On Ethics and Culture: A Matter of Variation or Deviation? A study on Top Notch Series

Mahdi Dahmardeh
Faculty of Foreign Languages & Literature
The University of Tehran
Tehran, The Islamic Republic of Iran
dahmardeh@ut.ac.ir

Hossein Timcheh Memar
Allameh Tabataba'i University

Abbas Timcheh Memar
Kharazmi University

Abstract. In pursuit of moralities and beliefs in the grey area of culture, the researchers carried out a study on Top Notch series to pinpoint the trace of ethics. This paper seeks to unfold the representation of ethics as an indubitable part of culture in Top Notch series. After having extracted all culturally and ethically-related topics and texts of Top Notch Series, 25 instances, featuring 6 patterns, were collected. Later these 6 patterns were dubbed as: violence, superstition, modesty, individualised ethics, religion, and modernity. Having analysed these 6 themes, well representing beliefs and moralities, the researchers came to the conclusion that both misrepresentation of ethics and underrepresentation and overrepresentation of different cultures are at work. The results show a reconsideration of the representation of ethics, or better to say reconsideration of misrepresentation of ethics which might find its root in wrong dominance of culture over ethics.
Keywords: culture, English Language Learning, Ethics, Top Notch Series.

The current study reports on the interplay between culture and ethics observed in the English teaching textbooks, Top Notch series. The domain of the study covers a wide range of disciplines, including sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and above all education. In essence, since it deals with culture, it lends itself to the social aspect of language, sociolinguistics; and for its contribution to language teaching, here teaching English, it is concerned with applied linguistics; and finally, for its implication in curriculum development and educational materials it falls into the domain of education in general. However, culture and ethics are not confined to the foregoing domains and have far-reaching contributions to other disciplines. Meanwhile, from an ontological point

of view, the study gives precedence to ethics than culture while maintaining the fact that culture should not be downplayed. Additionally a new yardstick to evaluate culture is introduced.

OVERVIEW

It is supposed that we are far away from the heyday of culture in terms of its moral and ethical dimension. These days we have witnessed a swing of the pendulum in the number of culture studies. In fact, culture with its all subdivisions has been interpreted and translated into considerably different notions in the realm of foreign/second language learning in general and English language learning in particular. This overarching concept has been reduced to terms such as *difference, identity*, or some other notions of that ilk (Atkinson, 1999). In a similar vein, Tseng (2002) states that culture is consigned to oblivion while deserving to be one of the highlighted elements in language. We can reasonably regard culture as a fuzzy notion yet its outstanding features help us broadly define it. As Piller puts:

Culture is an ideological construct called into play by social actors to produce and reproduce social categories and boundaries, and it must be the central research aim of a critical approach to intercultural communication to understand the reasons, forms and consequences of calling cultural difference into play. (2011: 16)

For the reasons below, the aforementioned definition could shed light on the puzzling nature of culture. Firstly, it is extremely abstract. Secondly, it is activated by social factors, and finally, it is used for social classification. These three factors reveal the paradoxical nature of culture. In other words, although it is seemingly too broad to have clear-cut boundaries, it is flexible enough to be used for classifying a wide range of social terms. Given the above paradoxical nature of culture, it leaves little doubt that culture has a key role in defining other abstract social concepts.

Though culture and ethics are different, each can be considered to be the cornerstone of the other. Put it simply, the word *ethics* is at the heart of culture. There is no culture with certain ethics. Culture by nature consists of some conceptions. Kramsch (2013) holds that culture in language study should be regarded "as a way of making meaning that is

relational, historical, and that is always mediated by language and other symbolic systems" (17).

