Investigating the Types and Categories of Culture in the Official English Language-Testing-Exams in Algeria, a Descriptive Study of BEM Exam Texts from 2005 to 2019

دراسة أنواع وفئات الثقافة في نصوص الامتحانات الرسمية للغة الانجليزية في الجزائر، دراسة وصفية لنصوص اختبارات شهادة التعليم المتوسط من 2005 إلى 2019

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ABSTRACT:

ملخص البحث

This descriptive study is based on a content analysis of a sample of fifteen BEM exams. It intends to investigate the types and categories of culture embodied in the texts of the selected exams. The findings show that all texts are designed within a cultural dimension. However, the majority of the concerned texts tend to discuss themes from Big c culture. Furthermore, the source culture was largely marginalized.

Keywords: Content analysis; BEM exam; Culture types; Culture categories; Culture and language

تستند هذه الدراسة الوصفية على تحليل محتوى عينة من خمسة عشر امتحان من امتحانات شهادة التعليم المتوسط،وتهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف أنواع وفئات الثقافة المجسدة في نصوص الامتحانات المختارة. تُظهر النتائج أن جميع النصوص مُصممة ضمن بُعد ثقافي. ومع ذلك ، فإن غالبية النصوص المعنية تميل إلى مناقشة مواضيع من الثقافة الكبرى. علاوة على ذلك ، تم تهميش ثقافة المحلية إلى حد كبير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة : اللغة : شهادة التعليم المتوسط : الثقافة المحلية: الثقافة المستهدفة

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1. Introduction:

In EFL settings, Culture proved itself to have a vital role in the learning/teaching of foreign languages (Kramsch, 2013). Therefore, the learner of foreign languages is supposed to be culturally competent in the same way he is required to be linguistically. EFL materials, in this regard, started to have their texts and activities more and more culture based; communicative tasks target cultural phenomena and the productive skills are performed in a cultural dimension (Cortazzi, 1999). In terms of classroom management, foreign language classrooms tend to have students from different cultural backgrounds to encourage cultural exchange (Crozier & Reay, 2008).

This tendency in centralizing culture as a hub in foreign language learning leads the researchers to think of the place of culture in language testing. Indeed, testing comes as an ultimate outcome of any teaching program where the teacher can identify and measure his teaching in a systematic way (Bachman, 1996). It is then very logic that the foreign language testing texts and instructions in foreign language learning environment would be evolving around cultural axes considering the paramount role of culture in language teaching.

In Algeria, the case of foreign language teaching is not an exception of what has been stated above. Thus, this study will deal with the place of culture in foreign language teaching in Algeria, as far as testing is concerned. The researchers made this study on BEM exam texts as an official testing program. The choice of BEM comes from the fact that it is an official examination of a whole language learning program at the middle school level. It is supposed to test the exit profile of learners who spent 4 years in learning English. As such, BEM exams could be a reliable and valid sample of middle school examinations (Grine, 2014). Moreover, the researchers chose to start studying BEMs texts from 2005 onward, as it is the year when the official authorities has adopted the Competency-Based-Approach which is still adopted up to this day (BENADLA, 2013).

This study was conceptualized as to answer the following questions:
➢ Do BEM exams texts cover cultural topics from the source and the target culture?
➢ Do BEM exams texts deal with topics from Big c and small c aspects of culture and in what way?

2. Background of the Study
2.1.   Testing in the learning/teaching process

Testing can be regarded as one of the multiple existing tools to assess the outcome of the learning/teaching process; this definition of testing is faithfully perceived in the writing of Taylor (2009) about assessment in the fact that tests are assessment tools which are intended to measure the language outputs that reflect the learners' productive language skills. This measurement of the teaching outcome would help, inevitably, the teacher to identify the weaknesses in his teaching and provide an eventual remediation to assure the progress of the teaching/learning process.

