Cultural Content of English Textbook's Picture: A Semiotic psychological Study of the effect on the attitudes of the students

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Abstract

The current study investigates the cultural content in some pictures from the first intermediate textbook to teach English (English for Iraq). The study aims to answer the following questions: **(1)** What type of culture is employed in the selected pictures? **(2)** what are the dimensions of culture employed in the selected pictures? **(3)** What semiotic system indicates culture in the selected pictures? To carry out the study, the researcher analyses eight pictures qualitatively using an eclectic model comprising Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) types of culture, Moran's (2001) dimension of culture, and Peirce's (1991) semiotic analysis framework. The analysis revealed that the pictures represent international and source culture types rather than target culture. Also, all culture dimensions are employed except the perspective dimensions. On top of that, the semiotic elements of the sign are the basic ground for cultural representation in the picture selected.

Keywords: Culture, English as a Foreign Language, Semiotics, Cultural Content.

1. Introduction

English is more than just a tool for exchanging information; it also shapes our values, norms, and customs, which make up a society's culture. Learning a new language is essentially the same as absorbing a new society. As a result, most language teachers acknowledge that fostering cultural understanding is a primary goal of studying abroad. Textbooks play a central role in the education of Iraqi students. Therefore, texts are essential to any language-learning programme because they are the primary vehicle for disseminating aspects of the target culture. To classify the various topics covered in textbooks, content analysis is used. This investigation provides some much-needed context for the cultural assumptions made in Iraqi EFL textbooks, with a focus on the textbook of the first intermediate to figure out the cultural content presented in pictures. The study's overarching goal is to estimate what kinds of culture are represented in English first intermediate textbooks, focusing on the cultural groups that receive the most attention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture in Language Learning

It was long ago noted by Sapir (1921) that a language cannot exist independently of its culture. "A language is a part of the culture, and culture is a part of the language; the two are tightly intertwined such that one cannot separate the two without losing the relevance of either language or culture," Brown (1994) explains, painting a picture of the chain between language and culture.

Culture, according to Horibe (2008), "Covers an exceedingly vast spectrum of ideas, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, values, manners, traditions, and institutions." Linguists agree that defining culture in a succinct sentence is challenging. Lado defines culture as "People's Ways" (1986). However, the image becomes clearer if certain notions of culture are illuminated. Culture, as defined by the National Center for Cultural Competence and states that culture is "an integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships, and expected behaviours of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations" (Omer et al., 2011).

Learning the culture of a group of people is a process, which is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process that demands the learner to be engaged in this process cognitively, behaviorally and effectively. There are two types of cultural learning:

1- Culture-specific learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills belonging to the specific target culture, i.e. the culture of a particular community group.

2-Culture –general learning- learning knowledge and skills that are more generalisable and can be transferred across cultures (Paige & Stringer, 1997).

Learning a new culture may occur consciously or subconsciously, but once it does, it occurs automatically and on a subconscious culture (Lund, 2006). Learning the culture that surrounds a foreign language is essential, say linguists. They complement one another quite well. To explain this phenomenon, Jamalvandi (2013) proposes "get- togetherness of language and culture" in acquiring an FL. Dornyei (2001) agrees with the above and adds that learning a foreign language involves more than just picking up a set of rules and syntax. Alpetekin (2002) adopts Dornyei's theory and introduces the notion of "enculturation," which refers to the assimilation of the cultural references and worldview of the target language culture.

More than just a kind of enculturation, according to Corbert (quoted in Hesar et al., 2012), the process of acquiring a target language culture is an issue of "acculturation" in which Foreign Language learners (FLL) are "encouraged to operate within the new culture while keeping their own culture." FLL should be able to mediate effectively across cultural divides, which requires skills that may be categorised as intercultural Competence.

Intercultural Competence is the FLLs' underlying knowledge successfully acquired while learning the FL. Intercultural Competence entails the FLL's ability to behave acceptably and flexibly when facing actions, attitudes or expectations representing the target language culture. This acceptability and flexibility demand that FLL be aware of the cultural differences between the mother tongue culture and that of the target language (Meyer, 1991).

1.2 Cultural Content in the EFL Textbooks

Textbooks play a significant role in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms while not being the only source of instructional information. Alternatively, students need support in forming meaning from multimodal texts that integrate pictureses and language (e.g. picture books) and from online and virtual environments (e.g. social media, websites and wikis). When teaching English as a foreign language, picture books are often used to support language learning in children. Pictures, which tend to be picture book rich, are typically used to help students identify new lexical items as they provide context to create meaning (Jabour, R. & Faisal, W. ,2022).

FLL also looks to textbooks as a source of linguistic information and examples. Moreover, as Liu (2013) puts it, "the foundation for language information learners get and the language practice that happens in the classroom", textbooks are an integral part of the educational process. Liu isn't the only expert in the field of FL instruction to make the point that, in addition to supplying the material for every FL lesson, it's important to strike a balance between the skills being prioritised and the sort of language exercise the FLL engage in. However, to delve more into the significance of textbooks, we refer readers to the words of Sheldon (1988): "textbooks are regarded as the visible heart of every ELT curriculum." Textbooks are intended to impart certain features of the target language culture beyond what is indicated because of the connection between language and its culture. It is well-established that foreign language textbooks must adequately depict the culture of the language they are teaching. After 2005, it was decided that Iraqi children would start studying EFL at six, i.e. first primary classes. Hence, under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, 12 new EFL textbooks have been developed for grades 1-12. Six textbooks for primary schools, three for secondary schools and three for preparatory schools.

