypes for identity formation, the linguistic causes of intercultural misunderstanding,
- take on multiple perspectives on an issue,
- address the affective side of intercultural contacts.

### 2.1.3. De Corte's Taxonomy

Sercu (2000) argues that culture learning tasks should help learners to be deeply involved with the subject matter in order for culture learning to happen. As a matter of fact, intercultural tasks will be evaluated in terms of their level of involving the learners intellectually in the task. They will be counted and distributed over the various levels of intellectual involvement (De Corte's, 1973), i.e. from lower intellectual involvement when tasks are receptive, to higher level of involvement when tasks are productive. The following is De Corte's Taxonomy ( 1973 cited in Sercu, 2000: 256):

#### I. Receptive-reproductive operations

1. Apperception
2. Recognition
3. Reproduction

#### II. Productive operations

4. Interpretative production of information
5. Convergent production of information
6. Evaluative production of information
7. Divergent production of information

## 2.2. Corpus

Four locally-produced English textbooks are selected for analysis; these are the ones used by middle school pupils, namely (My book of English) year

one, year two, year three, and year four. Their major goal is to teach English as a means of communication with others (unspecified) in an Anglophone context. The teaching method is communicative and the syllabus is functional. The focus of teaching is on developing the four skills and the acquisition of language; and the overall aim in the development of communicative competence. The textbooks are divided into units, each of which is about a particular theme that deals with an aspect of the British or the Algerian culture.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results obtained from the analysis of both the textbooks' representation of culture and intercultural tasks. The results are quantified and discussed in terms of the extent to which they promote the acquisition of ICC.

#### 3.1. Representation of Culture

##### 2.1.1. Amount of culture and emphasis on culture

To acquire an ICC, EFL learners should be familiarized with the foreign culture by being exposed to an adequate amount of information and to tasks allowing higher degree of involvement with the cultural information envisaged (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Sercu, 2000). In this respect Sercu (2000: 268) argues that: *"The more culture a series contains, the greater the chances are that the learners will perceive culture as an essential component of learning how to communicate in the foreign language with people from the foreign culture"*. Figure 1 is about the amount of information about different cultures contained in textbooks. It shows a significant presence of cultures including the Algerian and the British ones. In fact, 81, 13% of the information presented by textbooks is cultural, whereas, only 18, 237 of the information is decontextualised, i.e. information that does not explicitly refer to any specific culture.



Fig 1: The amount of culture in the textbooks selected

Figure 2 describes the distribution of the cultural content of textbooks over the different cultures presented in the textbooks investigated. It shows that 53.34% of the whole cultural content of textbooks is about Britain, whereas the remaining 46.66% is distributed over decontextualised information, the Algerian culture, international and intercultural issues, and other cultures. Those rates allow three important conclusions. First, the proportion of the British culture, though it makes half of the content, is not very significant for an EFL textbook aiming at teaching English for intercultural communication. Second, the amount of decontextualised information is more significant than that of the Algerian and other countries' cultures, which means that nearly fifth of the content is taught without any cultural reference. Third, the amount of other cultures and international and intercultural issues remain negligible compared with decontextualised information and the one about Britain and Algeria. This makes the textbooks unsuitable for the promotion of intercultural communicative competence, a competence that is based on the comparison and mediation between cultures.