As to culture, ethics is an umbrella term which is hard to pin down. Now the question is why culture should be looked at from an ethical perspective, when ethics itself has no clear-cut definition. It may sound odd to define an umbrella term by a blanket term but as the saying goes 'diamond cuts diamond', terms of the similar nature are supposed to mirror each other well. This paradoxical approach has a number of merits, including: Firstly, the cross between culture and ethics makes a broad demarcation out of these two fuzzy notions. Secondly, ethics is deeply rooted in philosophy and there is a general consensus about it. In other words, the notion of culture is fuzzier than ethics, so to speak. The following analogy may clarify the above merits. Life in the other world is something extremely abstract, and to make it tangible, we frequently draw on dreams to have a broad picture of it. Of course, dreams themselves are quite abstract, though not as much as the other world. The same goes for culture and ethics, which are respectively analogous with the other world and dreams. Not surprisingly, some thinkers prefer to look at culture through an ethical lens, one of which is the great Islamic thinker and scholar, Allameh Jafari (2001) who defines it as follows: "Culture consists of a necessary and suitable quality or style for those kinds of mundane and spiritual human activities based on right thinking and feeling in an evolutionarily logical life" (10).

It can be inferred that culture is lifelong company of human beings; likewise, Kramsch (1998: 67), from the vantage point of social psychology, states that "our perception of someone's social identity is very much culturally determined". She goes on and puts her finger on the cultural stereotypes, suggesting that we are conditioned by our own culture to look at the world. Put another way, we see the world around us through the lens that our culture prescribes for us. On the interplay between language, culture and thought, Pillar (2011) supports the weak version of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. To her, the strong version saying that language through culture determiners our thought has been proved to be obviously wrong, whereas the weak version saying that language through culture influences our thought has been proved to be obviously right. Similarly, from the linguistic view, Kachru (1985) puts forward three circles of the English language users, namely inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle. The inner circle embraces those countries having

English as their first language, the outer circle embodies the countries where English is used as their second language, and finally the expanding circle includes the countries in which neither their first nor their second language is English. He then goes on to stress that the inner circle provides norms for the other two circles.

Knowing that language and culture are inextricably intertwined and subscribing to Kramsch's (1998) statement on the role of culture in our perception as well as Piller's (2011) emphasis on the intuitive correctness of Sapir-Whorf's weak version, one can infer that the inner circle has imposed its culture and norms on other countries, and as a consequence, virtually all countries in the other two circles view the world from the lens provided by the inner circle.

To Kellner (2001), it is the ripe time to look for ethics and moral aspects of culture in cultural studies. As he pointed out:

…ethics tends to be subordinated to politics and the moral dimension of culture tends to be underemphasised or downplayed. Thus, one could argue for a cultural studies that more explicitly stresses the importance of ethical analysis, scrutinising cultural texts for the specific ethical norms portrayed and evaluating the work accordingly. Or one could explore in more detail and depth than is usually done in cultural studies the moral and philosophical dimensions of cultural texts, the ways that they carry out moral critiques of society and culture, or embody ethical concerns regarding good and evil, and moral and immoral behaviour or phenomena. (Kellner, 2001: 2)

Not dissimilar to Kellner, Potgieter (2011) believes that religion gives rise to morality, which in turn paves the way for individuals to practice moral self-restraint. By extension, we can come to the conclusion that sticking to morality in a way reduces crimes pertaining to immoralities. Therefore, it behoves us to propagate morality and resist against the waves of attacks towards it. In a similar vein, Vandeyar (2003) calls for more studies on multicultural education and conceives of an ideal multicultural education as the one which not only tolerates other cultures but also respects them. This stance has a lot in common with the purport of this study, which chiefly acknowledges the marginalised cultures by striking a balance between dominant and marginalised cultures. Likewise, geocultural approaches to ethics stress the differences of cultures and ethics around the globe, as Carter puts:

Geocultural approaches to ethics vary considerably from region to region. Generally, they are responses to traditional Westernised approaches to ethical decision-making which are criticised as appealing to mostly American cultural traditions. South America, Asia and Northern Europe are regions where more culturally-specific approaches to ethics have been developed where, perspectives on liberty, social justice and the value of life differ significantly. (2002: 2)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Given the grounds above, in this study ethics is operationally defined as a set of widespread ideas and beliefs currently ingrained in culture. Moreover, these beliefs can logically be employed to categorise ideas and beliefs based on the learner's culture either as constructive or destructive. The former sheds light on the fact that if a given principle, idea or behaviour brings about some positive effects based on ethics, it will be constructive. The latter casts light on the nature of a negative and unsatisfied effect of a given principle, idea or behaviour on ethics.

