

## **Whose Culture is Represented in English for Business Purpose Course Books in Iran: Center or Circle Englishes?**

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### **Abstract**

Intercultural communicative competence plays an important role in business communication. English for business course books need to provide students with the opportunity to explore, acquire, and compare various features of the cultures of different countries. The present paper reports a content analysis of three English for business purpose (EBP) course books published by two main academic publications in Iran. The aim was to find out cultural representation of center and circle English countries. Also the potential for fostering intercultural competence was investigated. Two checklists were developed for the data collection in the study, namely, Cultural Representation and Intercultural Experiences Checklist. Content or document analysis was applied to identify inner circle, and the outer and expanding circle cultural contents of the EBP textbooks under analysis. The data was quantified as the frequency of occurrence both in the texts and illustrations of the three books if any. Also the coverage of activities was recorded that allow for multiculturalism and foster interculturally competent EBP learners. The findings suggest that the texts were generally de-cultured and no provision was made for developing an intercultural personality in the students.

**Keywords:** English for business purposes, material evaluation, content analysis, world Englishes, intercultural competence, cultural representation

## **Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....**

### **1. Introduction**

Spread of large international companies throughout the world and use of English as an international language as the most important language of communication within and between these companies have made national, organizational, and professional cultures a distinctive feature of English for Business Purposes (EBP) programs. On the other hand, individual's bias (thoughts, beliefs, and values) prevents the accurate reception of the message intended in interpersonal interactions (Steinberg, 2007:49). By the same token, insufficient cross-cultural understanding can potentially result in impaired communication and even the loss of business (CiLT, 2005). In fact, intercultural competence plays a major role in effective business communication and inattention to culture-specific socio-pragmatic rules of etiquette can directly affect the outcome of business transactions. Moreover, misinterpretations due to cultural differences may cost a company its reputation. Ellis and Johnson consider "the awareness of appropriate language and behavior for the cultures and situations in which they will operate" as a key element for EBP learners (p. 35). It is in fact evident that awareness of intercultural aspect of business communication prepares EBP students to manage the cultural differences that may hamper business transactions.

### **2. Literature Review**

An issue of contention in ESP is its relationship with culture. This relationship may be envisaged from a general or a specific perspective. Through the lorgnette of general relationship, ESP is considered as an approach to English language teaching sharing many characteristics with ELT in general (EGP) (Qattous, 1995). The commonly accepted view is that each language has the cultural dimension of its original country, and that language and culture are tightly interwoven making it impossible to separate the two in any real sense (Brown, 2014; East, 2012; Pulverness, 2004). Communicative approaches to language teaching ignored intercultural dimension of language learning assigning only a peripheral role to culture as an addendum for transmission of some factual information about the target culture (East, 2012). However, in most international communications through English, the participants are not native speakers of the language, people

who need to use English for a variety of purposes but do not adhere to English speaking cultures (cf. Lee, 2012).

Specific purposes for the learning, subject matter, and the target population may call for specific relationship between culture and an ESP program (Qattous, 1995). While it may naively seem that unlike general ELT, ESP is not concerned with culture, cultural values and behaviors are considered as an essential feature in many ESP programs (Dudley-Evance & St. John, 1998). In fact, researchers and practitioners now generally acquiesce to the extra specific relationship between ESP and culture, be it national, professional, or organizational. A particularly important case in point is business English. Dudley-Evance and St. John (1998: p. 69) assert that "sensitivity to differences between cultures is necessary for successful business communications in matters such as the purpose of meetings, the use of direct or indirect negotiation tactics, the structuring of information or the use of politeness strategies in letters or meetings".

Arguing for the international nature of ESP, López Torres and Perea Barberá (2002) consider it a prominent characteristic of ESP since "in the majority of cases, interactions take place among people of different nationalities using English as an international language for communication" (75). Studies on business English as a lingua franca (BELF) and on international business English (IBE) point to "the need to reassess the privileged position that has traditionally been held by native speaker models, and the perhaps more pressing need to understand much more about the nature of English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication and what leads both to success and to failure in ELF interaction". (Nickerson, 2013: 451). Therefore, enchantment with native speaker culture is gradually being replaced with a recognition of all hues of cultural diversity.