Tests can be categorized in different ways according to their ultimate goals. For example, tests that are supposed to be in relation to the teaching programs to meet the goals of the curriculum are called achievement tests whilst performance tests measure the learners' readiness to perform a communicative role (Desheng & Varghese, 2013). Other academics classify tests according to their items' nature into direct or indirect tests. A direct test is supposed to test learners' communicative competence. Learners are felt to be directly targeted by the instruction of the test as this kind of tests puts the learner in a real-life like situation (Harmer, 2007). On the other hand, indirect tests tend to test the linguistic competence of the learner in a form of grammar or lexis based tasks as to measure the productive and receptive skills of the learner (Harmer, 2007).

However, though their diverse classification, it is widely agreed that tests should have two outstanding characteristics: validity and reliability (Madsen, 1983). First, tests should be valid in the sense that they should test what they are supposed to test. For example, a writing test should focus on mechanics of writing and spelling mistakes. The second feature of testing in language teaching is reliability. By the term reliability, tests are supposed to generate the same results under the same circumstances. In other words, the same learner who scores differently each time he takes the same test could not be said that he received a reliable test. Similarly, in a reliable test, the learner who has a higher level is more likely to score better than a student with a lower level (Madsen, 1983).

2.1.1. BEM as an official language Exam in Algeria

The BEM is a French abbreviation standing for (Brevet d'Enseignement Moyen), that is: middle school certificate. The BEM is an official examination which "certifies knowledge and skills accumulated over a course of four years of learning carried out in middle school education; it allows an assessment that allows access to the secondary cycle. This induces that the learner has been subjected to various types of assessment: diagnostic, informative, and summative" (Grine, 2014, p. 62).

In the case of English language, BEM exams are devised within two main parts. Part one contains a document (generally a text) dealing with themes that were taught during the course of middle school level. The document of part one is followed by reading comprehension activities and mastery of language activities. This part deals with different skills and sub skills of the language such as the reading skill (comprehension questions related to scanning and skimming), the speaking skill (testing pronunciation through activities dealing with the pronunciation of final "ed", final "s", silent letters, diphthongs…etc), and other sub skills such as mechanics of writing, lexis, syntax and the rest. This part of BEM exam is felt to have indirect items of assessment as it was discussed earlier in this paper (Harmer, 2007). Then, part two represents a direct assessment of the learners' linguistic/communicative outcome i.e. the teaching/learning final product. It is generally a situation of integration where the learner is requested to write a piece of writing (letter, article, email…etc) in which he uses his communicative competence to deal with a situation in direct relation to the document of the exam.

The finality of this exam is to enable learners to understand cross curricular topics in English by interacting with written documents, interpreting activities and producing new pieces of writing (Bounab, 2020).

Finally we can say that the BEM exam falls in Desheng & Varghese's (2013) classification of tests as an achievement test on the one hand; the BEM tests what has been taught in the middle school level, on the other hand, it is also a performance test since it tests the readiness of learners to access to the secondary cycle.

2.2.   Culture in the learning/teaching process of foreign languages in Algeria

Many academics in the field of language teaching accounted for the importance of integrating culture in the foreign language classrooms (Kramsch, 2013) and (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991).

It is, thus, imperative to organize the Algerian EFL classroom settings within this dimension, since many EFL teachers and learners are expected to have some personal, academic, and professional experience of dealing with more than one cultural topic. However, many Algerian teachers have been claimed to face problems in transmitting cultural themes in their lessons, either

because they have never been to an English speaking country or because they fear to tackle the existing divergence between the target and the source culture (Madani, 2020).

2.2.1. Types of culture

Topics of culture fall, according to their levels and importance, into two classifications. In this sense, we can identify two outstanding terms for culture: the big C culture and the small c culture.

We refer to Big "C" culture to the representation of "facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals and customs of the target speech community" (Laohawiriyanon, 2013, p. 85). Thus, any culture which focuses on the products and contributions to a society and its outstanding individuals, is often referred to as Large/Big/Capital/Macro "C" culture.

Small "c" culture is another aspect of cultural themes. It refers to the daily aspects of life that embody everything as a total way of life (Laohawiriyanon, 2013, p. 85). These aspects of daily life could be visible such as gestures, clothing style, food, music, or invisible such as popular issues, opinions, preferences and tastes (Peterson, 2011).