After having defined ethics and culture, all topics and texts related to culture, with no effort to classify them, were extracted from the series. Then according to the observed patterns, several ethically-related themes were emerged. These themes, then, were dubbed as: violence, superstition, modesty, individualised ethics, religion, and modernity. The themes are believed to feature the main trends of culture and ethics in the current English course books.

1. Research method

Bearing in mind the cultural and ethical influences on English language learning in the Iranian EFL context, the researchers carried out a study on Top Notch series. The reason for the selection of Top Notch series lies in the fact that it is one of the best sellers of English Language Teaching (ELT) books in the ESL and EFL contexts, if not the best one, which is being employed by a good many institutes across Iran. Based on the website of Pearson Longman, "Top Notch is an award-winning communicative course for adults and young adults that sets new standards for reflecting how English is used as an international language. Over 3 million students worldwide have learned English using the Top Notch program." Moreover, the series, according to Pearson Longman Website, intends to enhance cultural fluency:

Top Notch is unique in including a cultural fluency syllabus in which students learn to navigate dealing with people of different languages and cultures. This emphasis helps students to build the communication skills and self-confidence needed to navigate social, travel, and business situations in unfamiliar cultural settings.

The researchers employed an inductive, bottom up, approach for data collection and analyses. Thus, the entire series of Top Notch, including the videos, course books, and workbooks, was examined. Then all the topics and ideas which were particularly pertinent whether directly or indirectly to culture and ethics were pinpointed and consequently six pronounced themes were abstracted. Finally, the frequency of the six pronounced themes was obtained and qualitatively studied.

2. Results

The table below shows the frequency of six pronounced themes of ethics existing in the series.

Table 1 Ethical trends

theme	violence	superstition	modesty	Ind. ethics	religion	modernity
frequency	3	3	4	5	4	6

As can be seen, ethics and culture have been categorised into six themes, namely violence, superstation, modesty, individualised ethics, religion, modernity respectively. From among them, modernity is the most frequent (6) followed by individualised ethics (5), religion (4), modesty (4), superstition (3), and violence (3). In what follows, the analyses are explained. In the sitcoms of Top notch, at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, violence has been introduced as virtually a controversial issue. The interviewer asks the interviewees about their ideas regarding the censorship of the movies, books and things of that nature. Since the interviewees have different opinions on the issue in question, censorship seems to be something quite debatable. The same goes for Top notch book, 2A, which reiterates the same idea that violent movies are debatable. "One popular filmmaker asks why violent images on the screen are a problem since we live in such a violent world". Of course in the Workbook at level 2A, some statistics about violence are given which alleviate the above points to a small extent.

Regarding superstition, three major pronounced examples can be found in the series. First, astrology has been introduced controversial, at level 2B in the Workbook. Birth order relationships, predicting different characters, are other points to note here, which stress the role of superstition in one way or another. The Chinese zodiac has been introduced, on page 62 Summit1, and students are asked to find the animal signs of their birthdays.

Not only has Modesty been introduced controversially in the series but also old-fashioned and to some extent backward. At level 2B, a father who thinks modesty is necessary for women, has been labelled as old-fashioned. In a similar vein, at the same level on page 116 there is a radical viewpoint labelling the following commonsensical belief as sexist: "a lot of people think it's ok for men to wear shorts, but not for women". Oddly enough, the word *sexist* is tantamount to a person who thinks men and women are not the same in terms of wearing clothes. For instance, a man believing shorts are appropriate for men and not for women in public is labelled as a sexist.

Finally, at the same level, on page 117, there is a statement based on which there are two standpoints on modernity, namely being modern and old-fashioned. In fact, the word *modest* has been accompanied by old-fashioned, double standard, and sexist.