Following the cultural and linguistic norms of the native speakers (NSs) of English in situations where people involved in communication are both nonnative speakers (NNS) of English is now under question. Dudley-Evance and St. John (1998) argue that business English that is mostly used between non-native speaker and non-native speaker (NNS-NNS) is mainly about effective communication and aspects of native speaker (NS) language such as phrasal verbs are unhelpful to NNSs as they are less transparent than alternative phrases. Jenkins (2000) was able to identify some pronunciation features of standard NS English which are not necessary for intelligibility and therefore do not need to be included in ESP programs. By the same token, there are cultural elements belonging to NSs that are not helpful to NNSs in their international

## **Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....**

business communication in English. On the other hand, international business communication and transactions between individuals and companies from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds call for intercultural competence rather than awareness of NS culture.

With the rapid expansion of English as a global language to diverse sociocultural settings where it serves a variety of purposes including business, the language has taken different local tastes and colors. Identification and recognition of linguistic and cultural features of these varieties is an important step towards fostering effective business communication between companies based in different cultural settings. In a series of articles, Kachru (1985, 1991, 1992, 1998) attempted to recognize world Englishes (WEs). He distinguished three concentric circles of WEs based on its functional domain and the way it is acquired and spread. In this model, inner circle includes the five norm-providing countries where English is the primary language; the outer circle is assigned to the norm-developing countries where English is an institutionalized non-native language, and the expanding circle belongs to norm-dependent countries where English is used as a foreign language.

Kachru (1992) questioned the inner circle native speaker norm as a valid criterion for international communication in English and assigned a legitimate status to local varieties of English, especially those of the outer circle countries. This means that fluent international English speakers able in cross-cultural communication may take over the speakers belonging to the center circle. English norm is therefore defined irrespective of affinity with native or non-native speaking countries (Modiano, 2001). It was estimated that approximately 75% (Crystal, 1997) or 80% (Graddol, 1997) of English used in international communication was for NNS-NNS communication. This statistical dominance of the circle Englishes coupled with the rapid growth in the use of WEs in expanding circle, not only credits the legitimacy of expanding circle varieties, but also confers a dominant position to circle Englishes in shaping and developing the norms for global communication (Lee, 2012). Therefore, people learning a global language such as English are required to develop intercultural competence rather than acquiring the cultural norms of the inner circle English (McKay, 2002; Velasco-Martin, 2004).

Guilherme (2000) defined intercultural competence as "the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own" (297). Taking an intercultural personality or what Kramersch (1998) calls 'cultural appropriation' involves learners adapting the cultural elements to their own needs and interests. This in essence means the ability

to understand other cultures while retaining one's own. In order to develop intercultural personality in learners from different L1 backgrounds, it is imperative to raise their awareness of intercultural aspect of communication in world Englishes and sensitize them to the different ways of using English by people from different cultures and thus prepare them to take the responsibility of managing the differences (Lee, 2012). In this vein, EFL/ESL learning must engage language learners in critical awareness about the WEs language and culture and their own language and culture (Snow et al., 2006).

Development of intercultural competence in ESP students of business administration is a curricular goal that can be implemented through pedagogy and teaching materials. Hyland (2006) believes that one of the principal roles of materials in language instruction, including ESP is to provide ideas and contexts that stimulate and promote discussion and writing, encouraging students to make connections to their own experiences, articulate their ideas, and interact with others. Similar to general ELT, materials and textbooks for business English can incorporate features so that they enable students to understand communication patterns as well as expectations and avoid losses due to misunderstandings in interactions between NNS-NNS from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Classroom activities are centered around topics relevant to the students' local settings and which allow students to explore their own cultural attributes and those of other cultures (Lin et al., 2005; Luk, 2005). Then comes what Byram (1991: 19) calls "a modification of monocultural awareness" when learners are helped to depart from ethnocentrism and to acquire an intercultural awareness where phenomena are seen from a different ethnic identity and cultural perspective. Liddicoat (2011) explains that language learners are helped to develop "a sense of themselves as *mediators between language and cultures*" (837). Cultural content of ESP materials for business students and the activities that provide for both local and international cultural exploration and acquisition can determine if they are targeted at developing an intercultural personality.

