


# Cultural Values Represented in First Certificate Masterclass Taught in Iran: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum

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## Abstract

Due to the crucial role textbooks play in any educational system, an urgent need is felt to examine, evaluate, and choose the most suitable ones available. This study is an attempt to critically examine and uncover the hidden curriculum in First Certificate Masterclass (FCM) that is taught at Navid institute in Iran. To this aim, FCM was deeply examined to identify any instances of Western cultural norms and preferences and their potential influences on Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' thoughts and ideologies. Peterson's distinction between Big "C" culture and little "c" culture constituted the theoretical framework of the study. To collect the necessary data, all passages, texts, exercises, and even listening excerpts were closely studied and evaluated by the researcher. Results indicated that among the elements of little "c" culture introduced by Peterson, preferences or tastes, food, hobbies, popular music, and popular issues could mainly be observed in the book. Furthermore, the majority of the representations introduced and depicted in the book were incompatible with Iranian Muslim people's ideologies and beliefs. Implications of these findings for Iranian material developers and textbook writers as well as English teachers are also discussed.

## Keywords

cultural values, hidden curriculum, ideology, textbook evaluation

## Introduction

Textbooks are, undoubtedly, an indispensable part of every educational system. Given the crucial role textbooks play in any educational system, an urgent need is felt to examine, evaluate, and choose the most suitable ones available in the market. The field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) is no exception and even more sensitive in this regard. In an EFL context such as that of Iran where the dominant religion is Islam, the books aimed at teaching English that are mostly produced by native English speakers in Western countries might not be fully capable of fulfilling the requirements of such an Islamic context. The fact that language and culture are intricately interrelated makes the problem even more serious. Although the main purpose is teaching English, some unwanted and unexpected by-products might also be obtained as a result of using such books.

In general, culture can be divided into two types: Big "C" culture and little "c" culture (Lee, 2009; Peterson, 2004). Lee (2009) defined Big "C" culture as "the culture which represents a set of facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals and customs of a target speech society" (p. 78). Peterson (2004), however, put the culture relating to grand themes under Big "C" culture that includes the themes such as geography, architecture, classical

music, literature, political issues, society's norms, legal foundation, core values, history, and cognitive processes. According to Lee (2009), little "c" culture is "the invisible and deeper sense of a target culture" (p. 78), including attitudes or beliefs and assumptions. For Peterson, however, this culture is the culture focusing on common or minor themes such as opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes, gestures, body posture, use of space, clothing styles, food, hobbies, popular music, popular issues, and certain knowledge.

EFL textbooks, directly or indirectly, carry a set of cultural values referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Cunningsworth, 1995; Hinkel, 1999). The term "hidden curriculum" was first coined by Jackson (1968) who proposed that education is a fundamentally social process. "Hidden curriculum" is defined as a socialization process that takes place in school without being part of its formal curricular content (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001, p. 1). As Margolis et al. (2001) rightly put it, hidden curricula occur at multiple places

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and times, and educators are responsible to find out “how both the form and the content of the curriculum reproduce structures of power and oppression” (p. 16).

The hidden curriculum can be considered as a means through which the powerful exert their power over the powerless and their thoughts. Hence, it is intentionally hidden to maintain the status quo as well as the hegemony of the powerful over other people (Margolis et al., 2001). The “hidden curriculum” is called the “other curriculum,” in contrast to formal, overt curriculum, to demonstrate that this curriculum belongs to a privileged group distinct from the public (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 3). It is also called the “null curriculum” (Einser cited in Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014, p. 123) because it nullifies “any perspectives that question the capitalist project,” that is, the ones that take into consideration the interests of groups or individuals other than those of the stakeholders and decision makers. Several researchers, being concerned about the hidden layers of textbooks, voiced their concerns on the use of English textbooks produced in developed countries in enhancing the spread of their culture (e.g., Cunningsworth, 1995; Holly, 1990; Kakavand, 2009; Kilickaya, 2004; Sadeghy, 2008, to name a few). Being concerned about the same issue, the current study is an attempt to examine First Certificate Masterclass (FCM, hereafter), taught at Navid institute in Iran, to identify any instances of Western cultural norms and preferences that are represented in this book along with their potential influences on Iranian EFL learners’ thoughts and ideologies.