Individualised ethics is the other theme which can be the crux of ethics in the series. Telling lies and stealing are the examples introduced in Top Notch videos at Pre-intermediate level. At level 2B, in the workbook, page 85, there is a passage titled *Ethics and Values* and there is a question which reads: "do you have any ethical questions? Write to Amanda…" where ethics is viewed as something like psychology, which can be subject to various interpretations. In other words, ethics has been treated as if there were no benchmarks based on which it could be evaluated. Then, it is followed by five questions resting on the fact that it is plausible to steal in one way or another. For instance, a person who reserved five DVDs but was charged only for three asks for a solution. It goes without saying that the topic tries to make ethics relative by hook or by crook. Likewise, there is another topic, at 3A on page 11, which says whether dating customs have changed a lot or a little, and whether the change is for the better. There is little doubt that the western notion of dating has been taken for granted and accepted as the world-wide norm. Moreover, it suggests that it has considerably been changed since now

there is almost no traditional marriage and the like. In the same book on page 80, there is a piece of writing about comics based on which comics might be rather immoral but the conclusion, to a large extent, eerily suggests that morality is bound to be subdued by popularity. That is to say, although some are immoral, they are wholesome because of their popularity. Again at the same level on page 104, there is a discussion on four major problems of the current world in a global survey but once more there is no name of ethics and spirituality. Of course, the validity of the survey and the generalisability can be called into question as there is no piece of evidence regarding the validity of the survey. Finally, the name of Sigmund Freud has been mentioned twice in Summit 2 on pages 76 and 83. In both cases, he has been lionised in a way that he is tantamount to a genius without even mentioning some of his rather anti-ethical ideas. The point is we are not talking whether he was a genius or not, rather we are putting our finger on the fact that he should have been portrayed in black and white with all his warts. Put another way, why have his critics and critiques been overlooked?

Religion is the next theme which has a lot in common with ethics and of course has an important role in it. While a good many studies are focusing on the better presentation of religion to students such as that of Roux (2003), in Top Notch series religion has been sneered at. In the movies of Summit 2, unit seven, there is a part about Simpson cartoon, in response to the critics based on the fact that in this cartoon, more or less, religion has been overlooked and people have never been shown in church, one of the producers says we even show God in our cartoon. Then there is a picture of a huge animate masquerading as God. As a matter of fact, in this way they might scoff at God and His believers. On page 56 level 3A, Ramadan has been down played as holidays around the world and accompanied with Thailand wet water festival and the like. As to ethics, Sigmund Freud, in Summit 2 on page 76 and Summit 1 on page 34 of Workbook, has been lionised in a way that he is tantamount to a genius without mentioning his role in the anti-religion movements. Furthermore, in 3A, page 104, there is a discussion regarding four major problems of the current world in a global survey but again there is no name of religion and spirituality, which has been already mentioned regarding ethics.

Modernity is the last theme under the heading of ethics. By modernity, we chiefly underscore the trend towards a modern life with little or no

celebration of ethics. Put simply, here, the interplay between modern life and ethics has been dubbed modernity. In the videos for the Pre-intermediate level, it has been tried to suggest that make up is appropriate for men. Moreover, it is regarded as something more or less modern and consequently better. At the same level in the videos, a so-called modern woman says to another woman now we live in the 21st century and these days women can invite men for dinner, of course by dinner she meant dating. In 2A, page 44, *cosmetic surgery vacation* is introduced and has been defined as: Going to another country which is cheaper than your country in terms of the cost of cosmetic surgery and returning to your country without mentioning the surgery. In doing so, your neighbours may think your changes are due to your vacation. In 2B on page 117, there is a sentence stating: "I am modern in my attitude about modesty". The implication is ethics is not fixed and modernity changes everything in some way. In Summit1 on page 45, there is a question reading as follows: "who do you think should spend more time making themselves attractive, men or women? Why?" The point is why such a question should be raised, is there any doubt about it? or because we live in a new age everything should be valued differently , good should be portrayed bad and bad should be portrayed good; the same goes for beauty, ugly should be depicted beautiful and beautiful should be depicted ugly. Finally, in the Workbook of Summit 1 on page 34, there is a weird idea based on which "ninety percent [of women] are afraid of being conspicuous and of what people will say. So they buy a grey suit. They should dare to buy different." It simply implies women should wear a different colour at any cost. Although wearing bright colours by women is not unsound, attempting to be conspicuous through sheer gaudy clothes might not stand to reason.