The present study is an attempt to investigate whether and to what extent inner and outer/expanding circle cultures are represented in three EBP course books produced by two major state-run academic publications in Iran: SAMT and Payame Noor Publications. Also the study seeks to investigate if there are particular activities in these books that can potentially provide for intercultural competence.

The following questions were formulated for the study:

## Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....

1. How do the three EBP course books differ in their representation of the center and circle Englishes cultures?
2. To what extent the books under evaluation provide for the acquisition of intercultural competence?

### 3. Method

A qualitative study was conducted to analyze the contents of these books to see whether and to what extent they represent inner circle and the outer/expanding circle cultures. The data was collected as frequency of occurrence of each category and the ratio of total occurrence of inner circle to outer/expanding circle culture themes was calculated. Also, document analysis was employed to see if the books under evaluation help EBP students develop intercultural competence by providing for the opportunity to raise awareness of, and critically reflect on the international cultures and languages in relation to the learners' local language and culture.

#### 3.1. Corpus

A micro-evaluation (Ellis, 1997) was performed for three EBP course books published by two major academic publishers in Iran from an intercultural point of view. The books included *English for the Students of Business Administration 3* (Babaie Zakliki, 2013), *English in Business Administration ۳* (Samarbakhsh Tehrani, 200۳), and *English in Business Administration ۴* (Samarbakhsh Tehrani, 200۴). While the first material was designated as the main course book for classroom activities, the last two books were developed for self-study by EBP students at Payame Noor University.

*English for the Students of Business Administration 3* includes 15 units including reading passages and the relevant exercises. The book addresses reading skill with a very traditional taste. Each unit starts with a reading comprehension passage on themes and contents relevant to business administration such as marketing management, consumer behavior, principles of insurance, sales forecasting, strategic management, commercial banks, etc. This is invariably followed by *Comprehension Exercises*, *Language Practice*, and a *Translation Activity*. Very few diagrams and even fewer tables are the only illustrations in 149 pages of the book.

*English in Business Administration 3* comprises 6 units and 3 self-assessment sections which amount to a total of 136 pages. Units are introduced with the same explicitly stated general aims, i.e., '*helping the learners with a number of key words*', '*familiarizing them with*

*typical passages*' and *'translating the related passages'*. The units start with a very traditional presentation of vocabulary in the form of dictionary definition and exemplification. This is then followed by *Vocabulary Exercises*. A reading passage with *Pre-reading Questions* and post-reading *Comprehension Questions* compose the second section of each unit. Finally, the units are terminated with a *Translation Practice* which is simply a passage that the learners are required to translate into Persian. The book contains no illustration and the reading passages compose the main body of each unit covering the themes and topics such as the types of business organizations, the marketing concept, importance of communication in organizations, management information system, and industrial psychology.

The last book that served as the corpus for analysis in this study was *English in Business Administration 4*. The book comprises 6 units and a final self-assessment section presented in 141 pages and the sequence of activities in each unit is the same as that of *English in Business Administration 3*. Traditional presentation of vocabulary in the form of dictionary definition and exemplification and subsequent matching and fill-in-the blank activities are followed by a reading passage and the relevant *Pre-reading Questions* and post-reading *Comprehension Questions*. Similarly, a *Translation Practice* terminates each unit. This book also contains no illustration and the themes and topics of the reading passages include fundamentals of the international business situations, accounting activities and careers, entering the global business market, managing budgetary controls, management and customer satisfaction, and formulating business strategies.

### **3.2. Instruments**

Two checklists were developed for the data collection in the study. Cultural Representation Checklist included aspects of culture belonging to inner and outer/expanding circles (center and circle Englishes, respectively) based on Kachru's (1985) model. Cultural content encompasses both conspicuous and inconspicuous elements. The conspicuous elements in the study included people (as depicted by nationality, race, and proper names), geographical location, customs and traditions, food and eating habits, entertainment/media, and dress and appearance. Inconspicuous elements on the other hand, include attitudes, norms, beliefs, values, and thinking patterns. Trompenaars (1994) presented a model consisting seven significant invisible dimensions of culture in Business English that deal with relationship between people, the passage of time, and

## **Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....**

the environment. While all these dimensions are important, Dudley-Evance and St. John (1998) argue that the ones that are most important are the relationship dimensions of *neutral:emotional*, *individualism:collectivism*, *specific:diffuse cultures*, and *universalism:particularism*. These invisible dimensions of the culture were built into the Cultural Representation Checklist adopted for data collection in the study.

