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Story as Culturally Appropriate Content and Social Context for Young English Language Learners: A Look at Lebanese Primary School Classes

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The relationship between second language learning and meaningful interactions is now well recognised in second language acquisition research. While English is a widely taught foreign language around the world, much of the interaction research comes from core-English countries, which are also the major producers of English language teaching (ELT) materials. The rich cultural diversity of English language teaching and learning contexts raises questions about the applicability of the materials in other cultures. Using transcript data collected from 12 primary school classrooms in the Lebanon during 18 hours of observation, this article takes a critical look at how different coursebook tasks unfold in the reality of the classroom. The findings suggest that a story-based approach to English language teaching provides a more culture-sensitive medium for classroom interactions, adaptable to diverse cultural expectations about the roles of teachers and learners than the traditional communicative language practice typical in primary school ELT courses.

Keywords: interactions, culture, communicative approach, materials

Culture and Communication in the Language Class

English today has a special status in at least 70 or so countries and is the most widely taught foreign language in over 100 other countries (Crystal, 1997). In many of these countries, English also serves as the vehicular language in the general curriculum, and at times in the primary school. This is the case, for example, in the Lebanon, the context of this study. While research of the past 20 years strongly suggests that interactions are a key to successful second language learning (e.g. Ellis, 1985), classroom interactions, as any human interactions, are social events, as Allwright (1984) has aptly pointed out, and, therefore, are also complex and culture-bound. In his *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*, Holliday presents a solid argument for acknowledgment of the diverse classroom cultures and the social dynamics within them in English language teaching. He notes that: 'any methodology in English language education should be appropriate in the social context within which it is to be used' (Holliday, 1994: 1).

Yet, examination of the internationally published language teaching coursebooks reveals little of the cultural diversity of the ELT world in terms of methodology or content. This is, of course, understandable in light of the constraints of international publishing and marketing policies, which make it difficult, if not impossible to consider all 'the learners' real worlds with all their cultural behaviors' (Holliday, 1994: 173). However, if materials

developers use their own cultural reality as a reference point, inappropriate assumptions about the similarity of experience may result in texts and activities that inhabit a world different from the one of the teachers and learners using them. What teachers and learners bring to the situation may 'alter classroom practices in ways that are unintended and unexpected by... curriculum designers or textbook producers' (Kumaravadivelu, 2002: 16).

Taxonomies of cultural patterns

Classrooms are microcosms of the cultures within which they are situated, and can, therefore, be expected to reflect the communication patterns prevailing in the culture. Intercultural communication literature of the past 30 years has identified a number of taxonomies of cultural patterns, with Hofstede's (1980) landmark study of over 40 national cultures providing indexes for a number of different dimensions of culture. Despite these dimensions having been contested by some (e.g. McSweeney, 2002), several large-scale replication studies, some of them involving more than 30 countries (e.g. Hofstede, 2002; Kolman *et al.*, 2003), provide a robust empirical basis for Hofstede's theory.

'Knowledge of how culture works generally can reveal much about the workings of classroom interaction' (Holliday, 1994: 23), and two dimensions of culture are particularly important when attempting to understand events in the classroom. First, there is the level of hierarchy in interpersonal relations, or what Hofstede calls 'power-distance preference'. Where hierarchy and formality guide social interactions, teachers and pupils are likely to have clearly defined roles to which they are expected to conform. Lustig and Koester (1993: 139) describe the teaching-learning situation in cultures scoring high in Hofstede's power-distance index (PDI) so:

Students in high-PDI cultures are expected to comply with the wishes and request of their teachers, and conformity is regarded very favorably. As a consequence, the curriculum in high-PDI cultures is likely to involve a great deal of rote learning, and students are discouraged from asking questions because questions might pose a threat to the teacher's autonomy.

Another dimension in Hofstede's study relevant in the classroom context is the level of tolerance for uncertainty and willingness to deal with ambiguity. Cultures high in uncertainty avoidance tend to be characterised by many rules that govern social behaviours and elaborate rituals with precise form or sequence (Lustig & Koester, 1993: 143). In the classroom, this may translate into fixed routines that are followed and insistence on the correct answer. Richards' and Lockhart's (1994: 108) quote from a teacher in Egypt reflects preference to avoid uncertainty:

When I present a reading text to the class, the students expect me to go through it word by word and explain every point of vocabulary or grammar. They would be uncomfortable if I left it for them to work it out on their own or ask them just to try to understand the main ideas.

Needless to say, in each country or cultural group, individuals differ in these two dimensions to varying degrees, and the above-cited differences should be understood as merely central tendencies and not reflective of the population as a whole, as Bennett (1998) points out.

