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Contextualization of intercultural aspects displayed in English textbooks in the Albanian classes, Korca city

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to identify intercultural aspects that appear in the English textbooks in the Albanian context. It emphasises the lifelong learning aspect of education, and the need of expanding capacities and facilitating relations among learners belonging to different cultures. It is seen how some of the defining principles, pedagogical methods, subject specific skills and intercultural activities treated in the English textbooks, relate to the realities of classroom practice in Albanian educational system syllabuses. It is an investigation of the background knowledge and learning experience of Albanian learners engaged in the study of English through English textbooks applied in different school levels in Korca city, elementary schools, Albania. I have done experimental research in the form of a questionnaire survey, and a survey on some intercultural activities organised in classrooms. I am focused on Albanian learners’ perceptions of how the cultural diversity between Albanian and English intersects with the pedagogical aim of promoting learner awareness of cultural differences, when the context of study is an Albanian area of study. The results of the questionnaire for the intercultural activities, held in different school levels support for the efficacy for fostering cross-cultural and intercultural perspectives.

Keywords: contextualization, intercultural aspects, learners, foreign language acquisition, English textbooks, cultural awareness, questionnaires.

1. English language and the cultural identity.
Languages are part of the cultural wealth of our society and the world in which we live and work. Learning a foreign language facilitates and elicits a common understanding and raises the civil responsibilities. Learners learn how to appreciate different countries, different cultures, communities and societies. By making comparisons, they get acquainted to the culture and society, part of which is the language they learn.
In a globalised, postmodern world a rather different model of education has emerged. An individual, to participate fully in the new economy – as worker, consumer and responsible citizen – needs to be even better informed and needs higher-order and more flexible skills, so learning English language is a good mean for creating future citizens with knowledge, creativity and critical thinking skills, able to face life. (Graddol, 2006; 71)
The communicative skill, in another language, is inseparable to the individual desire for being educated and to establish one’s own personality. The foreign language teachers have this privilege to work with this vital and special phenomenon. Culture is necessary because it is an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs and ways of life expressed in language specific world views are reflected in language. (McKay Lee Sandra 2002; 85)
Possessing knowledge in a foreign language has to do with the formation of the identity. As Christina Sargsyan (www.teachingenglish.org.uk; 2008) points out, “knowledge of a
foreign language provides you with a new “modus operandi”, through which to discover yourself. I think the role of the teacher is crucial here, because this discovery, this identity formation, sometimes is quite thorny and asks for considerable effort. It creates uncertainty which so many of us hate”! Teachers help learners to deal with this uncertainty.

Teaching a foreign language, such as English language creates a critical and analytical perspective, which helps learners to win a self-confidence. Non-native teachers have often had the same experience of learning English as their students are now having, and this gives them an instant (even if not subconscious) understanding of what their students are going through (Harmer 2007; 119). They try to promote a culture-bound approach to learning the language. In doing so, learners can integrate English culture into Albanian culture. However it is better that learner can work with native speakers, because they can create cultural continuity (Holliday, 2005). But this is not possible in Albania. “The ideology of nativespeakerism is based on the assumption that ‘native speakers’ of English have a special claim to the language itself” (Holliday 2005; 8). Native speakers often bring “discoursal baggage” (Holliday 2001; 124) with them from their home country that tends to rationalise other learners’ behaviours by reducing them to “culturist national or regional cultural stereotypes” (Holliday 2001; 88). This culture is presented in the foreign authors’ English textbooks that Albanian learners work with. The learners may have stereotypes to explain a native speaker’s behaviour. Therefore teachers are encouraged to plan lessons to help learners and to look beyond generalisations and see similarities and differences between each other. Non-native speakers, in our case, Albanian learners, should be able to identify that the characteristics of the other person, the generalised ‘other’, are a doctrine of their own characteristics, the ‘self’, rather than a truth about the other culture.