3. Discussion

The above points just shed little light on the reality we are dealing with these days; the dwarfed window opened in this study pales in comparison with the true picture of the current world. What should we expect when in books scientists have been replaced by western celebrities? The students will follow whoever they see in books; unfortunately, the western celebrities, mostly actors and actresses, are virtually infamous concerning ethics.

There are two essential points to consider regarding ethics and culture. First, generally speaking, culture has to do with variations and customs, while ethics has to do with principles and conduct, and of course, principles override variations. This stance towards culture and ethics can be borne out by the definitions of culture and ethics provided by American Heritage online Dictionary (2011):

Culture: "The arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought considered as a unit, especially with regard to a particular time or social group".
Ethics: "A set of principles of right conduct".

Second, the issues of precedence and incidence are at work. By precedence, the priority of ethics over culture is meant, while by incidence, the frequency of a given culture is meant. Casting a long-side glance at this issue, one might say that even with taking account of the frequency of the representation of a given culture the injustice cannot be redressed. In other words, incidence deals with underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a given culture, while precedence deals with misrepresentation of culture. The diagrams below shed more light on the above statement.
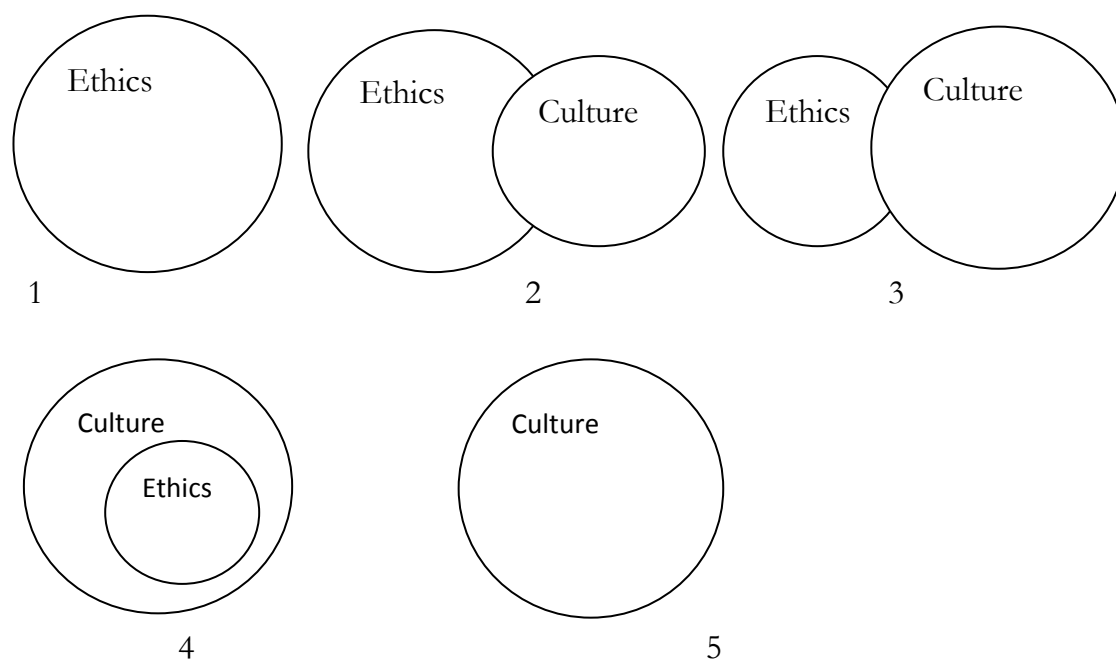
As can be seen, ethics, ever since its inception, has witnessed a tortuous path. To crystallise this state of flux, the following metaphoric example of clothes perception is related. The first diagram, stressing the vital role of ethics, could go parallel to a time in the days of yore when people just tried to cover their bodies properly with clothes regardless of their colours and designs. The second diagram, showing the emergence of culture, could go hand in hand with the later time when people paid incidental attention to the colours and designs while they were making clothes to cover their bodies properly. The third diagram, revealing the central role of culture over ethics, could depict yet the later time when people paid incidental attention to covering while the designs and colours received primary concerns. The state of culture, in the fourth diagram, indicates the present time in which covering can be considered as a part of design, while colour and designs are still getting ground. And finally, the fifth diagram envisages the bleak prospect in the future in which people will find covering as something redundant and will pay close attention to colours and designs.