2.2.2. Categories of culture

Learners' knowledge about a particular culture defines the notion of culture into two basic terms, in this sense; we can distinguish the source culture which is the culture of the learner and the target culture which is generally the culture of the target language.

In our case, the source culture is represented by the Algerian National culture; Islamic and Arabic whereas the target cultures is represented in this study by the cultures of the U S A and U K and other countries where English is used in way or another, since English has become a lingua franca of the world (Alpetkin, 2002).

3. Methodology

This descriptive study is based on a document analysis which is a form of qualitative research design where documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around a topic of assessment (Bowen, 2009). The Analysis of documents involves the coding of the content into themes. It is similar to how interview transcripts are analyzed (Bowen, 2009). The document or content analysis of this research intends to examine the target sample of BEM exams as to see whether it incorporates cultural topics, types and categories in a workable way or not.

3.1. The sample of the study

The sample of this study is a collection of fifteen (15) texts of BEM exams, from 2005 to 2019. The choice of 2005 as a starting point is due to the reforms that were brought about to integrate the competency-based-approach into EFL settings in Algeria (Thaâlibi, 2006).

3.2. Research tools

The researchers opted for checklists as a content analysis tool since it is argued to be the most effective tool in evaluating textbooks chand other written documents in a systematic way (McGrath, 2002). Two checklists are, herby, used in this study.

First, Cortazzi's checklist (1999) addresses the culture related issues in terms of the categories of culture. It investigates all the cultural information concerning the source culture

(learners' native culture) and the target culture which can be American British or any other culture (international cultures).

The second one is Chen's (2009) checklist about types of culture which is designed to collect data about the topics of culture. The researcher adopts the following principles to conduct the data collection in relation to the types and themes of culture presented in the selected BEM texts as table.1 below shows.

Number	Big "C" culture	Small "c" culture
1	Government/politics	Food
2	Economy	Holidays
3	History	Living style
4	Geography	Customs
5	Literature/art	Beliefs/values
6	Society's norms	Hobbies
7	Education	Gestures/Body
8	Architecture	Language
9	Music	
Total	9 Themes	7Themes

Table.1 Chen's (2009) classification of cultural themes into small and big c

4. Results and discussion

The findings of this study have shown that the texts of the concerned exams are designed within a cultural dimension. The types and categories of culture were, however, disproportionally covered; the target culture dominated the source culture whilst some texts seemed to be culturally neutral as far as the source and the target cultures are concerned.

4.1.   Culture types

Big C themes had been covered in different topics ranging from science, geography, architecture, history, education to society norms and politics.

 The theme "science" was covered in the text of BEM 2005, which discussed the different usages of the microscope and in the text of BEM 2018 which discussed a Man-like robot which can perform Man's daily activities. The theme "Geography" was covered in BEM 2006 (A text discussing effects of deforestation on the climate and on earth) and BEM 2014 (A text providing geographical facts about Brazil), the theme "History" was dealt with in BEM 2008 which narrates the Titanic tragedy in 1912. The theme "politics" was dealt with in BEM 2007; it discusses the green-peace movement against US nuclear activity in Alaska. The theme "Society norms" was covered in BEM 2017, discussing the celebration of Earth day in USA. The theme "Architecture" was perceived in BEM 2011, it describes several architectural places in Rome. Finally, the theme "Education" was dealt with in two different topics. First, the Educational system in the UK was discussed in BEM 2013. Second, BEM 2016 discussed the issue of stress during exams; it gives possible solutions to this problem.

The first appearance of small c themes had started in 2010. Topics of this type of culture embodied values, holidays, life style, food and costumes.