Hall compared culture with iceberg (Figure 1). He reasoned that there are some visible aspects, above the water, but there is a larger portion hidden beneath the surface. This means that the external, or conscious, part of culture is what we can see and is the tip of the iceberg and includes behaviours and some of our beliefs. The internal, or subconscious, part of culture is below the surface of a society and includes some beliefs, values and thought patterns that underlie behaviour. There are major differences between the conscious and unconscious culture. Internal implicitly learned unconsciously is difficult to change subjective knowledge versus external explicitly learned consciously, which is easily to change objective knowledge (Hall 1989, 197)
Hall suggests that the only way to learn the internal culture of others is to actively participate in their culture. What this model teaches learners is that they cannot judge a new culture based only on what they see when they first get presented to it. They must take the time to get to know individuals from that culture and interact with them. (Hall 1976).

Quite simply, the function and place of the foreign language in the curriculum is no longer that of ‘foreign language’ and this is bringing about profound changes in who is learning English, their motives for learning it and their needs as learners (Graddol 2006; 72). One feature of education in the postmodern world is the fragmented nature, not just of knowledge, but also the community of learners in the classroom. In relation to language learning, the expectation that all learners in a class will be at the same level of proficiency or even be studying the same foreign language – is giving way to approaches which allow more personalized learning. Such trends stress further the need for learner autonomy and diversity of learning materials (Graddol 2006; 72).

2. Teaching English language and its culture in the Albanian context

Nowadays Albanian English language teachers are facing a great challenge of encouraging learners to learn English. This is a complex process, as English like every language presents and transmits ideas and patterns that belong to a specific culture mostly quite different from learners’ native culture.

English textbooks written by English authors may not be easily assimilated by Albanian learners in the fact that they contain texts, activities, dialogues, listening materials, based on foreign experiences, which are far from the native culture. English is explained based on known factors by the learners’ familiar situations and cultural comparisons, where Albanian learners see the useful sense of the language for real communicative aims. This
contextualization helps learners in reinforcing historical and cultural knowledge and in inciting the identity growth, self-evaluation and respect for ethnic diversity. The English classes are adapted to Albanian learners’ interests, needs and make them be identified to the classroom context. In this way they may feel the practical sense of the foreign language.

Contextualization may be applied in other classroom elements such as the classroom setting which should be well-organized, by creating a good environment to be adapted not only to the learners’ native culture, but even to the foreign culture. It should be used a different pace for different cultural activities. Learners should be given different roles and different tasks, by following the norms, ways and customs of different cultures (Harmer 2007; 128). Other classroom elements are teaching aids: The textbooks illustrations, dialogues, materials etc., may be processed by learners according to their needs and interests and their way of thinking, planning and focusing. In other words, it is necessary that teachers assume themselves that their teaching has to be pluricultural. Textbooks should be challenged; they are never neutral, a “simple” grammar exercise can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes by means, for instance, of the vocabulary used or the pronouns chosen. Critical discourse analysis, which studies the way text and talk may reproduce or resist racism, abuse of social power, dominance and inequality. Once the textbook has been challenged, it is the teacher’s turn to act as a mediator: parts of the book can be adapted, new material can be supplemented, the account of a personal experience can be presented, and ethnocentric approaches or images can in fact be turned around and used as a pretext for intercultural activities (Soler, Jorda (ed.) 2007; 71).

In the textbooks there are fundamental patterns of cultural differences; in our case between Albanian speakers and English speakers: There are different communication styles, different attitudes towards conflict, different approaches to completing tasks, different decision-making styles, different attitudes towards disclosure, and different approaches to knowing. Thus teaching the intercultural and the involvement of intercultural activities in the teaching and acquisition process of English language in Albanian schools, creates opportunities to learners toward the possibility of dialogue with a foreign culture, the possibility of learning something new, developing friendship, and understanding different points of view.

Claire Kramsch points out: "If...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency ... Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing". Language itself is defined by a culture. We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. We cannot learn a second language if we do not have an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to our own first language. (Kramsch, 1998)

An English language class should serve as a formation for Albanian learners, for exploring and discussing their culture, history and traditions. It is true that the perspective of a world rarely meets another. The confrontation of two cultures doesn’t mean that one is superior and the other is inferior. No doubt that cultures should be respected. The cultural elements presentation is the right way through which learners become aware with the fact that the world is made of a diversity of cultures. Cultural competence refers
to ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures (Mercedes et al. 2007; 31-36).