English language-teaching materials

Most, if not all, of the internationally marketed primary school ELT courses are authored and produced in the United States and Great Britain, two of the 'core-English countries', to borrow Phillipson's (1992: 17) term. There is nothing peculiar, in itself, about that, of course. What is, however, noteworthy is that whereas these two major ELT materials-producer countries, together with the other core-English countries – Canada, New Zealand and Australia – scored low in Hofstede's power-distance index, many of the end-user countries of the ELT courses, including Hong Kong, Brazil and Mexico, scored high in power-distance preference. In other words, course-producing cultures tend toward egalitarianism between individuals, regardless of social position or rank, many of the end-user cultures lean more toward hierarchical relations with social status, rank, gender, age and other factors determining the appropriate role behaviour. Another striking difference between the course-producer cultures and many end-user cultures is the level of tolerance for uncertainty and willingness to live with ambiguity. The scores from the UK and USA (as well as Canada, New Zealand and Australia) reveal little difficulty living with ambiguity and uncertainty while Mexico, Turkey, France, Argentina and Japan, for example, scored high in uncertainty avoidance index (Hofstede, 1980: 315). This raises a question about a possible mismatch between the language teaching materials and cultural expectations of the materials' users.

Here, a brief look at the materials is in order. By and large, the approach most of the internationally marketed primary school ELT courses adopt can best be characterised as communicative. In these courses, students are provided with language models, which they practise in pairs or small groups, the aim being student use of the new language, as in the following typical example. Students are expected to talk about their free time activities, and the text provides a question and answer sample, and a number of response options (accompanied by illustrations):

Sample: *What do you do in your free time? I collect coins.*

Options: *read; listen to music; garden; care for pets; paint; play soccer; play music; cook; bowl; play video games; collect coins; watch TV.*

(Herrera & Zanatta, 1996: 15)

Holliday (1994: 169), who refers to this approach as a 'weak version' of the communicative language teaching (CLT), warns that there are elements in it that are not 'culture-sensitive' because they 'are *not* adaptable to any social situation' (emphasis in the original). He further suggests that this version might work best in small adult classes with good acoustics where the teacher can easily manage to monitor the conversational practice of the pairs and small groups. Moreover, in CLT, the role of the teacher is that of facilitating communication between the learners themselves and between the learners and

the given activities, as well as being a participant in the group (Breen & Candlin, 1980: 99).

As an alternative to these courses, several studies around the world have explored the viability of authentic target language stories with great success (e.g. Elley, 2000; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Elley *et al.*, 1996; Ghosn, 2004a, 2004b; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). These and other studies, involving literally hundreds of participants in several different countries, have exposed children to large selections of English language storybooks. The results consistently show the storybook groups outperforming the control groups in all the four language skills. Ghosn (2003) has suggested that the gains can be explained by the different discourse the two types of materials generate and argues the difference to be due to the meaning-focus in the story-based discourse as opposed to form-focus in the communicative language practice. Although the above-cited story-based studies do not discuss the teacher's role, Sloan's (1995: 4) examination of literature-based 1st language reading classes provides a useful reference. She notes that in these classes the teachers 'serve as guides and facilitators, motivators, and mentors', which is not very different from the CLT teacher's role.

Although a sizeable body of literature exists about differences in cultural beliefs and value orientations between language teachers and language learners, much of it is, however, produced in the English-speaking West, with some of it accused of stereotyping cultures (e.g. Holliday, 1994; Stephens, 1997). The focus of the research has mainly been native-English-speaking teachers and their students, either foreign students in the United States or expatriate teachers in learners' home country. Little, if anything, has been written on the cultural differences between the language teaching texts and the non-native English-speaking teachers and their young pupils.

Considering the above-cited differences between course producers' and users' cultural preferences on the one hand, and the success of story-based instruction in such diverse cultural contexts as Fiji, Sri Lanka, South Africa and the Lebanon on the other, one cannot but wonder about the possible role of culture in the process. After all, the storybooks used in the above-cited studies were authored in the very same countries as the ELT course materials. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to understand the extent to which these two types of materials fit the teachers' and learners' 'real world' and their culture. It was hypothesised that the story-based approach has some features that are more culture-sensitive than the communicatively oriented materials.

I do not intend to engage in 'cultural profiling' (Hawkey & Nakornchai, 1980: 70), or 'culturism', which Holliday (2002: 4) sees as characterising the mainstream TESOL discourse. Rather, I wish to understand and explain the observed classroom behaviours and occurrences from a perspective of an insider to the culture and shed light on a heretofore little explored area, namely primary school ELT classroom interactions within an Arab culture. Drawing on transcript data from 12 primary school classrooms in the Lebanon, the present study contributes to the heretofore little researched area, namely young Arabic-speaking children and their teachers interacting around different language-teaching materials.