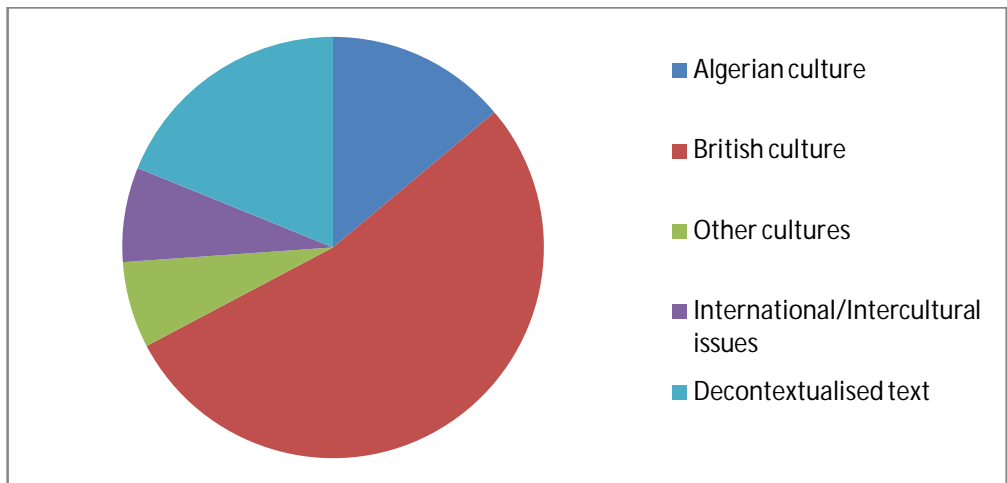


Figure 2: The distribution of textbooks' content according to type of culture

### 3.1.2. Degree of Realism in the Presentation of British Culture

The textbooks' degree of realism is dependent on their representativeness and balance in the representation of culture. This realism is defined in terms of comprehensiveness and balance in the representation of culture. It is dependent on the amount and variety of cultural aspects, and their balanced

distribution over positive and negative aspects, the three dimensions of culture and mono or multi-perspectival views (Sercu, 2000).

- . Distribution of Culture over Cultural Dimensions

By cultural dimensions, it is meant the micro level culture, macro level culture and international and intercultural issues (Risager, 1991a). Micro level culture refers to the British people's everyday lives, habits, behaviors, feelings, everyday conversations, situations of interaction etc. Macro-level culture refers to broader topics such as the country's history, geography, major historical events, wars, arts etc. International and intercultural relations refer to issues such as famine, pollution, charity, international relations, situations of intercultural encounters etc.

A significant presence is observed of the British culture at its macro-level in the four textbooks. In the year two, year three and year four form textbooks, the British culture is more presented at the micro-level than the Algerian or the other cultures. In year one form textbook, nearly half of its cultural content presents culturally neutral information. Most of the texts are single words labeling a picture referring to something or someone that is British or belonging to any or no culture such as names of things, animals, vegetables etc. In year one and year two, the macro-level dimension of culture is totally absent. Both textbooks do not deal with broad cultural and national topics related to the country's history and international relations but with topics related to everyday life only.

The macro-level dimension of the British culture is mostly represented in year three, whereas, in year four, there is very little representation at that particular dimension. It has to be noted that the distribution of culture over the international and intercultural issues is negligible and that international issues and situations of intercultural encounters are rarely represented in the four textbooks. To summarize, the British culture is significantly present at its micro-level dimension and significantly absent at the macro-level as well as international/intercultural dimensions. The representation of the British culture in the Algerian EFL textbooks can, therefore, be described as incomplete, imbalanced and unreal, which may result in incompetent intercultural communicators who lack knowledge of the reality, lived by the British people.

It might be concluded, then, that textbooks fail to provide a balanced representation of culture in its three dimensions. It is a presentation that is limited to everyday situations and ignores the historical, societal, economic and political structures in the foreign country. It might lead pupils to perceive the target language country as one with no history, no institutions and a country that is isolated from the international community. Britain is not shown to maintain any relationship with Algeria, the pupils' country.



There is no indication in all textbooks that Britain has a relationship with Algeria except that British people can come as visitors to a friend or as tourists. Algerians can only go there to learn the language or visit a British friend. The textbooks help reinforce in pupils the stereotypic image that the relationship between Algeria and Britain or other European countries can only be that of tourism, whereas in reality that relationship is not limited to tourism but open to other kinds of cooperation.

- Perspectives on the Foreign Culture

Textbooks are also evaluated in terms of the extent to which they present multiple views on a particular issue and a balanced presentation of positive and negative aspects of the foreign culture. By multi-perspectival or multiple points of view, it is meant that different people present their opinions on different cultural topics such as school, the schooling system, the relationship between parents and children, social problems, environmental issues etc. Textbooks promoting ICC are expected to portray the world from different perspectives and maintain a balance between both its negative and positive aspects. In not doing so, pupils may acquire a mono-perspectival view of the foreign culture and consider the images presented to them as true and unquestionable.