To address the second question of the study, the criteria for micro-evaluation were mainly drawn from Lee (2012) who extracted common features of the various models proposed in the literature to integrate authentic intercultural experiences into the learners' cultural identity. These features included activities entailing cultural exploration (where the learners are asked to investigate or explore various cultural properties), cultural acquisition (where the learners are provided with cultural information), cultural comparison (where the learners are engaged in an activity of comparing aspects of two or more cultures), and negotiation or integration of the learner's third place between cultures (where activities explicitly or implicitly promote unprejudiced critical awareness about the learner's culture and the international culture, departure from ethnocentrism, seeing phenomena from a different ethnic identity and cultural perspective, and acquisition of an intercultural awareness).

### **3.3. Procedure**

Content or document analysis was applied to identify inner circle, and the outer and expanding circle cultural contents of the EBP textbooks under analysis. The data was quantified as the frequency of occurrence both in the texts and illustrations of the three books if any. To crosscheck the subjective decisions made on each category, two experienced colleagues were consulted and in case of different opinions, an agreement was reached through discussion. In order to be consistent in the decisions made, the controversies where there was inter-rater disagreement were recorded together with the final decision made and these were used as the criterion for analysis of similar cases. For example, in the event of a clash between race and living place (e.g. people from Asian or African origin assimilating American culture or the emigrants' descendants born in the US), the cultural representation was attributed to the learned and not genetic features and this criterion was consistently applied to similar case in the entire analysis. Finally, the visible and invisible cultural elements generally accepted as international and the instances where the affinity with a particular culture could not be established were not included in the data.



The second checklist was used to account for the coverage of activities that allow for cultural exploration, cultural comparison, cultural acquisition, and negotiation or integration of the learner's third place between cultures. Instances of occurrence of activities dealing with each theme were recorded to see the degree to which the course books under evaluation care for multiculturalism and foster interculturally competent EBP learners. Help from two experienced colleagues were sought for deciding on every item and an agreement was reached through discussion on the discrepancies. Again the settled decisions were utilized as a criterion to apply to the similar cases throughout the analysis. The difference between cultural acquisition and cultural exploration activities was taken to be that of presenting the learners with cultural information and having them to investigate and explore a particular cultural aspect, respectively. Cultural comparison activities were those in which the learners were asked to engage in a comparison of either local-nonlocal or nonlocal-nonlocal cultural themes.

#### 4. Results

Table 1 shows the frequency of occurrence of the cultural themes in the three EBP course books published by SAMT and Payame Noor University Press. Frequency of occurrence of activities aiming at developing intercultural competence in these course books are also depicted in Table 2. Both Tables reveal the cultural underrepresentation of the materials and a tendency towards culturally depleted texts and activities. There were also cases where references to a particular region were deliberately redacted possibly to avoid the affinity with a specific culture. In what follows, a detailed analysis of the cultural contents of each course book will be presented.

*Table 1. Frequency of occurrence of cultural themes representing inner (center) and outer/expanding (circle) Englishes countries in the three EBP books under investigation*

Cultural Content	<i>English in Business Administration 3 (Payame Noor U.P.)</i>		<i>English for the Students of Business Administration 3 (SAMT)</i>		<i>English in Business Administration 4 (Payame Noor U.P.)</i>	
	Center	Circle	Center	Circle	Center	Circle
Visible						
People (Nationality, Race, Proper Name)	0	1	1	4	2	9
Customs/Traditions	0	0	0	4	0	0
Location	0	0	18	48	4	18
Food and Eating Habits	0	0	0	0	0	0

## Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....