The Study

Participants

The data for the present study were collected in Grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 in eight different schools in the Lebanon. The schools represent average Lebanese private schools in terms of teacher qualifications and tuition fees (approximately 50% of the students in Lebanon are enrolled in private schools), and included both secular schools and schools operated by Christian and Muslim religious organisations. In four of the schools, children were studying from North American ELT materials and in the other four from story-based reading materials intended for native English-speaking children that have gained popularity in Lebanese ELT classes over the past 10 years. All teachers (two males and 10 females) had three or more years of teaching experience. The children were native speakers of Arabic, with the exception of five, who were bilingual in English, two in Armenian, and one in Portuguese. The classes ranged in size from 22 to 26 pupils.

Data collection and analysis

Six teachers (three ELT and three story-based lessons) were observed and videotaped for two class periods each, on two separate occasions, and the other six (three ELT and three story-based lessons) for one class period each. A total of 18 hours of observations in 12 different classes in eight schools (nine hours of ELT lessons and nine hours of story-based lessons) were transcribed. In addition to the observations, teachers were invited to review the videotaped sessions and interviewed about their understanding and interpretation of the observed events.

The transcripts were analysed to determine the nature of the interactions between teachers and students as well as students and their language learning texts in order to make assertions about the cultural forces at work. Although each class was observed only for one or two lesson periods, the multiple-case sampling strengthens the validity and generalisability of the findings, and helps to assure that the events observed in a given classroom were not wholly idiosyncratic (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcript data and the multiple teacher voices provide some 'thick description' (see Geertz, 1973) that increases the internal validity of the claims.

Findings

Data analysis quickly revealed a distinctive difference between interactions around the story-based lessons and the typical language practice lessons. The differences were consistent across the classes with the exception of one lesson period. The transcripts presented here come from five different classrooms out of those observed and were selected for discussion because they represent typical discourse observed around the two types of texts.

Communicative approach in practice

The first extract comes from a Grade 5 lesson where students are practising expressions of surprise and amazement. The book provides four dialogue

samples and a word bank of sample expressions. The teacher (A) brought student pairs with their books up to the front of the class to perform the task.

TA: OK. Now we will practice this conversation. Zeina and Anissa, please.

S1: *Hey, we won two tickets to the rock concert!*

S2: *I don't*

TA: No, don't read the same, use words from the bank.

S2: *You can't mean it!*

TA: Good. Now Hanadi and Rania.

S3: *That's*

TA: Hanadi, you are not reading the answer. Rania should read the answer.

S3: *A night on mers*

TA: Mercury

S3: *on Mercury is the same time as three months on Earth.*

S4: *That's aston-aston*

TA: asto-ni-shing

S4: *stonishing*

TA: OK, now Batul and Raghida. And use the data bank, please.

S5: *Isn't he a great singer?*

S6: [reads from the word bank] *That's unbelievable.*

TA: Raghida, you cannot say 'that's unbelievable' when she said 'Isn't he a great singer'. You must say something that agrees with what he said.

S6: *No way.*

TA: Wait, no [laughs], I see, so you don't think so. OK.

The exchange has a distinct drill flavour, and, throughout, teacher attention is firmly on the accuracy of form. In another school, another teacher was also observed using this same approach during a task where students were practising expressions of congratulations. When asked why they would not have the whole class engage in pair practice – which they could monitor by circulating among children – one of them responded:

A: I tried it the way they say in the teacher's book to put them in pairs to practice. But it did not work because I could not hear all of them. . . I'm sure they got some of the things wrong. (Interview notes)

The other teacher articulated a different concern with the approach promoted in the coursebook:

B: You now, I would really like to use the communicative approach, because I think that if students get used to it, it would really work. We have talked a lot about the importance of interactions at [a graduate TESL class] . . . but I have a big problem. When I first started teaching at [the school], I tried to follow the teacher's book and I think students liked it . . . but anyway, the coordinator told me to stop doing that because some parents were complaining. They said my class was 'out of control' and that I 'wasn't teaching the children anything' and that they were 'just talking to each other'. So, now I don't do that anymore. (Interview notes)

Her concerns resonate with the Japanese English language teacher, quoted by Richards and Lockhart (1994: 108):

If I do group work or open-ended communicative activities, the students and other colleagues will feel that I'm not really teaching them. They will feel that I didn't have anything really planned for the lesson and that I'm just filling in time.

The approach is clearly in contradiction with the role expectations of these teachers. However, the approach does not appear to be the only problem. The culturally oriented content typical in many of the ELT courses complicates the matter further. Take the following typical example about seasons and weather:

The text provides a dialogue pattern:

What's your favorite season? My favorite season is winter.