It is obvious that Algerian EFL textbooks introduce cultural issue from mono-perspectival points of view. They show characters of the same culture talking about their personal experiences in their families or schools. Rare are the cases where people from different cultures meet and discuss an issue from the perspective of their own culture. Pupils exposed to that kind of presentation of the foreign culture may adopt only one view of an issue that is assumed to be true. ICC is about relativised world views and the acceptance of difference; and such one-sided perspectives do not promote learning language for intercultural communication.

Another issue crucial to the representation of culture according to the criteria of realism is presenting the positive and negative aspects of the culture. The focus on one and the neglect of the other leads the pupils to acquire either a positive or a negative view of the foreign culture. Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of the cultural information over positive and negative perspectives in each cultural topic.

Table1: The distribution of textbooks' content over positive, negative and neutral point of views.

	Negative	Positive	Neutral
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YEAR ONE	0%	60%	40%
YEAR TWO	0%	35.71%	64.28%
YEAR THREE	6.31%	41.5%	52.63%
YEAR FOUR	0%	0%	100%

The figures in table 1 show that most cultural aspects contained in the textbooks are presented either from positive or neutral points of view. Life is depicted as rosy, happy, and comfortable, which is not real. For instance, British families are usually portrayed as happy, united and cooperative. Pupils are depicted as successful and happy with their schools and teachers and satisfied with their school subjects. British people have many means of entertainment and enjoy their free time well. The tendency to focus on one type of perspectives does not reflect reality which normally has both positive and negative sides. Textbooks seem to fail to present a balanced and impartial view of the foreign culture. Algerian pupils are expected to acquire only positive views of the British culture, which may lead to disappointment in communication as the native speaker may behave in an unexpected way, i.e., in a negative way.

- Contacts with the Foreign Culture

According to Risager (1991) and Sercu (2002), the degree of realism in any textbook depends on the variety of intercultural contacts and situations which may address learners' experiences with the foreign culture. In the Algerian context, where learners have very little or no direct contact with the British culture, learners should be introduced to and familiarized with the types of contacts they may have with the native or non-native speakers of English in the future . The variety of situations includes the exchange of information about culture as well as comparison of cultures. A high degree of that variety can increase learners' intercultural awareness. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the findings obtained from textbooks' analysis about the types of intercultural contacts presented in textbooks as well as their places and contents.

Table 2: Types of intercultural contact in textbooks

	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	YEAR THREE	YEAR FOUR	Total
Written correspondence	1	1	1	0	4
Tourism	0	0	0	2	4
Visit to the foreign country	0	0	4	0	5
Visit to a family	0	1	2	0	3
Internet	1	0	1	1	4
Conversation in undetermined place	2	4	0	0	5
Mass media	0	0	0	0	0
Total	4	6	8	3	21

Table 3 : Intercultural situations in textbooks

	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	YEAR THREE	YEAR FOUR
Comparison of cultures	0	0	0	0
Exchange of information about culture	1	2	3	0
Intercultural misunderstanding	0	0	0	0
Asking for cultural information (one side)	3	4	5	2

Table 3 shows that the data collected on intercultural contacts between the British and Algerians or Algerians/ British and a third party are limited in number and variety. First, the number of intercultural contacts in the four EFL textbooks is negligible (21 contacts only in all textbooks), which gives a very restricted idea about the intercultural contacts that occur every day in the world and that the learner may have one day. Algerian and British characters are shown to have contact through exchanging postcards or visits to each other's countries. The lack of variety of intercultural contact is accompanied by another lack of variety in the presentation of intercultural

situations. No comparison of cultures and situations of intercultural misunderstanding are presented in any of the four textbooks, which means that textbooks fail to provide mutual representations of the foreign and the native cultures. Intercultural contacts are shown to be short, smooth, emotionless and lifeless. There is no depiction of the affective side of an intercultural encounter such as emotions of frustration and anxiety or ones of happiness and satisfaction. The exchange of information about cultures is also negligible. Learners are rather presented with situations where an Algerian or a British inquires about a piece of information that one of the interactants gives without any further exchange of information. To conclude, textbooks have failed to present intercultural contacts and situations as they happen in real life. The contacts are few and not varied and the situations are smooth and emotionless. They seem to be cognitively and affectively unchallenging for learners as they do not invite learners to reflect on, react to and get involved in the situation. Being as such, textbooks do not address learners' needs for effective management of intercultural misunderstanding and successful intercultural contacts.