Invisible	Entertainment/Media	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Dress and Appearance	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Relationships, Family and Friends	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Companies/Products	2	2	16	7	17	2
	Currency	1	3	8	2	7	4
	Neutral/Emotional Cultures	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Individualism/Collectivism	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Specific/Diffuse Cultures	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Universalism/Particularism	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	3	7	43	67	20	33
Ratio of Center / Circle Culture	42.8%		64.1%		60.6%		

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of activities with a potential of or aiming at developing intercultural competence in the three EBP books under investigation

	<i>English in Business Administration 3</i>	<i>English for the Students of Business Administration 3</i>	<i>English in Business Administration 4</i>
Cultural Exploration	0	0	0
Cultural Comparison	0	1	0
Cultural acquisition	0	0	0
Negotiation/Integration of the Learner's 3 <sup>rd</sup> Place between Cultures	0	0	0
Total	0	1	0

### 4.1. English in Business Administration 3 (Payame Noor University Press)

Content analysis of the *English for the Students of Business Administration 3* revealed that either culture-free materials were used or the texts have been deliberately de-cultured. Throughout 132 pages of the book only 10 references to center or circle Englishes countries have been made, approximately one in every 13 pages. Underrepresentation of culture is more critical as the in-depth analysis revealed that these few and far-in-between references were quite brief and in the form of a passing mention of e.g. commercial products such as Coca Cola, Hoover, or General Motors. Apart from a few scientists and theoreticians who have been quoted in some passages – e.g., Maslow, Herzberg, and Mecland – mostly personal pronouns have been used to avoid reference to a particular nationality. A rare instance was using a Persian proper name in an exercise. There was one instance where a record or statement of the decision made by a legislative or judicial body was mentioned: Workmen's Compensation Act. Interestingly, no

reference was made of the country of origin for this record. Therefore, it is not surprising that the culturally-depleted materials do not provide for the slightest opportunity to foster intercultural competence (Table 2).

#### **4.2. English for the Students of Business Administration 3 (SAMT Publications)**

Analysis of the contents of the second book showed that throughout 148 pages of the course book, there were a total of 110 references to center/circle Englishes locations, companies, products, and currencies. This suggests one reference in every 1.3 pages. There appears to be a dearth of reference to international community and content analysis revealed that most passages referred to organizations, consumers, markets etc. in general and even there were instances where the affinity to specific cultures seemed to be deliberately redacted. The following excerpt from page 99 illustrates omission of the nationality and geographical location which seems necessary for a full appreciation of the passage:

“... Since World War II the proportion of Growth National Product (GNP) generated by service industries increased from 35 percent to almost 50 percent (Some sources estimate the proportion spent on services today to be as high as two-thirds of GNP). Two out of every three workers are now employed in service industries ....”

There is no reference in the entire passage to the country where the statistics were obtained and the reader is only provided with a business trend about *somewhere* since World War II. Another instance of deliberate exclusion of the particular country or geographical region was observed on page 117:

“Nevertheless, corporate planning was popular in the 1960s. The period enjoyed economic stability and planners were able to convince both themselves and their directors that they could predict the future several years ahead. The oil crisis of 1973 proved them wrong. The outcome was that corporate planning was criticized as organizations found themselves in turbulent change, and long-range plans were of little use.”

Again, the readers are given no clues to the country of region where crisis and economic turbulence occurred. Neither is it clear if the consequences of the oil crisis were for that particular country or the international community.

Unit 13 (Developing Competitive Advantage), presents a rare instance of comparison of successful Italian, German, and Japanese firms in terms of their typical size, the types of

## **Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....**

industries, and the way they are managed: "... Italian firms are managed like extended families ... Germany, in contrast, tends to have hierarchical organizations that emphasize technical and engineering content ... and [Japanese firms] demand management of complex assembly operations ..." (pp. 121-122). Apart from the potential threat of stereotyping and pigeonholing various business cultures, the passage can potentially provide for an excellent opportunity for cultural exploration, comparison, and acquisition necessary for development of intercultural competency in the EBP students. However, analysis of the post-reading activities revealed that the book fails to seize the opportunity and the passage, at best, is an attempt to transmit some factual information about the organizational cultures of the Italian, German, and Japanese companies.