Why? I like cold, snowy weather.

What do you do in the winter? I go sledding and ice skating.

(Walker, 1986: 113)

Learners are also given nine further sentences as response models (with colourful illustrations accompanying the text):

My favorite season is summer. I like hot, sunny weather. I go swimming and sailing... My favorite season is fall. I like cool, windy weather. I go bike riding. I play in the leaves... My favorite season is spring. I like warm, rainy days. I plant flowers in my yard. (Walker, 1986: 113)

The extract below reflects typical discourse observed around such tasks in the corpus of the data and is appropriate here because it so clearly illustrates the problem culturally situated language practice may pose in some contexts. Note how the teacher C insists on the text description of the seasons:

TC: So, what is the weather like in spring? How is the weather in spring?
How is the weather in spring? [designates a student]

S1: *Very nice.*

TC: I am asking you how is the weather? What is the meaning of weather?
Say it now, how is the weather in spring? Do you feel cold in spring?

S1: *No.*

TC: Do you feel hot in spring?

Ss: *No!*

TC: How do you feel?

S1: *Warm.*

TC: Right. The weather in spring is warm. Roni and Boutros, please do the conversation Number 4.

S1: *What's your favorite season?*

TC: Roni, fā-v'rit, my fāv'rit

S2: *My favorite season is spring.*

S1: *Why?*

S2: *I like warm rainy days. Why do you, what do you do in the spring?*

S1: *I plant the rose in the yard.*

TC: You plant flowers.

S1: *plant flowers in the yard.*

TC: OK. The 3rd conversation is about fall. How is the weather in summer?

Ss: *Hot! Hot!*

TC: Right, and how is the weather in fall? [designates a student]

S3: *Cold, cold*

TC: No, it's not cold in fall. It's windy and it's not very cold.

S4: *It's cool*

TC: Right. Cold in winter, warm in spring, hot in summer, cool in fall. OK.

S3: *What's your favorite season?*

S5: *My favorite season is fall.*

S3: *Why? Why?*

S5: *I like the windy weather and weather.*

TC: Don't repeat weather

During the interview, this teacher echoed the previous teachers' belief about the teacher's role as she explained:

C: Well, if I did [allow students to practice the dialogues on their own], I would not be able to make sure that they use all the different vocabulary and expressions in the text. I must also correct their mistakes, so that [the students] don't learn it wrong. . . (Interview notes)

The above teachers' comments reflect both a cultural orientation toward low tolerance for uncertainty as well as a belief about the teacher's role, which is to provide knowledge and assure that it is learned correctly, as opposed to simply facilitating children's communication efforts. Note how the last teacher recasts the student's own contribution about planting a rose. In other words, Kumaravadivelu (2002) predictions are confirmed.

Moreover, if the activity options provided in the text are unfamiliar, it further diminishes the meaningfulness of the task. For children in the above class, sailing, sledding, and ice-skating are activities they may have experienced only vicariously on television or movies, and 'playing in the leaves', while perhaps very familiar to children in regions where autumn is associated with dry, falling leaves, is not so for children in this classroom. As a matter of fact, most Lebanese mothers would frown on the idea of their children romping in piles of rotting leaves.

A similar seasonal lesson in an all-girls class in a religiously oriented school caused confusion for somewhat different reasons. The illustrations depict a girl, 'Agnes', wearing a sleeveless T-shirt in the summer and jeans in autumn and spring. Students are to interview each other about their seasonal clothing and fill out a chart, 'The Clothes My Friends Wear' in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The girls in the class had difficulty relating to the choice of clothing, because in their social world, 11-year-old females do not bare their arms and legs in public, and most wear headscarves outside the home. This considerably limited the personally meaningful options for the girls in this class.

During interviews, teachers, whilst acknowledging the importance of culture-learning in the language class, expressed their frustration about some of the culture-specific material in their books that they argued was unfamiliar even to them. As teacher B put it about a lesson calling for dialogue practice about addresses and zip codes:

B: If I want the class to practice the conversations in the lesson, I must first teach them *all* the vocabulary, which is all new to them. But even

then they don't understand it because we have no zip codes or street addresses, and they know nothing about the different states in America. They are still studying Lebanese geography. (Interview notes)

Another teacher commented:

D: How can I make tacos or burritos with [students]? I didn't first know what they were, and nobody in my school knew anything about them. I had to call my cousin in California. Even when I understood what they were, I could not find the ingredients in our local shop. (Interview notes)

In other words, the content poses a problem not only to students but at times also to their teachers, making meaningful and personalised language practice difficult.