## Literature Review

Language teaching textbooks do not only serve as a source of linguistic knowledge but also carry some cultural messages (Gray, 2002). These cultural messages can be identified in two different ways. On one hand, they are supposed to reflect specific values and beliefs on the basis of some social or political ideologies, implicit and invisible in nature, which are often referred to and investigated as hidden curricula. The purpose of such hidden curricula, according to Tin (2006), is to “socialize students to a particular view of the world whether learners or teachers are made aware of it or not” (p. 132). On the other hand, they are supposed to determine a specific culture of language learning in the form of language teaching methodology, including its approach, design, procedures, and role relationships between teachers and learners in a language classroom (Richards, 1998).

Several researchers have attempted to evaluate English textbooks from such viewpoints. In 2004, Amalsaleh, for instance, studied the representation of social actors in terms of social class, gender, and so on in EFL textbooks. She found that all the books, irrespective of their goals and audience, mostly seemed to follow an almost similar trend. For example, all of them showed males and females differently, portraying the female social actors as belonging to home context or having limited job opportunities in the society.

In contrast to what Amalsaleh found in her study, Sahragard and Davatgarzadeh (2010) investigated the linguistic representation of male and female social actors as well as the construction of gender identities in the *Interchange–Third Edition*. Results of their study revealed a differential representation of social actors in that females were portrayed as more prominent, successful, active, independent, expressive, and assertive in comparison with males. They concluded that, apparently, attempts have been made to bring women from margin to the foreground because females were associated with high-status activities in this series.

In a slightly different context in Pakistan, Farooq Shah (2012) investigated the gender inclusion in the textbooks used for teaching English at the secondary level. Based on the content analysis of the three English language textbooks published by the Punjab textbook board and by using questionnaire and interviews, the researcher found that although the content analysis and interviews showed a different picture, English teachers at the secondary level saw the textbooks inclusive in gender terms.

In China, Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2013) attempted to identify which type of culture was introduced in Chinese EFL textbooks at the university level. They examined four teachers’ manuals of EFL College English textbooks for Chinese non-English major students. Results of their study indicated that more than half of the cultural content was unidentifiable. Among identified cultural content, target cultural content prevailed while international target culture and source cultural content constituted a very small percentage. They also found that the predominant theme was little “c” of “values” and the absent themes were common little “c” themes such as “food,” “holidays,” “hobbies,” and “body language.”

More recently, Karim and Haq (2014) evaluated two English language teaching (ELT) textbooks used in two different systems of education (government-owned schools and private system of education) in Pakistan from a hidden curriculum point of view. They conducted a detailed analysis of the selected units from the two textbooks. Results of their study pointed to a clear-cut difference in the two textbooks from the point of view of hidden curriculum as well as the culture of language learning and teaching they espouse.

Although several textbook evaluation studies have been conducted in the context of Iran (e.g., Bahrami, 2011; Gordani, 2010; Kazempourfard, 2011; Riazzi & Mosallanejad, 2010; Souzandehfar, 2011, to name a few), the majority of them explored the textbooks based on some pre-established and pre-determined criteria or textbook evaluation schemes. Even those few studies that have systematically attempted to explore and identify the hidden curricula in the textbooks were mainly concerned with the representation of social actors or different genders (e.g., Amalsaleh, 2004; Sahragard & Davatgarzadeh, 2010) in the textbooks studied with no reference to the term “hidden curriculum” and the hidden ideologies in those books. The fact that Iran is a context that is dominated by Islamic beliefs and customs makes this

concern more serious and of paramount importance in this context. Hence, this study intends to examine the content of an English textbook taught in Iran to explore the hidden ideologies and curricula imposed on Iranian EFL learners by this book.

## Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

This study attempts to identify and critically evaluate the representations of little “c” culture in FCM textbook that is taught to Iranian EFL learners. To this aim, the distinction between Big “C” culture and little “c” culture made by Peterson (2004) served as the theoretical framework of the present study. Peterson put the culture relating to grand themes under Big “C” culture that includes the themes such as geography, architecture, classical music, literature, political issues, society’s norms, legal foundation, core values, history, and cognitive processes. Little “c” culture, however, is the culture focusing on common or minor themes such as opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes, gestures, body posture, use of space, clothing styles, food, hobbies, popular music, popular issues, and certain knowledge (Peterson, 2004).

The reason why just little “c” culture is investigated in the current study is the assumption that the themes constituting this type of culture can potentially be more controversial for Iranian students whose thoughts and ideologies are largely shaped and constructed by Islamic beliefs and ideologies.

## Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Developing textbooks for EFL learners is by no means an easy task. It, in fact, necessitates high levels of professional knowledge, experience, and awareness of the needs of language learners, as well as the value systems that inform the source and English languages. The interaction of all these factors results in two types of curriculum: the overt or formal curriculum that consists of different components of a textbook such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and so on and the covert or “hidden curriculum” that is the reflection of particular values, attitudes, and beliefs implicitly conveyed to English learners (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014).

Recently, many researchers voiced their concerns about the existence of such hidden curricula that led to more awareness of and sensitivity toward the hidden layers of English education and its hegemonic goals (Fairclough, 2006; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2005; Phillipson, 1992, 2009). Although some researchers investigated English learners’ resistance to such materials (Canagarajah, 1999; Giddens, 2000; Pennycook, 2007; Tomlinson, 1991), some others (Freire, 1973; Giroux & Penna, 1983; Weiler, 1988) attempted to draw attention to the subjugation promoted by global English education. The assumption underlying such concerns is that long-term exposure to such messages contributes to the

formation of a new mentality in language learners that is detrimental to their perception of their own identities and national sovereignty (Ehrensall, 2001; McPhail, 2006; Spring, 2009). The continued reception of such messages, according to McPhail (2006), molds the minds of the young people to the ideals and opinions that are rooted in the Western culture and ideology. These concerns highlight the significance of this study and points to the need for more studies in this area to uncover the potential threats our young generation of language learners might face by using unsuitable and unexamined textbooks. To this aim, the present study intends to seek answers to the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Which elements of little “c” culture (Peterson, 2004) have mostly been represented in FCM?

**Research Question 2:** Are there any mismatches between the cultural elements represented in this book and Iranian students’ beliefs and ideologies confirmed and recommended by Islam?

## Method

### *Materials for the Study*

This study evaluates FCM that is taught at Navid institutes in Iran. Navid institute, which has different branches in different cities of Iran, is a private institute in which English is taught to students of different ages and genders. This specific book is taught to FCE-level (First Certificate in English) students who are mostly young adults aged between 16 and 25 years old. The researcher examined the book from the beginning to the end to identify and evaluate any representations of the foreign culture that are at odds with the cultural norms and preferences of Iranian people. To this aim, all passages, texts, exercises, and even listening excerpts were closely studied and evaluated by the researcher. It is worth mentioning that the focus of this study has only been on the student’s book rather than the work book.

The book studied has been written by Simon Haines and Barbara Stewart in 2008 and has been published by Oxford University Press. It “has been fully updated for the revised FCE Examination” and is intended for those who want to prepare “and practice for exam tasks in all papers of the FCE examination” (Haines & Stewart, 2008, cover of the book). Overall, 12 chapters focusing on all four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) constitute the content of this book. Table 1 shows the topics covered in each chapter of the book.

### *Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

To come up with an overall picture of Western cultural norms and preferences represented in FCM, the researcher studied the book from the beginning to the end and listened

**Table 1.** Topics Covered in First Certificate Masterclass.

Chapter	Topic
One	The sexes
Two	Compulsion
Three	Talents
Four	Appearances
Five	Foreign parts
Six	The mind
Seven	Free time
Eight	Media
Nine	Around us
Ten	Innovation
Eleven	Communication
Twelve	Society

to all excerpts provided, in the form of a DVD accompanying the book, for the listening sections of the book. However, she did not take the pictures into account because some of the pictures had been censored to be made more compatible with the Iranian culture. Hence, all texts as well as all exercises were closely examined to find any potential topics or words that can be considered offensive or taboo in the culture of Iran. As mentioned before, Iran is dominated by the Islamic laws and religion; therefore, it was assumed that there might be some topics or words and expressions that are not in harmony with what Muslims believe in (*Haram* or taboo deeds).