### 3.2. The Evaluation of Intercultural Tasks

The evaluation of intercultural tasks is carried out by determining their type, either general or intercultural, and categorizing them according to the extent to which they help culture learning.

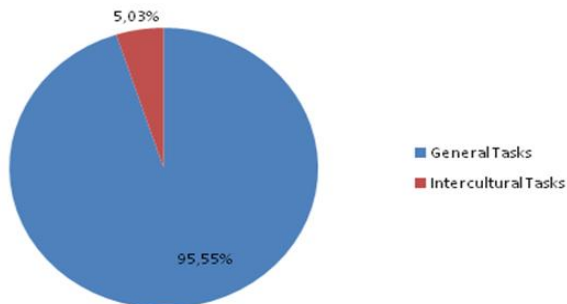


Figure3: The overall distribution of tasks according to type

It is clear that textbooks include general tasks more than intercultural ones. Most activities and tasks seek to teach the four language skills and their related strategies. Only 5% of the tasks ask pupils to reflect on or perform intercultural tasks, which does not promote the acquisition of an intercultural competence. The few intercultural tasks require learners to simple comparisons between aspects from the Algerian and the British

cultures, exchange information about cultures, ask for and look for cultural information etc. Learners are never asked to analyze instances of intercultural misunderstanding.

From the results in figure3, textbooks may not contribute to intercultural language learning. They, however, aim at promoting the acquisition of both linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. For culture learning to happen, intercultural tasks should involve learners in tasks requiring high level of intellectual involvement (Sercu, 2000). The classification of the intercultural tasks is done on the basis of De Corte's taxonomy of intellectual operation which comprises four levels of intellectual operations ranging from a lower to a higher level of involvement. At the lower level of involvement, tasks are either apperceptive or reproductive, i.e., they do not require much intellectual effort. Apperceptive tasks expect pupils to attend to the information presented to them. In other words, they should read the information. Reproductive tasks require pupils to repeat the information. Processing tasks invite pupils to reorder pieces of cultural information or match pieces of information to paragraphs in a text. Finally, application refers to the use of previously- acquired information and its application to a new situation and problems. The four textbooks and their workbooks contain 82 intercultural tasks only classified according to their degree of involving the pupil in intellectual operations.

Most tasks belong to the low-level intellectual involvement type. In fact, most of the intercultural tasks are apperceptive requiring pupils' mere attention to the information, followed by reproductive ones in which pupils have to reproduce the information without any reflection on it. Few tasks are of the application type that needs much cognitive effort on the part of the learners because they have to apply what they know to a novel situation. By presenting more low-level than high- level intellectual involvement tasks, it is doubtful that learners will learn the cultural information contained in their textbooks. Textbooks as such do not encourage learners to compare between cultures and reflect on cultural issues; nor do they raise pupils' intercultural awareness and motivation to establish intercultural contacts.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of the four textbooks selected for this study has shown an imbalance in the representation of the target language culture as well as other cultures and the learners' own. This might have negative effects not only on the learner's perceptions of foreign people and cultures, but also on the achievement of the objectives of English language teaching in Algeria. Pupils may acquire an unrealistic image of the target culture as well as stereotypic attitudes towards its people. Consequently, learners will not

acquire an ICC and subsequently may not be successful in future intercultural communication. The stereotypic representation of the foreigner as a tourist can limit the learner's view of the possible future relations with foreigners as well as intercultural contact situations. Textbooks should include a variety of possible relations with the foreigner such as being a friend, a colleague, a classmate, a neighbor, a husband or wife, a lover etc. and contact situations such as those offered by social media, travelling, mobility for studying and work etc.

Methodologically speaking, the Algerian textbooks were analyzed following a modernist approach in a time when the postmodernist approach emerged and emphasized the inclusion in textbooks of many cultures, even those of countries where English is spoken as a second or foreign language and to develop intercultural skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills. The analysis of the Algerian textbooks has highlighted their inconveniences, both in terms of content and methods, to develop ICC. Algerian textbooks need to be updated to cope with the changes in foreign language teaching practice and the newly- emerging needs of learners who live in a globalised world.

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