Cultural Content

Clearly, a mismatch is indicated between the material writers' perceptions about reality in many of the classrooms where the books are used. The above quotes reflect the difficult dilemma these teachers face: 'how to be in a classroom which is her own while at the same time belonging to others (Holliday, 2002: 4). Instead of monitoring student-student interactions, as clearly intended by the materials' writers, teachers monitor the accuracy of their production. The resulting outcome is 'routine teaching characterized by a heavy reliance on the textbook with few opportunities for spontaneous communication or interaction' (Holliday, 1994: 103).

In a recent ELT professionals' conference, a well-known, experienced materials developer suggested that, when faced with such culturally inappropriate content, 'teachers will be wise either not to select coursebooks with such content, or to substitute material' (Conference notes). The comment reflects an ethnocentric perception of what teachers can do, as well as a serious lack of awareness of the realities on the ground in many periphery-English countries. First teachers may have no say in the selection of books. For example, in the Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, principals and programme coordinators usually make coursebook decisions, often with little or no input from the teachers (sometimes influenced by financial incentives offered by the local distributors). Second, if large chunks of the material in a given book are of this nature, the teacher is faced with a daunting task of compiling alternative materials, which might not be readily available in sufficient quantities. Third, unlike in North American and British classrooms, the authority of the textbook goes unquestioned in some cultures, where the coursebook may function as the syllabus, with teachers 'covering the book from the beginning to the end' (Shaaban, 2000).

In her book, *Making Sense of a New World*, Gregory (1996) provides an insightful account of how learning, books and reading are perceived differently across cultures and how the perceptions influence expectations about teaching and learning. Ghosn (2001: 220) shows how the coursebook often plays an authoritarian, almost personified role in the Lebanese primary school

classroom, where teachers frequently use the pronoun 'they' when referring to the coursebook tasks:

Teacher 1: **They** want us to practice conversation here.

Teacher 2: Let's see what **they** want us to do today.

Teacher 3: **They** always give us problems to solve.

Teacher 4: **They** want us to circle the answers here.

There is a strong sense that the textbook is firmly in control of what is permissible and what needs to be accomplished. Thus, deviating from the coursebook by omissions or substitutions may not be a readily available option. The coursebook, being authored by native-speaker 'experts', may be perceived as an authority above the teacher. That these teachers should, 'of course, be trained in appropriate use of the materials', as the above-mentioned materials developer argued, represents an ethnocentric perception not only of the classroom life but also of the methodology developed in one's own culture as the only 'right' way to teach and learn English. In fact, this view, and the way the materials are structured, denies the teachers – and their learners – the right to their own cultural values and expectations (see Holliday, 2002, for an interesting related discussion).

Further, all the ELT course teachers interviewed for this study voiced the concern that, while children were practising the dialogues and role-plays daily, they 'did not learn how to speak English'. As two of the teachers articulated it:

B: This is exactly my problem! We practice and practice and they do so well, just like her, but when I want them to talk about something, they cannot say more than a few words, and their grammar is all wrong. That is so frustrating and the parents complain. . .

E: We do the conversations every day, and they do very well, but then when I ask them to talk about something else, they freeze and cannot get one sentence right. And the other [subject matter] teachers complain that my students cannot follow the teaching and want to answer in Arabic. (Interview notes)

Communication Around Stories

In the story-based classes, quite different interactions were observed. Contrast the above-cited language practice with transcripts from three story-based lessons in three different schools – in the same cultural context. In the first lesson extract, Grade 4 children have read Judith Viorst's (1977) classic *Alexander and The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*:

There were two cupcakes in Philip Parker's lunch bag and Albert got a Hershey bar with almonds and Paul's mother gave him a piece of jelly roll that had little coconut sprinkles on the top. Guess whose mother forgot to put in dessert? It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

This how the discussion went:

TG: Why did Alexander think it was such a bad day?

S1: *Miss, because, Miss, his mother not put ((sweets)) for him!*

S2: *Miss, what it mean 'cupcake'?*

TG: Uh, cupcake, cupcakes are little cakes ((cake)) baked in a paper cup.

S3: *Miss! Miss! What 'jelly roll'? Is the same jello?*

TG: Jelly roll, no, it's a little bit like..it's also a little cake but with a kind of jam inside, it's not jello.

S3: *Miss, like a donut?*

TG: Yeah, something like a donut, yes. OK, now. If you were in Alexander's place, how would you feel?

S1: *If me, if I am Alexander I will be very sad when I see all my friends eat cookies.*

TG: Uhuh, so you would be sad if you had no cookies for dessert.

S2: *Miss, me, me! Me, I angry because my mother she did not put any cookies.*

TG: Oh, so if you were left without dessert, you would be angry. Uhuh.