The theme "values" was dealt with in BEM 2010 (a small text showing that a son is helping his father in their garage), and in BEM 2015 whose text was about animal protection against extinction which is caused by Man; the concept of Man, in this text, depicts modern civilization and the harmful effects on nature and animals. BEM 2011 discussed the theme of holidays and how traveling can open doors to new cultures. The theme "life style" was dealt with in BEM 2012; it discusses life in Britain before the appearance of the internet (means of transport, newspaper, TV…etc). The BEM of 2019 tackled the theme of "food/costumes" in an intercultural dimension; it discussed different types of food and table manners around the world.

Figure.1 illustrates how the cultural types in the texts of the selected BEM exams are distributed
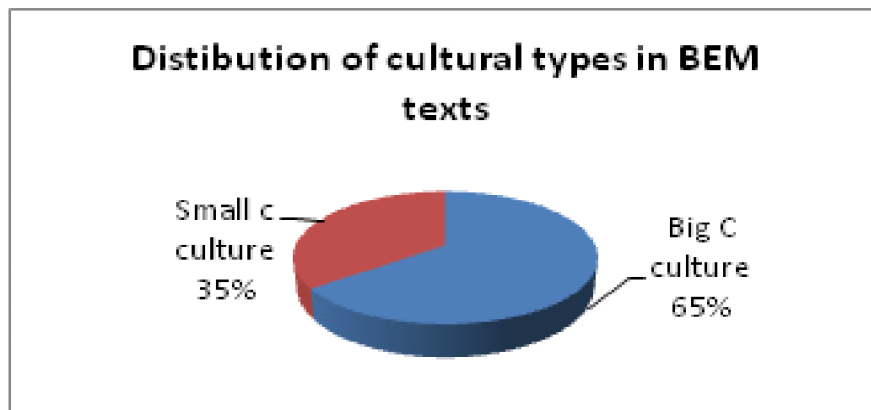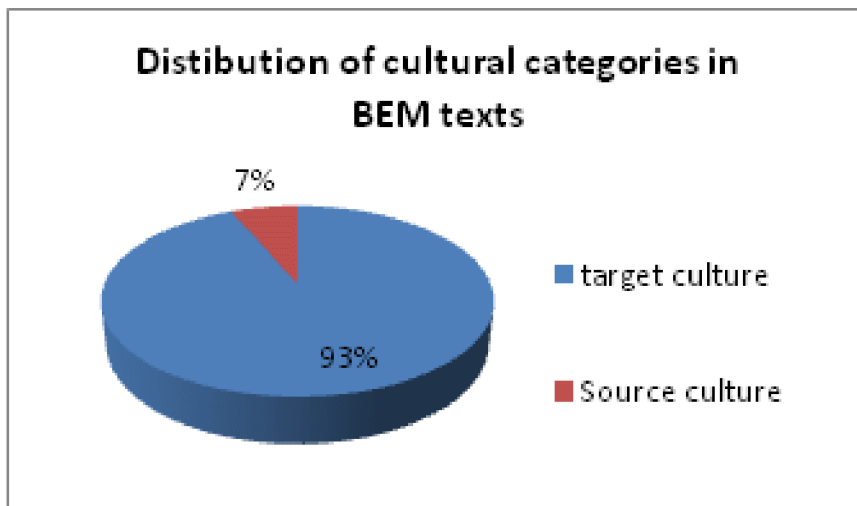

Fig.1 Distribution of cultural types in BEM texts

4.2.   Culture categories

Concerning the source and the target culture, it was clearly perceived that the majority of texts dealt with cultural themes from the target cultures (British, American or international cultures). Within the fifteen exams that represented the sample of this study, no text dealt directly with the source culture except BEM 2010 which was felt to be, possibly, of the source culture due to the presence of the Arabic name (Nadir).

The target culture was perceived under three distinct categories: the American culture, the British culture and international cultures (Italy and Brazil). This proves again that the target culture of English language is no longer exclusively confined to the British or American cultures; it goes beyond to embody other cultures due to the status of English as a lingua franca in this globalized world (Alpetkin, 2002).

Some texts, however, presented some neutrality as to present a universal cultural values and facts that can by no means belong to a particular culture.

The figure.2 below illustrates how the cultural categories in the selected texts of BEM exams are distributed whilst fig.3 illustrates the different target cultures that were encountered.