Culture is within the language. Different members of communities have different attitudes, different behaviours, expressed or not expressed by opinions or observed verbal or non-verbal practices in the community communications. (Boyer 1999; 5-14). Cultural teaching affects positively in Albanian learners’ foreign language linguistic success. Others are of the opinion that culture can be used as an instrument in the communicative process, when certain conventions of behaviours are explained. The English language awareness attracts learners’ attention toward the differences and similarities in their native language, so in Albanian language. Cultural awareness teaching shares a double aim in the language awareness; so it supports language acquisition and it broadens the general understanding of the culture. (Byram (Ed.). 1994; 141)

Foreign language teaching takes place in a context with at least two cultures. Language and culture are inseparable from each other in acquiring the foreign language, in the way that the learner receive cultural information and different new ways of behaviour (Haloci et al. 2008; 226). The main context is the study of learners ‘classroom interactions, the examination of the cultural interactive modalities in sociolinguistic contexts.

3. Intercultural learners’ awareness through the English language textbooks in Albania

In the ideal foreign language class the teaching of culture is an integral organized component. Fundamental aspects of the culture are incorporated into the classroom activities. The learners anticipate that they will “learn a people” as well as a language. (Chastain 1988; 298)

Language is used to convey meaning, but meaning is determined by the culture. Understanding cultural differences among the various subcultures within a pluralistic society is equally important. (Chastain 1988; 299). Second language study can be one of the core educational components for fostering these widely recognised objectives of intercultural understanding.

The syllabus in English textbooks should enable learners to acknowledge the cultural diversity. When developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching, as Byram points out, teachers should try to achieve several aims:

• to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

• to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures and enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours.

• to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity.

• to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience; learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, and this help them acquire interest and curiosity about others. (Byram et Al. 2002)

Teaching materials utilization for exploring “the second” culture in the foreign language classes are a crucial element. Recently in the Albanian curriculum the programs are compiled in the way that language and culture are found incorporated with one another.
For example, for developing intercultural skills, teachers may explore different subjects related to different topics, and they may encourage learners to compare cultures and challenge stereotypes. The basic principle is that learners may compare the topic in a familiar context with examples in the text in an unfamiliar context (Byram et al. 2002; p21). Teachers should encourage learners to comment on different statements, discuss, share ideas and challenge them. Most of the cultural information that learners receive at school, come from textbooks which communicate directly or indirectly aspects of cultural values.

A real representation of the society and an account of some historical and cultural aspects of the countries where the foreign language is spoken originally can help learners to understand better language structures, predominant vocabulary, idioms or the status of that language in the world. At the same time, rather than reflecting a specific culture, textbooks help to develop discovery skills that will allow learners to get the necessary information in each situation, not only during the learning period but also in future. The combination of all these elements should be the development of critical cultural awareness. (Soler, Jorda (ed.) 2007; 73) The attitude of the teacher is a crucial factor in determining the extent to which cultural objectives are attained. The teacher’s task is to make learners aware of cultural differences, not pass value judgements on those differences. (Chastain 1988; 301).

I am of the opinion to consider the textbooks in schools more as source books than teaching ones, and their role should be the facilitation of the learning process.

4. The study

The research question – How do intercultural activities help in a better English language acquisition of Albanian learners in various levels of Elementary school in Korca city? It is observed the learning experience of Albanian learners through intercultural activities, presented in English textbooks. It is an overview on the contact of the cultural issues by developing an understanding of the learner’s own culture on one side and the sensitivity and awareness toward understanding the other culture on the other.