The experience of disappointment, although firmly culturally situated, is clearly something that children in this class can relate to. At the same time, the text offers an excellent opportunity for explicit learning about the target language culture – as well as a natural context, for example, for past tense verb forms and pronouns. Even though some of the content is unfamiliar to children, clearly they are curious and quite able to ask questions about it. However, their role is that of an observer rather than imaginary participant in the situation. Yet, despite the children's eager contributions and questions, the teacher is clearly maintaining her instructor role.

In the following extract, another teacher and her class are reading a trickster tale:

TH: Open your book on page 49, flip through the pages and tell me what is the difference between this story and the one we read before.[Several students begin talking excitedly]

TH: Yes, Rami.

S1: *The characters are different.*

TH: Good, Rami. You noticed that the characters are not the same as in the other story.

S2: *Many animals in the story.*

TH: That's right, Jasmina. There are many animals in the story.

S3: *The name of the animal and what is saying.*

TH: Excellent, Jawdat. We know what each animal is saying. So, it is a . . . [looking around the class; no response from the class]

TH: For example, when Ghina says, 'Open the door please', and Kamal answers, 'No, I can't' [laughter]

TH: This is a dialogue and the story you will listen to in a few minutes is a play. In this play, we have characters they are animals.

S4: *It's a trickster*

TH: Ah. So, you think it is a trickster tale. And, Joseph, who do you think will trick the other?

S5: *The rabbit will trick the tiger.*

TH: Why do you think so?

S5: *Because the rabbit is smarter than the tiger.*

TH: OK. We will see if the rabbit is smarter than the tiger. You might be right.

TH: Before I play the tape, I want you to know that the black sentences [in the book] refer to each animal speech and the red ones explain how the animals are acting. Did you understand me? Now, listen carefully.

Students listen to the tape while following the text in their books. The teacher stops the tape every now and then to ask questions and elicit predictions.

This teacher is clearly more authoritarian than the one observed above and clearly has in mind acceptable answers. While the teacher is clearly in charge of the exchange, and not much is left for guesswork or ambiguity, the discourse is meaningful.

In the following extract, Teacher J is discussing a story set in winter with a class of 10-year-olds. She identified as one of her aims to encourage children to make logical predictions.

TJ: They were preparing breakfast, then what did they do?

S1: [reads] *They put on some warm clothes—Miss, what we mean by 'scarf'?*

TJ: Scarf, what's a scarf. Do you know? Rami?

S2: *They, they put it* [demonstrates how a scarf is wrapped around the neck]

TJ: Uhuh. I think it's ((scarf)). OK. And they put on coats [some students pantomime putting on coats] and boots.

S3: *And mittens, Miss.*

TJ: What are mittens? Gilbert?

S3: *Gloves without fingers.*

TJ: They don't cover your fingers, they are like this cut [points to her fingers]

Ss: *Gloves!*

S2: *No, the ones that comes (xx) two pieces like here.* [points]

TJ: But what Gilbert means it doesn't cover the fingers. If they were going to play in the snow.... [several students talking simultaneously about mittens having to cover the whole hand if children were going to play in the snow]

TJ: Right, mittens are like what Rami said. They cover the fingers. OK. Go ahead

S2: [reads] *They put on some warm clothes, scarves, coats, boots, and mittens.*

TJ: OK. What do you think will happen next? What do you think will happen? Rami, what do you think will happen, what's your prediction?

S2: *She, they will go outside to play.*

TJ: OK. Why do you think that? Maya?

S4: *Because.. they said that on the streets there were snow.*

TJ: So, what makes you think that they will go outside and play?

S5: *Because, because there was no school they can play*

Although Teacher J is also clearly in control of the discourse, the exchange is focused on meaning, and the video clip from the classroom shows several

students bidding for turns to participate. Despite that the three lesson episodes are quite different in nature, they reveal an aspect that was evident in all the story-based lessons but not in the ELT classes: frequent open-ended and challenging teacher questions. Unlike the limited-answer options observed during the communicative language practice, the open-ended questions resulted in longer and syntactically more complex student responses (as Kubota (1989) and Ghosn (2001) for example, have shown) and subsequently more negotiated exchanges. Another finding that held in all story-based lessons – but only in one ELT lesson – was children’s questions not only about the lesson content and vocabulary but also about how language works.

One teacher – different texts, different discourse

Now, a reader might well argue that the above differences are not so much task-related as teacher-specific, especially since the sample is limited to six teachers in each group. The following extract helps dispel this argument, however. The extract comes from Teacher A’s class, where we observed children earlier practising expressions of surprise and amazement. While the language practice of that lesson resulted in ‘pseudo-communication’, the discourse took on a very different flavour when the same teacher and her students interacted around a story. In this episode, students are preparing to dramatise a story, a simplified¹ excerpt from Melville’s ‘Moby Dick’, which they have read in their ELT book.