Fig 2. Distribution of cultural categories in BEM texts
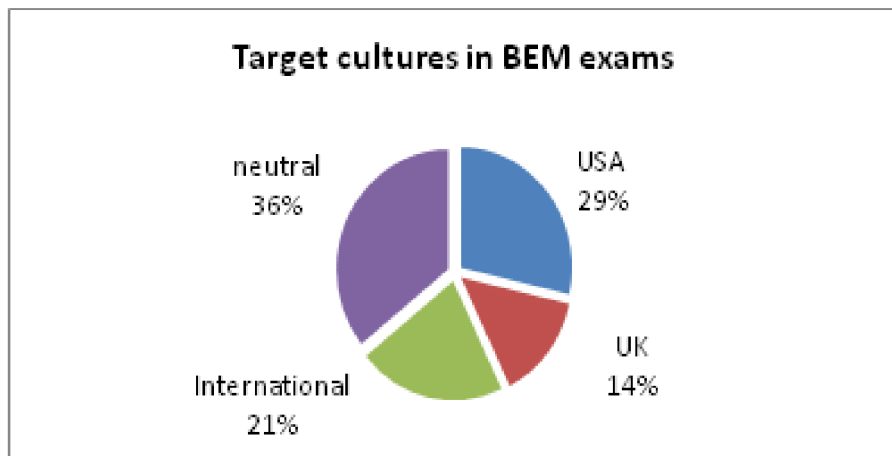
Fig 3. Target cultures in BEM exams

5. Conclusion

In the teaching/learning of foreign languages, culture is argued to be playing a paramount role as far as communicative competence is concerned. As such, the researchers have inquired the presence of culture in one of the most important stations in the teaching/learning process, testing. The choice of the BEM exams was mainly due to the fact that they are a reliable sample of middle school examinations; BEM exams are official and supposed to cover the whole curriculum of the middle school level.

In this regard, this descriptive study was conducted by the researchers who opted for a document analysis as to investigate the distribution of cultural types and categories in the texts of BEM exams from 2005 to 2019. The study came to conclude that all texts under scrutiny have, by and large, a cultural theme whether from the big C or the small c aspects of culture. The dominance of the Big c culture over small c culture was clearly perceived while the target cultures were also prioritized over the source culture. Nonetheless, other texts were felt to present neutrality in as much to culture categories.

Finally, the researchers call for further investigation concerning the place of culture in BEM exams, especially as far as the instructions and the writing expression activities are concerned. The researchers also suggest that BEM designers give more importance to the source culture which is of equal importance to the target culture as to achieve an efficient intercultural competence which is another key-element in the teaching of foreign languages.

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7. Annexes :

Table.2 Distribution of cultural themes into culture types and categories in BEM texts from 2005 to 2019

Year	The Main Cultural Theme	Big C	Small C	Source C	Target C
2005	The microscope (Science)	01	00	00	01 Neutral
2006	Deforestation (geography)	01	00	00	01 Neutral
2007	The green peace (politics/government)	01	00	00	01 USA
2008	Titanic tragedy (history)	01	00	00	01 USA
2009	child labor (society norms)	01	00	00	01 USA
2010	Nadhir is helping his father (values)	00	01	01	00
2011	A visit to Rome (Architecture/ holidays)	01	01	00	01 inter
2012	life before internet in UK (life style)	00	01	00	01 UK
2013	Education in Britain (Education)	01	00	00	01 UK
2014	The Brazil World Cup (sports/geography)	01	00	00	01 Inter
2015	animal protection (Beliefs/values)	00	01	00	01 Neutral
2016	Stress in exams (Education)	01	00	00	01 Neutral
2017	Earth day celebration (society norms/holidays)	01	01	00	01 USA
2018	Sophia the Robot (Science)	01	00	00	01 Neutral
2019	food around the world (food/costumes)	00	01	00	01 Inter
Total	15	11	6	01	14
%		64.7 %	35.3 %	6.6%	93.4%