4.1 The aim

The overall aim of this research is to see teaching English language and its culture in the Albanian context and how intercultural activities of the foreign authors’ English textbooks are adapted and used by Albanian learners, in order to simplify and to make more enjoyable English language acquisition. Teachers need to teach for communication, and a lot of users of English as a lingua franca are communicating perfectly effectively with limited grammar and without standard grammatical usages. (Jenkins, 2006) This is what we want to point out through intercultural activities- communication and interaction- which are a good mean for helping learners to communicate through cultures.

It was aimed that the questionnaire and the survey during the activities could provide more detailed and richer data about a better understanding of English by Albanian learners.
4.2 The subjects in the study and the research instruments.

This research is focused on a survey of some intercultural activities held in elementary English classes. The participants involved in this study were 100 learners from VIIth, VIIIth and IXth grades during the academic year 2011-2012 in 2 Elementary schools of Korca city. The questionnaire survey is organised with learners of the Elementary school, belonging to VIIth, VIIIth and IXth grades, in Korca city, Albania, during the academic year 2011-2012. The number of the interviewed learners is 100, 33 of which belonged to VIIth grades, 35 belonged to VIIIth grades and 32 students of the IXth grades. The data derived from the checklist were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Percentages for all items were obtained.


With this number of learners is held a questionnaire after the activities, in order to see the impact that these intercultural activities had on the language acquisition. In this way, there are investigated Albanian learners’ perceptions of how the cultural diversity between Albanian and English language intersects with the pedagogical aim of promoting their awareness of cultural differences, when the context of study is an Albanian area of study.

4.3 Methodology

The methodology used is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis. The first one involved an examination of learners in the acquisition of the intercultural activities and how intercultural activities help in the overall language acquisition of the learners in the classes where the survey is held. Loew advocates that culture is the most important aspect of second language courses because knowledge of the culture is necessary for communication, essential for interpersonal interaction, and an important factor in personal and international cultural understanding. (Helene Loew; 1981)

The quantitative analysis is conducted with a questionnaire hand out to learners, and this quantitative approach to second language classroom observation, takes the form to be filled or completed. This instrument is designed to examine teacher behaviour, learner behaviour, the interaction between the teacher and learners or among learners. (Richards, Nunan; 2002, 47; 48)

5. Results

5.1 Data Analysis of the intercultural activities.

The cultural dimension of English language in the Albanian classes is analysed based on: learners’ attitudes toward teaching about specific cultures (native and non-native), and the impact of intercultural activities on learners’ attitudes toward native and non-native culture in English classes.
By making use of these intercultural activities, learners are not only informed, but they are created opportunities to disclose their knowledge through projects, learn English culture, accept it, its values and to combine cultures in various topics of social, political, historical, life.

Language awareness has been the traditional term for this type of understanding; knowing about a language, for a teacher is more important than knowing a language. It has been noted that non-native speakers of English have an advantage over native speakers. (Jenkins; 2006)

The learners were provided with a variety of intercultural activities, taken from "Express publishing" textbooks, applied during the English classes in different class levels. These activities helped learners to win awareness for avoiding conflicts and getting socialised with the foreign cultures. They acquired knowledge by learning from the ways of behaving in foreign countries. Learners become aware of different problems all over the world, learn a new language and compare other cultures with their own. Learners in this way not only were informed but also found the possibility to express their knowledge through projects and intercultural activities, to learn from English culture, to accept it, its values and to combine it with Albanian culture and with different topics from social, political, historical, musical life. etc.

English language teachers should focus their teaching in intercultural activities. The topics in Express publishing texts are creative, true, and convey cultural and linguistic identity and socio-cultural values that are universal; such as tolerance, courage, hope. The social, linguistic and cultural aspects are inseparable from each other: The topics treated in these textbooks, bring a linguistic communicative method, stories, role plays, games, information gaps, questionnaires and surveys.

The application of intercultural activities, in the English classes, resulted in an obvious change in the learners in these aspects: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills.

Learners gained knowledge of the essential norms and customs of the other culture, behaviours in social and professional spheres. They might compare important aspects of the behaviours belonging to cultures (social interaction, routine), techniques that help in the foreign language acquisition, historical and socio-political factors of different cultures.