TA: Who can tell me why, why was Captain Ahab angry with Moby Dick?

S1: *Miss, because he had bit off his leg.*

TA: Yes

S1: *And he want to take revenge.*

TA: He want to, very good. He, who?

S1: *Captain Ahab.*

TA: Captain Ahab.

S1: *Captain Ahab.*

TA: Who would like to dramatise the story here in front of us? We are there on a boat, we are on the [several Ss raise their hands]

TA: boat, OK. Going across the sea and one of us is the Captain Ahab who is going to pay back [xx] the whale. OK?

S2: *I want to make like captain Ahab [unintelligible noise]*

TA: Ninar, Amal, Nadine, come here. OK. And [xx] [Five Ss line up in front of the class]

TA: Would you tell us about your personalities, your new characters now.

S1: *I’m Captain Ahab.*

TA: Yes, Nadine is captain Ahab.

S2: *I’m Ishmael.*

TA: Would you, would you tell us something about you captain Ahab?

S1: *I’m Captain Ahab. I, I’m a sailor.*

TA: Uhuh.

S1: *A whale had had had bit my had bit my leg.*

TA: Yes.

S1: *And I want to kill hem.*

TA: OK. [to class] But look at Captain Ahab. Is he, is there something wrong with his body?

LL: Yes! No! yes!

TA: So what should Nadine do here?

LL: She should make [several students demonstrate a leg bend].

S3: *She should make* [bends leg back from the knee].

TA: Yes, she should have a leg like Captain Ahab. And he is. . .

TA: Now you, Ninar, who are you, my dear?

S2: *I'm Ishmayel.*

TA: Ishmaeyl, yes. You are what, who are you on, Captain Ahab on his boat?

S2: *Yes. I am* ((his helper)).

TA: Aha. She is helping him to

LL: Kill the whale!

TA: Yes, to kill the whale. OK [turning to S4]

S4: *I am the [giggles] the whale [laughter from the class]*

TA: Aha, she is the whale [laughter]

TA: Would you tell us something about you

S4: *I am a strong*

TA: Uhuh

S4: *I, I have a big mouth.*

TA: Ah, a big mouth, yes.

S4: *And I .. who any person hurts me I will kill I will bother.*

LL: [interrupt] bother me.

S4: *who bother me I will kill him.*

TA: Aha. She will kill him. OK

Despite students' need to use some L1, the discourse is connected and meaningful, and the teacher's feedback is more positive and accepting than during the 'communicative' language practice lesson.

Discussion and Conclusions

Content and approach in communicative lessons

The findings indicate that primary school language courses produced in core-English countries, when used in a different culture, can pose a problem of both content and set-up of activities. These courses often presuppose a shared, English-dominant cultural reality, presenting situations, concepts and vocabulary stereotypical of American (or British) classrooms, cities and country scenes. In the absence of a shared reality, however, difficulties may arise when young learners – and their teachers – and the language learning texts inhabit separate worlds, as Gregory (1996) has shown.

Although unfamiliar content has the potential of engaging students' imagination, and to use Holliday's words, 'encourage them to travel in their minds' (personal e-mail communication), the *approach* of the communicative activities makes it difficult. Unless the concepts in the dialogue happen to match the children's own situation, or their lexicon already includes other words that better

describe their own activities and experience, their utterances are restricted to the options in the book. Thus, the task does not allow learners to bring anything of their own to the situation, contrary to what Breen and Candlin (1980) have claimed that communicative language teaching can do. As Teacher B put it:

B: I think that [name of a coursebook] is really beautiful and all, but I think that my students should learn first to talk about their own environment in English before they begin to talk about unfamiliar things like tacos, but the vocabulary in the books does not help them. (Interview notes)

The transcript data clearly indicate that pair practice, while perhaps being well suited to North American ESL classes, does not necessarily meet the expectations of teachers and learners in the Lebanese L2 class. The role-play and dialogue practice, in particular, expect teachers to assume the role of 'spectators of their pupils' performance' (Wurzel & Fischman, 1995: 42). This role, while perhaps comfortable to Anglo-American primary school teachers, might be much less readily accepted by teachers in more hierarchical cultures, where a teacher represents the authority who is expected to conduct the class. The above-cited teacher quotes certainly suggest this to be the case in the Lebanon.