After collecting the required data, the researcher analyzed them using Peterson's concept of little "c" culture that refers to the culture focusing on common or minor themes such as opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes, gestures, body posture, use of space, clothing styles, food, hobbies, popular music, popular issues, and certain knowledge (Peterson, 2004). To this aim, by closely examining the cultural representations in this book, she made an attempt to unfold any mismatches between those representations and the acceptable cultural norms of Iranian people.

## Results and Discussion

After studying and examining the textbook from the beginning to the end, the researcher found out that there were plenty of instances in which representations of Western cultural norms and preferences, incompatible with Iranian students' beliefs and ideologies, were portrayed. To save space, however, in this section, some illustrative examples will be reported and critically evaluated in detail.

### *Relationship Between Males and Females*

In Islam, family, forming the nucleus of the society, is highly respected and valued. Due to the importance of establishing and maintaining family relationships, no other

**Table 2.** Examples of the Use of "Girlfriend" and "Boyfriend" in First Certificate Masterclass.

Page	Words used
12	Our boyfriends
16	My boyfriend
22	Boyfriend
	Girlfriend
62	My boyfriend
	Girlfriends
85	Girlfriend
	Boyfriend
93	Boyfriend
142	Boyfriend

male–female relationship beyond the boundaries of a family is allowed. Hence, boys and girls are ordained to be pious and avoid having any kind of relationship with each other until they get married. Therefore, in an Islamic society, the concepts of "girlfriend" or "boyfriend" are considered to be offensive and taboo. Obviously, the situation is quite different in Western countries where such concepts are ordinary and normal constituting part of people's everyday lifestyle. In FCM, the representative of a Western country and its culture, there were several instances in which these two concepts were mentioned. The following Table 2 depicts those instances.

The first mention of the word "boyfriends" could be observed on page 12 of FCM. This example is taken from a grammar exercise in which the students are asked to read a letter and fill in the blanks with the appropriate form of the verbs in brackets. At the end of this letter, the writer (i.e., Sue) says, "By the way, this is an all-girls trip. We all want a break from our boyfriends" (Haines & Stewart, 2008, p. 12). In this sentence, the use of the pronoun "we," along with the determiner "all," implicitly implies that having a boyfriend is a completely natural and normal phenomenon and is, therefore, by no means, offensive. Although this situation might be acceptable in other non-Muslim countries, Muslim people strongly reject such unlimited relationships between girls and boys. For them, an "all-girls trip" is not only acceptable but also natural and usual.

The above-mentioned representations, however, tell us just one part of the story and what is more important is what the students are asked to do with these concepts or how they are going to make meaning from them because as Weninger and Kiss (2014) rightly put it, "ultimate interpretation will be based on how students are *guided* [emphasis in original] to make sense of them within the pedagogical context of the activity and the lesson" (p. 19). As an example, on page 12, students are asked to think about their possible reactions to different situations. In one situation, they are asked to think that their boyfriend/girlfriend may have been secretly going out with someone else. In response to this happening, they should tell a friend what they plan to do about it. In fact, this



activity draws students' attention to the two concepts of "trusting boyfriend/girlfriend" who "betrays you" and makes them think about and feel this sense of betrayal. By asking them to express what they plan to do, the task makes them think about having a boyfriend/girlfriend and trying to take revenge on that person for betraying them; the very thought processes they may never experience if they are not exposed to such imaginary situations.