Given the appropriate cultural information, Albanian learners acquired a certain degree of comprehension of the people and their culture. In this way the activities held in classes gave them such a knowledge which developed in them a higher degree of sensitivity and tolerance for cultural differences than they had prior to language study. These activities built in them a sense of self confidence to interact with peers belonging to other cultures, learn from them, face new emotions, take various roles, depending on the situation, and show interest in new cultural aspects. They understood changes in behaviour, values and attitudes.

From the observation it is seen that there is demonstrated an elasticity, when they interact with each – other or when they face real life situations from foreign cultures in different cultural activities. It is seen that learners are able to solve socio cultural conflicts and misunderstandings; they are able to use the right strategies for adapting their culture with the foreign one in different situations. As a result:

- Learners’ cooperation in the classroom is increased at 100%.
• There is an increase of 66% in the motivation to expand knowledge, compared to 33% of the learners who answered sometimes.
• There is an increase of 100% in the individual involvement in class, when intercultural activities are organized.
• It is observed that there is an easy acquisition of knowledge with a percentage of 66%.
• Communicated aspect is improved in a mass of 89%.

As it results from the survey, the results after the organization of intercultural activities are satisfactory. Learners are interested and highly motivated, with the topics diversity that these textbooks offer. The table below shows learners’ changes after intercultural activities held in the class, with the diversity of topics displayed in Express Publishing textbooks (figure 2)

**Figure 2**

### 5.2 Data analysis of the questionnaire

The learners’ answers are explained depending on how close they were to viewing the cultural aspects of learning English as intrinsically oriented toward native community. The overall percentages of the learners, based on the addressed questions are as below:

- From the 3 grades (VII\textsuperscript{th}, VIII\textsuperscript{th} and IX\textsuperscript{th}), 77.2% have heard for the “intercultural term” in the texts of Express Publishing, in the rubrics at the end of each module and also they have heard about it from the teachers, compared to 22.8% others who have heard about this term in the Internet sites.
- Regarding the question about the cultural exchange in the foreign language acquisition, from 33 learners of the VII\textsuperscript{th} grades, 54.5% of them believe that these activities influence in an amount of 80% the English language acquisition, 24% of the learners belonging to this grade, believe that these activities influence in an amount of 60% and the rest believe that these activities influence in a mass of 40%. From 35 learners belonging to the VIII\textsuperscript{th}, 57.1% believe that interculturality influence 80% the English language acquisition, 43% say that the intercultural activities help 100% in the English language acquisition. This is observed even in the IX\textsuperscript{th} grade, where 75% of 32 learners are of the opinion of a great influence of these activities in the English language better acquisition.
• From 100 interviewed learners, 69% of them believe that the intercultural activities increase significantly their interest and motivation toward the English culture; 25% are motivated a lot and 6% are slightly motivated.
• As it was observed from the learners’ reactions during the English classes in different levels, 85% of the learners express their satisfaction and wish to learn foreign language through intercultural activities. 66, 6% of the learners from the VIIth grade, find the intercultural activities of highest importance during the foreign language classes, 21, 2% find them very important and the rest find them of a little importance. Concerning the VIIIth and IXth grades, 79, 1% of them like and consider these activities of a highest importance, because they offer to the learners an essential help in the cultural exchanges with their peers, and also help them in the understanding of the English culture communication.
• For the question of how exactly help these kinds of activities, all the learners answers were nearly the same related to the 30% of those who believe that these activities helped them in the speaking skills, 30% believe that these intercultural activities help them demonstrate vocabularial skills; 22.5% learners express the opinion that they are a great help for them in reinforcing grammar and 17,5% believe that these activities help them more in improving listening skills.
• Referring to the question that which activities seem to them more important in the acquisition process of the English language, they reported that they had preferences for all of them and the different ways of receiving culture. Internet and cultural exchanges with other schools abroad take a wider percentage, so 50%. A considerable place for the learners take the organization of school events, plays, information in the books, so 30% and 20% think that movies and periodical magazines are of a great importance in the English language acquisition. All of these are interesting ways of transmitting culture.
• Students are of the opinion that Express publishing textbooks, and their rubrics, where is widely treated the intercultural dimension and intercultural aspects, help learners a lot in the intercultural communication acquisition, together with the standard expressions, functions, and linguistic structures accompanied with realistic situations. Also the projects included at the end of each module, help learners in the language acquisition through different sources in receiving and exchanging cultural knowledge. From 100 interviewed, 66, 5% are of the opinion that textbooks help them a lot in the intercultural communication and 33, 5% believe that textbooks help them sufficiently in the intercultural communication acquisition.