Content and approach in story-based lessons

Stories, although almost always highly culture-bound, can provide a culturally more appropriate social context for both classroom interaction and, subsequently, for language learning than the traditional language practice tasks shown above. The transcripts reveal there is a crucial difference between the culturally situated language practice of role-plays and dialogues on the one hand and the exchanges generated around stories on the other. Unlike the communicative language practice tasks that require children to role-play unfamiliar situations, using also new, unfamiliar expressions, stories allow children to remain in their own persona while examining and talking about the content and ideas in the story. In other words, the story provides a context for meaningful exploration and exchange of ideas while the language practice tasks provide a context only for drill. As an anonymous reviewer of this article aptly put it, story narrative brings in 'the third person to open the way to a much more authentic form of expression by taking the spotlight off the speaker and putting it on the story, this universal object of interest the world over that makes listener want to leap in and comment.'

The transcript extracts from the classes of teachers G and J about Alexander's misfortunes and the winter-day school closure both also reflect the strong potential of a story for cultural learning as children are trying to relate the story world to their own life experience. Interestingly, the rich multicultural content (Hispanic, Chinese, Vietnamese and Native American) in one of the North American ESL courses, which was used in three of the classes, was mentioned as a positive aspect by the very same teachers who complained about the zip codes and other culture-specific content. On closer inspection of the material, it transpired that the multicultural (i.e. non-Anglo) content was presented primarily in short reading texts, such as folktales, short biographical narratives and so on, which served as a stimulus for discussions.

In the story-based classes, although much of the work happened in the traditional teacher-fronted format, the focus was on getting at the meaning of the texts. This engaged the students and offered many opportunities for a genuine exchange of ideas, which, in turn, generated connected and interactive discourse and genuine communication. When the focus of the task is on meaning, teachers tend to also accept student responses, extend them, negotiate meaning and elaborate ideas. The interactive discourse helps explain the positive research evidence from story-based studies, such as the famous 'book flood' studies (see e.g. Elley, 2000; Elley *et al.*, 1996).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided snapshots of primary school classrooms in Lebanon, showing how different instructional texts influence interactions. The transcript data reveal that, in story-based language instruction, learners do not *practise communication* but use language to *communicate* ideas, and, indeed, communicate also with texts. In other words, story-based instruction provides a medium for what Holliday (1994) has referred to as 'strong version' of the communicative language teaching. Language learning happens as the teacher and children engage in meaningful interactions around stories and related tasks in an environment not unlike the one suggested by Vygotskian (1978) sociocultural learning theory. Most importantly, story-based instruction is culture-sensitive and adaptable to given local contexts and culture-specific expectations of teachers and learners. In other words, story-based instruction fits within the three-dimensional framework of 'postmethod condition' postulated by Kumaravadivelu (2002: 14–16) and 'consisting of the parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility'.

SBI is sensitive to the local cultural context, enabling teachers to select the content and pedagogy most appropriate to their particular situation; allows teachers to construct their own personal theories of practice; and it can empower participants to appropriate language and knowledge while maintaining their own identities.

Analysis of learners' needs, interests and characteristics, as well as their home culture, will determine the selection of appropriate stories. The prevailing classroom culture will dictate what kind of procedures and activities are desirable and acceptable and what might be 'out of character'. The choice of content and methodology must also reflect the wider culture within which the classroom is situated. Story-based instruction allows teachers to maintain ownership of their classroom and adopt an approach most appropriate in their specific classroom. While autonomous teachers may have considerable flexibility in terms of the approaches they adopt, teachers in more restricted contexts can follow the expected, standardised procedures. In a hierarchically oriented cultural context, such as the one prevailing in Lebanon, for instance, teachers can follow the traditional, teacher-fronted approach and use the question-answer format while still maintaining focus on the meaning. In more egalitarian cultures, teachers can structure instruction around small-group and pair-work and assume the role of a facilitator. Whether the teacher is a whole language advocate or believes in skills-focused language instruction,

they can structure instruction around stories. Stories can also provide a means for language practice; once a story has been read and discussed and children are familiar with the key vocabulary, they can create their own dialogues and role-play all or parts of the story. Such practice would be both meaningful and useful.

There is a rich body of high quality English language literature for children around which to develop a language teaching syllabus. Stories with enduring universal themes, such as belonging, love, courage, hope, friendship and achievement, albeit set in foreign cultural contexts, will appeal to children around the world. Culturally unfamiliar content, while difficult to personalise in role-plays and dialogues, can safely be explored in a discussion where learners can maintain their own identities. Stories can also be linked to non-fiction content, enabling building of meaningful thematic units within which children can explore different registers and expand their language awareness while also learning about the world around them.

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Notes

1. I do not believe in including simplified versions of adult classics in children's ELT materials.

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