As another example, on page 62, students are asked to read a passage and fill in the blanks using the sentences given on the next page. At the beginning part of this text, the speaker says, "Then my boyfriend and I broke up. Never mind, I thought." After this section, there is a blank space in which the students are asked to fill. To fill this space, they should think about the situation or, in other words, put themselves in the speaker's shoes. Interestingly, the sentence fitting this context is "I'll find someone else to go with some day." In fact, what seems to be natural and normal for Western people (i.e., girls having relationships with different boys) is severely forbidden and offensive in Iranian people's cultural and religious norms and ideology.

On page 85, students are asked to write a short story beginning with the sentence "I felt so excited when I looked at the envelope." Some hints and ideas are also provided on how to complete the task. As an idea for writing the story, the students are supposed to think that the letter is from their "boyfriend/girlfriend." What seems to be obvious in all the above-mentioned examples is that all of them make students imagine those situations and try to anticipate their own reactions toward them. Creating such thought processes can gradually mold the minds of language learners (McPhail, 2006) into accepting these ideas as natural or normal and not questioning or criticizing such relationships. Furthermore, if language learners are continually exposed to such messages, they might form a new mentality that can be detrimental to their own identities and ideologies (Ehrensall, 2001; McPhail, 2006; Spring, 2009).

### Food and Drinks

Followers of Islam are not allowed to eat every type of food or drink anything they wish because their religion has placed certain restrictions on what they can eat and drink. For instance, pork, wine, and any type of alcoholic drink are considered as *Haram* (strictly forbidden) in Islam, and Muslims avoid using them altogether. However, as Table 3 shows, it was found that such forbidden drinks have been mentioned in several occasions in FCM.

As Table 3 shows, fast food, oysters, and crisps and hamburgers are foods consumed mostly by Western people. There were also several mentions of different types of alcoholic drinks (e.g., alcohol, wine, cocktail, champagne, and whiskey) that are strictly forbidden in an Islamic context such as Iran. Muslims are never in their lives allowed to drink such kinds of alcoholic drinks. However, as the book

**Table 3.** Examples of the Use of Different Food and Drink in First Certificate Masterclass.

Page	Food/drink mentioned
53	Alcohol
58	Fast food
63	Champagne cocktail and oysters
69	Crisps and hamburgers, wine
88	Wine
128	Champagne
153	A half empty bottle of whiskey

mentions on page 53, in Britain, young people are allowed to "drink alcohol in a pub" when they are 18 years old. This is part of an activity that asks students to read the information in a chart and write some sentences describing what young people in Britain are allowed to do in comparison with what they can do in their country, thereby encouraging them to compare and contrast the situations in their own countries and that of the United Kingdom.

### Preferences or Tastes

Comparing Western and Islamic lifestyles, one can come to the point that they are quite different from each other. In Islam, it is believed that human beings are mainly created for the life in the Hereafter while the life in this world is considered to be trivial and passing (the Holy Quran). Hence, they should do their best in this world to build a perfect life for themselves in the next world.

Western cultural norms, however, as represented in FCM, value the current life of human beings paying little or no attention to the life after death. Hence, FCM portrays life in the same way by stating that "without a doubt, we live in a 'spend-happy' society" (p. 34) and by introducing the concept of "live life to the fullest" (p. 36), thereby encouraging its audience to try to enjoy their lives.

While in Western societies dogs are known as faithful and loyal human companions, in Islam, they are considered to be dirty and unclean (i.e., *najjes*) animals that should not be allowed to live in the same place with human beings. Keeping a dog as a pet in the home is strictly prohibited on the basis of Islamic doctrine. On page 88, in a reading passage titled "Holidays With a Difference," it is mentioned that "your dog is welcome to stay in your room," which is indicative of Western cultural values and norms incompatible with Iranian people's ideologies and beliefs.

In other parts of the book, some other cultural elements were referred to which could be considered offensive from a Muslim Iranian point of view. References to bars (p. 91), club (p. 97), ballet (p. 135), winning the lottery (pp. 141 and 154), compulsive gambling (pp. 151 and 152), and drug addicts (p. 154) are some of those elements that are forbidden and against Islamic beliefs and ideologies.