Yet, another metaphor might shed more light on the issue. Having been endowed with language, primitive humans were empowered to express themselves. With the passage of time, some variations of conveying thought through language emerged. People tried to clearly speak their minds in different ways. Parallel with the interdependent evolution of language and thought, language paradoxically took quite an opposite role, i.e. manipulation of reality. Put it differently, some variations in telling the truth emerged. These days, variations are gaining momentum, in a way that little attention is paid to the truth. These variations can aptly be dubbed deviations as they deviate from their initial purpose, the truth.

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, Kachru (1985) believes that the English language demarcates countries into three circles, two of which, the inner and expanding circles, are the opposite extremes. These two extremes in terms of norms can be classified as providing and dependent respectively. Thus, not surprisingly, the foregoing cultural cases simply show that cultural and ethical values of the expanding circle have been ignored by the inner circle.

To Alptekin (1993), teaching culture in EFL books should move from familiar to unfamiliar and in this case unfamiliar could even be the international culture and not necessarily American or British culture. But

what we observe in this series is miles away from what it might be. The series focuses on some specific English culture like playing up the celebrities and luxury and playing down scientists and simplicity. Alptekin & Alptekin (1984) claim that we should strike a balance between the target culture and students 'native culture. In essence, it seems that one particular culture should not be dominant in books. Conversely, such an idea is hardly observed in the series.

To Guest (2002), culture should be taught indirectly while emphasising pragmatic and linguistic universals. In the same vein, he suggests that the focus should not be on the differences as it works like a Pandora's Box. From another perspective, as Piller (2011) holds that, culture through language has an effect on thought, corresponding to Sapir-Whorf's weak version, which behoves us to be prudent regarding its presentation in our books for the new generation due to its lifelong effect on their thoughts. Importantly, as Kellner (2001) necessitates the ethical dimension in cultural studies, this paper draws on ethical analyses of culture to mirror its misrepresentations. Additionally, ethics, for its supple nature, has been introduced as a touchstone to vet culture. Ironically enough, ethics is abstract enough to go with culture, while it is concrete enough to go through it.

There follows a few implications drawn from this paper. First, curriculum designers should include ethical aspects of culture while designing their books and educational related materials. Second, culture should not be contaminated by some biased concepts imposed by some dominant and powerful communities, the inner circle, either intentionally or unintentionally. Third, the sphere of academia could wear the ethical lens through which seemingly blind spots of culture can be discerned. Above all, ethics can play the role of absolute for culture, as elsewhere mentioned culture by nature is relational(Kramsch, 2013), and as Plank (1933) holds that there is no relative unless it is compared with something absolute; however the word absolute makes sense when it is compared with something. Hence, a new yardstick to evaluate cultures, whether they are of variations or deviations, is introduced.

All in all, mudding the water of violence, playing up superstitions, playing down religions, compromising modesty, dubbing individualised ethics, and surging to modernity is the disease of this age, which circulates from one country to another, from one continent to another through print materials and into people's minds. In conclusion, this

study suggests that it stands to reason to view culture from the ethical point of view as ethics provides an eagle eye to look through culture and detect its misrepresentations. Moreover, ethics should not be confined to just a set of new-fangled terms such as ethics in research and likewise. Ethics is the heritage of humanity; if it is compromised, humanity will be forsaken.

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