### **4.3. English in Business Administration 4 (Payame Noor University Press)**

The statistics for the cultural themes in the last book was not basically different from those of the other EBP course books under analysis. As Table 1 shows, there were a total of 20 and 33 instances of the cultural themes belonging to the center and circle countries, respectively with a ratio of 60.6%. This amounts to one reference in every 2.6 pages. Moreover, the content analysis revealed that even the brief references to particular cultures were mainly in the form of isolated sentences serving as an example without a deeper analysis of the case. For example, the excerpt "costs are two thirds lower at Japan Air Charter, a subsidiary that employs foreigners, than at the parent company" (p.63) was used as an example of the usage of business terminology, 'parent company'. Therefore, it is not surprising that the book has no plan to treat intercultural competence. This is manifested in Table 2 where not even a single activity was detected for cultural acquisition, exploration, comparison, etc., which are the hallmarks of intercultural education.

## **5. Discussion**

Various categories of cultural themes belonging to inner circle native speakers of English, outer circle, and the expanding circle countries including the local culture were greatly or wholly missing in the evaluated books. In fact, the three English for business purpose course books under analysis were not basically different in their coverage and representation of cultural

themes. Nor did they feature activities fostering multiculturalism and intercultural competence in EBP learners.

Depleting the EBP materials from their cultural content or making use of culture-free materials may reflect the sociopolitical and ideological position of the material developers or the higher level decision makers at the curricular plane. The motivation behind this decision may come from a variety of sources. For one thing, there is the dissatisfaction with what Robinson (1991) criticizes as "too much attention [being] focused on the business practices of Western Europe and the USA [and] any cross-cultural adjustment being made in the direction of the West" (98). The overreaction against cultural monopoly of the US or Western countries could even go as far as total omission of foreign culture from the L2 learning material. In fact, ESP/EAP was earlier conceived of as a culture-free endeavor (Strevens, 1977). Furthermore, the universal language of science and technology reflected in most ESP/EAP materials was once supposed to be objective and free from any cultural bias. Nickerson (2005) described most research into English in international business as opting "for a view of English as a neutral medium not associated with any one particular dominant culture" (377). However, as Parkinson (2013) argues, even science and technology are not context-free and disciplinary culture and values may vary between countries. In an interesting study, Artemeva (1998) found that the different disciplinary culture and values in a North American and a Russian engineering company were reflected in different sentence and paragraph organization, thematic structure, and even content of their progress reports.

In the preface to the two course books by Payame Noor Publications, the aim of the books was proclaimed to develop reading skills of business administration and to use the relevant textbooks. As the books are generally of an EAP nature, the passages are unequivocally descriptive in nature presenting the students with culturally depleted information on the basic concepts, theories, and classifications in the field. There is no instance of more practical and professional ESP-oriented treatments such as actual business negotiations and interactions. Zoranyan (2008) contends that culturally imposed rules in business communication are more conspicuous than in academic contacts. She further explains that intercultural incompetence during business negotiations may be misinterpreted as arrogance or aggressive behavior which may cost any businessman their international career.

## **6. Conclusion**

Effective business communication calls for intercultural competence which is not necessarily based on the NSs linguistics and sociopragmatics norms. Business English is mostly used between non-native speakers and non-native speakers. Inattention to the international nature of World Englishes in NNSs-NNSs business communications can directly affect the outcome of business transactions. Materials for EBP - be it more academic or job oriented - can and should prepare the students and professionals to cope with insufficient cross-cultural understandings. Incorporation of various aspects of national, organizational, and professional cultures into EBP materials is the first step toward appreciation of the unique role of culture in EBP programs. This needs to be complemented with activities that allow for cultural exploration, comparison, acquisition, and negotiation or integration of the learner's third place between cultures. Locally developed materials in Iran need to keep abreast of the developments in the fields of English as a lingua franca and intercultural communication.

The main limitation of the study was that there was no benchmark for comparison. While elements to develop an intercultural personality in learners are recommended to be an important component of EBP materials, it is not easy to objectively state how much culture is enough. Also, apart from problems of cultural representation and the optimal frequency of occurrence of cultural elements in ELT and ESP/EBP books, a more important issue is the way they feature activities for fostering an intercultural personality in learners. Finally, well developed EBP materials with diversified international cultural contents are only effective if they are properly utilized by the instructors who appreciate the importance of intercultural competence for EBP learners. The preparation of these instructors for intercultural communication instruction, their cognition and actual practice of intercultural communicative competence, and the challenges they perceive are among the items in the new research agenda for the field.

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## Whose Culture Is Represented in English for.....

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