6. Overall discussion and Conclusions
This study aimed at identifying learners’ attitudes toward the cultural dimensions of English language based on data analyzed from questionnaire and intercultural activities survey which considered the following features: learners’ attitudes toward teaching about specific cultures (native and non-native), and the impact of intercultural activities on learners’ attitudes toward native and non-native culture in English classes. This study revealed that in Albanian classrooms there is a social interaction when it is learned a foreign language. The transmission of culture is an important aspect. Not only foreign language educators, but also educational institutions should identify widening
opportunities for developing an intercultural dimension in the English textbooks, to approach learners with learning culture, confronting changes through cultures and challenging them.

Based on the quantitative data, in summary in 75% and 80% of different age groups the cultural activities help them in English learning. They raise the interest toward the foreign culture. The statistics show they believe that not only the language is necessary, but also its incorporation with the culture, in order that learners can be adapted and can value others that have a different culture from their own. Learners are of the opinion that the educational system should deal with the changes that are happening nowadays; changes having to do with the language, and culture. It is because of this that the cultural activities in the English classes are so important.

Moreover, in Express Publishing textbooks is widely treated the intercultural dimension and the socio cultural aspects, which help learners a lot to gain a full and clear understanding of the language with the help of the standard expressions, linguistic structures accompanied by everyday real situations. The projects included at the end of the rubrics of each module, create to the learners the possibility of a better language acquisition through exploring a wide range of sources by receiving and exchanging cultural knowledge.

From the questionnaire statistics, there seem that the highest percentage of the great influence of intercultural activities in the English language better acquisition, are in the VIIIth and IXth grades. There is a great percentage in the 3 levels that the intercultural activities of the foreign textbooks of Express Publishing affect a lot in the increase of interest and motivation in the English acquisition.

The effectiveness of these intercultural activities among Albanian learners is obvious, in the fact that the highest percentages of the interviewers feel better in English when doing these activities rather than other activities. They also help them in assimilating better speaking and vocabularial skills. On reflection, learners viewed learning culture in English language classes very positively.

The results of the questionnaire for the intercultural activities, held in different school levels support for the efficacy for fostering cross-cultural and intercultural perspectives. Language and culture are two elements that presume each – other. Teaching a foreign language means to deal with a specific culture and if we refer to this, not all the English textbooks that English teachers use are the right ones for meeting the learners’ cultural needs and interests. Everything depends on the fact how the teacher treats the content and focus in the classroom. Teaching should be lead in that way to make learners feel that English does not belong to another culture, but it belongs to their own. It is very challenging for non-native learners to adjust their academic and social lives in the present context because they have to cope with linguistic and cultural ‘nonaccommodation’. The future of the English language does not depend only on what happens in the native countries, but in non-native as well.

The organisation of different cultural activities raises the learners’ awareness and develops their curiosity toward the foreign culture and helps them to make comparisons between cultures. This enriches the learners’ experience and makes them aware that in spite of the existence of the globalized cultural elements, there still exists diversity among cultures, diversity that should be understood and respected by them. An intercultural speaker also needs awareness that there is more to be known and
understood from the other person’s perspective, that there are skills, attitudes and values involved, which are crucial to understanding intercultural human relationships. (Byram M.et. Al. 2002; 6). These topics should be considered as crucial, and the intercultural dimension should be promoted and should be adapted with the curriculum or program set by the Albanian institutions.

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