

A Cultural Look into the Persian Language Resources: Case of Dehkhoda Textbooks

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

While learning a foreign/second language, learners are consistently involved in the comparison of their own culture and that of others. The main challenge they face is to decode the existing codes and sub-codes of the target language in order to communicate. As mentioned by Aghae (2013), the success of language learners can be evaluated in terms of their knowledge of the target culture, its system of codes, as well as the relationships between the codes and sub-codes.

Despite some Persian learners' knowledge of Persian language, it is observed that they cannot effectively communicate in the language. This means that a foreign / second language is culturally bound and requires the incorporation of a wide range of elements of the L2 culture. With this background in mind, the current study aimed to investigate the elements of culture in the books named Persian Reading and Comprehension for non-Iranian learners (elementary and intermediate levels) based on Risager's theory of culture and Tartu semiotics of culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the present study was based on three approaches toward the theory of semiotics of culture. The first approach aims to address "the self not the other" through the evaluation of the identity of ideology and the first language. The second approach is named "the other not the self" since it gives priority to the target language. The approach is considered dialectic since the dynamicity of the two cultures is of utmost importance, and accordingly, it is called "the self and the other".

Another employed theory in the current study was the cultural dimensions of language teaching introduced by Risager (2007). According to this theory, teaching culture involves

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Content dimension: This dimension entails the images of target language countries and the world that were offered in textbooks and presented in class.

Context dimension: This dimension considers the social aspects of the target language.

Poetic dimension: This dimension views culture from its poetic and aesthetic perspectives.

3. Method

The investigated books in the current study were Persian Reading and Comprehension for non-Iranian learners (Jaffari, Navai, & Erahimi, 2001) at elementary and intermediate levels. The first criterion in selecting these book series was their popularity in national and international Persian teaching centers. Each book consists of 18 passages on different topics designed to improve the reading skills of the learners. The units in the books are composed of pre-reading questions, reading passages, and comprehension exercises. At the end of each unit, there is a section called extra reading, which entails subjects related to legends, daily life experiences, celebrations, as well as Persian traditions and customs.

To conduct the study, the reading passages of these books were first analyzed based on Risager's cultural dimensions, and then, the texts were subjected to the theory of semiotics of culture developed by Tartu school. The descriptive Chi-square Test was utilized to investigate the significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of the investigated variables.

4. Results and Discussion

Considering the three approaches toward the theory of semiotics of culture, the most frequent approaches in the elementary and intermediate books were "the self not the other" and "the self and the other", respectively. Out of 72 reading passages, 20 and 14 reading texts at the elementary and intermediate levels followed "the self not the other" approach, respectively.

The obtained results of the Chi-square test were indicative of a significant difference between the books at elementary and intermediate levels. In fact, Persian teaching reading passages aim to highlight the cultural self not the cultural other. Regarding three dimensions of culture, content was the most frequent dimension in both elementary and intermediate books, followed by context and poetic dimensions.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

According to the obtained results of the current study, it can be concluded that Persian teaching books should be enriched with dialectical materials. Likewise, Aghaee (2013) reported that Persian teaching books highlighted the self and lacked the dialectical aspect of language learning and teaching.

The content dimension of culture was the most frequent dimension in the investigated books. In fact, the writers tried to form learners' semi sphere by providing information about the attitude and identity of Persian native speakers in relation to the self. On the other hand, the authors employed content dimensions similar to that of self while talking about the other. In addition, they used the other

content dimensions when they aimed to present dissimilar cultural signs. As a result, authors might not be successful in shaping the learners' semi sphere since learners may not tolerate this biased presentation of the culture, especially at elementary levels. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct future studies on the comparison of the Persian language teaching books with non-Persian ones (e.g., English, French, or German) in order to gain a deeper insight into the presentation of culture. Moreover, further research can focus on determining different aspects of culture in advanced Persian teaching books to find similarities and differences.

Keywords: Aspects of culture, Persian reading and comprehension, Tartu school, Teaching Persian language

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