**Table 4.** Examples of the Use of Different Types of Music in First Certificate Masterclass.

Page	Music
12	Rock concert
22	Pop songs
51	Rock-and-roll
58	Summer music festival, pop and rock
96	Punk
97	Rock concert, jazz, rock concert
98	Disco, dance music with top DJs
103	Jazz

Note. DJ = Disc Jockey.

**Table 5.** Celebrities Mentioned in First Certificate Masterclass.

Page	People mentioned
36	Orlando Bloom
48	Madonna
117	Nicole Kidman
134	Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, Keira Knightley
150	Michael Madsen

### Popular Music

In Islam, according to Husaini (2005), “Tunes that are commensurate with immoral gatherings, and with corrupt and sinning individuals” (p. 132) are prohibited for Muslim people to play or listen to.

Table 4 indicates that FCM, intentionally or unintentionally, introduces popular music belonging to Western countries and their culture. Obviously, Islamic doctrine does not allow its followers to join groups playing such music.

### Popular Issues

Another aspect of Western culture conspicuously presented in FCM is celebrities or artists as well as popular films. On page 134, popular films such as *King Kong*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Shrek*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* were mentioned. Table 5 reveals the instances in which celebrities were introduced.

Considering all the above-mentioned examples taken from FCM, one can answer the two research questions posed at the outset of this study. In response to the first research question that sought the elements of little “c” culture (Peterson, 2004) represented in FCM, it was found that among the elements of little “c” culture introduced by Peterson (2004), preferences or tastes, food, hobbies, popular music, and popular issues could mainly be observed in the book. The answer to the second research question, which intended to identify any mismatches between the cultural elements represented in FCM and Iranian students’ beliefs and ideologies confirmed and recommended by Islam, is clearly yes. The majority of the representations of Western

culture introduced and depicted in the book were incompatible with Iranian Muslim people’s ideologies and beliefs as explained above. Hence, we fully agree with Cunningsworth (1995), Holly (1990), Kakavand (2009), Kilickaya (2004), and Sadeghy (2008) who attempted to voice their concerns on the use of English textbooks produced in developed countries in enhancing the spread of Western cultural norms and preferences.

In line with the findings of other studies in other parts of the world (Fairclough, 2006; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2005; Phillipson, 1992, 2009), results of the present study also showed that English teachers and learners all over the world, especially Muslim ones, need to be more aware of and sensitive toward hidden layers of English education and its hegemonic goals that are intentionally kept hidden to maintain the status quo as well as the hegemony of the powerful over other people (Margolis et al., 2001). They should be made aware of the fact that long-term exposure to such messages leads to the formation of mentalities in language learners that are detrimental to their perception of their own identities and national sovereignty (Ehrensall, 2001; McPhail, 2006; Spring, 2009). It is worth considering that the continued exposure of language learners to such messages molds their minds into the ideals and opinions that are rooted in the Western culture and ideology.

### Conclusion and Implications

The present study intended to track down the hidden curriculum promoted in FCM by critically examining cultural elements represented in that book to identify any potential mismatches between Iranian EFL learners’ cultural norms and preferences and the ones they are exposed to in the book. Results of the study revealed that some of the elements of little “c” culture were portrayed in the book, which were not compatible with Iranian students’ ideologies and beliefs rooted in their religion, Islam. Therefore, we should know that language-learning materials produced all over the world do not only serve as a source of linguistic knowledge but also carry some cultural messages (Gray, 2002) that can be detrimental to our young generation of language learners’ belief system. As a result, the books produced by native English speakers must be treated with more caution by English teachers and learners. They should also be made aware that in spite of the importance of English in the current world, we should by no means turn a blind eye to the potential threats our learners are exposed to by using such books.

In the light of the findings of the present study, materials developers as well as textbook writers may feel the urgent need for developing locally produced textbooks for TEFL in an Islamic context such as Iran. However, if there is no choice for them or no locally produced textbook available, they should try to select the books with more critical awareness and caution to avoid being trapped in the cultural norms and ideologies of Western countries hidden and implicit in

the books they produce for people in other parts of the world whose beliefs and religions are different from those of native speakers of English.

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