The researcher chooses to focus on the EFL textbook of the first intermediate because it is expected that at such a level, EFL textbooks are more advanced at this stage than at lower stages. In addition, it is expected that FLL, at the first intermediate stage, has reached a linguistic, cognitive, and emotional development level that demands the FL curriculum provide more extensive knowledge, especially for the cultural content.

Linguists cite several resources from which FL courses might benefit. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) divide cultural knowledge sources into three categories. The following are:

1- Textbooks mirror the **source culture** of the student.

2- Textbooks reflect the culture of the **target.**

3- Textbooks that include civilisations not specified in the first and second types are called **international cultures**.

Moran (2001) outlines the five dimensions of culture: products (e.g., tools, food, clothing), practises (e.g., verbal and non-verbal language, actions and interactions, taboos), perspectives (values, beliefs), communities (race, gender, religion, etc.), and persons (individuals).

1.3 Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics is widely defined as an interdisciplinary study that includes all kinds of communication. Chandler stated that Semiotic is the name for the study of signs that consists of words, sounds, and even body language. (Chandler, 2007). Because of the belief that everything can be analysed semiotically, Berger emphasises that some semioticians call semiotics' the queen of interpretative science' (Berger, 2005).

Firstly, what is interesting is the interrelation between both semiotics and linguistics or generally semiotics and language. In his research paper, Kumral conducted a semiotic approach and proposed the explanation of the interconnection between semiotics and language: Language is a virtual communication system consisting of words, and oral signs, already exist in the long-term memory of the speaker of the language concerned (Kumral, 2013). When words are recognised as oral signs where their meanings have been arbitrarily assigned and used for any purpose of communications, then semiotics occurs as the primary concern of the whole issue, concerning itself with all domains of language using ranging from semantics to pragmatics, literary studies, social and scientific studies, and the like.

Semiotics and language are impossibly separated as they can be mixed in so many different ways. Each word in the language has a meaning and is simultaneously presented by the symbols, in this case, alphabetic signs. Semiotics is often regarded as a tool for textual analysis; in that case, it becomes part of structural analysis. As the name says, structural analysis focuses on the structural relationship between all functional parts in the signifying system. Chandler says structuralism pays special attention to the constituent units in a semiotic system, studying the structural connection between them and the relationships between parts and whole (Sebeok, 2001).

The three-part model of signs proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce consists of the representamen, an interpretant, and an object. According to Chandler (2007), the representamen is the form of the sign, the interpretant is the meaning, and the object is anything to which the sign refers. Peirce (1991) discusses the unity of what is provided, how it is presented, and how it is perceived as the following figure in one of his notes.
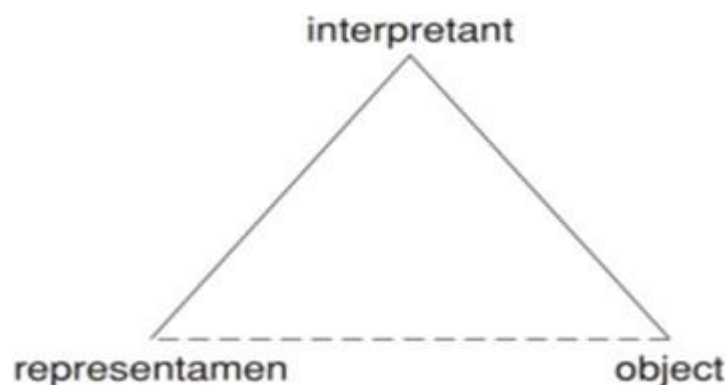

Figure 1: *Pierce's semiotic triangle (Chandler, 2007)*

As Chandler (2007) emphasised, there is a broken line at the triangle's base, indicating no necessary link between the representamen and the object or the sign vehicle and the referent. It is important to note that Peirce refers to a sign as a representamen, whereas Saussure uses the word signifier. The interplay inside the semiotic triangle is known as semiosis, and it is essential to comprehending a sign. Danesi (2004), defines semiosis as "the brain's ability to make and comprehend signals." Umberto Eco (1976, as referenced in Chandler, 2007) often uses the term semiosis to describe how it leads to various interpretations. In order to comprehend the meaning of semiosis, Chandler (2007) describes the meaning-making process and its synonyms, signification and signifying activities.

3. Methodology

The current study investigates eight pictures from the textbook "English for Iraq" for the first intermediate stage. This selection is justified because such a stage is transformational in language learning, where students should be subjected to more cultural content successively. Pictures in the textbook will reflect the type of culture in focus, categories of cultural topics employed, and the type of semiotic signs in use.

The study is qualitative, where the eight pictures are interpreted in terms of the model adopted without setting any numerical account of the results. This research method follows Denzin & Lincoln (1994), who define the qualitative method as the "study of things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them".

To analyse the data, the researcher adopts an eclectic model consisting of three frameworks that complement each other. The first framework is the three-dimensional classification o culture source by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) into source culture, target culture, and international culture as explained in (*cf.* 1.2). The second framework comprises the dimensions of culture by Moran (2001). The final framework is Peirce's (1991) semiotic triangle.

4. Data Analysis

Picture 1: Eid al-Fitr
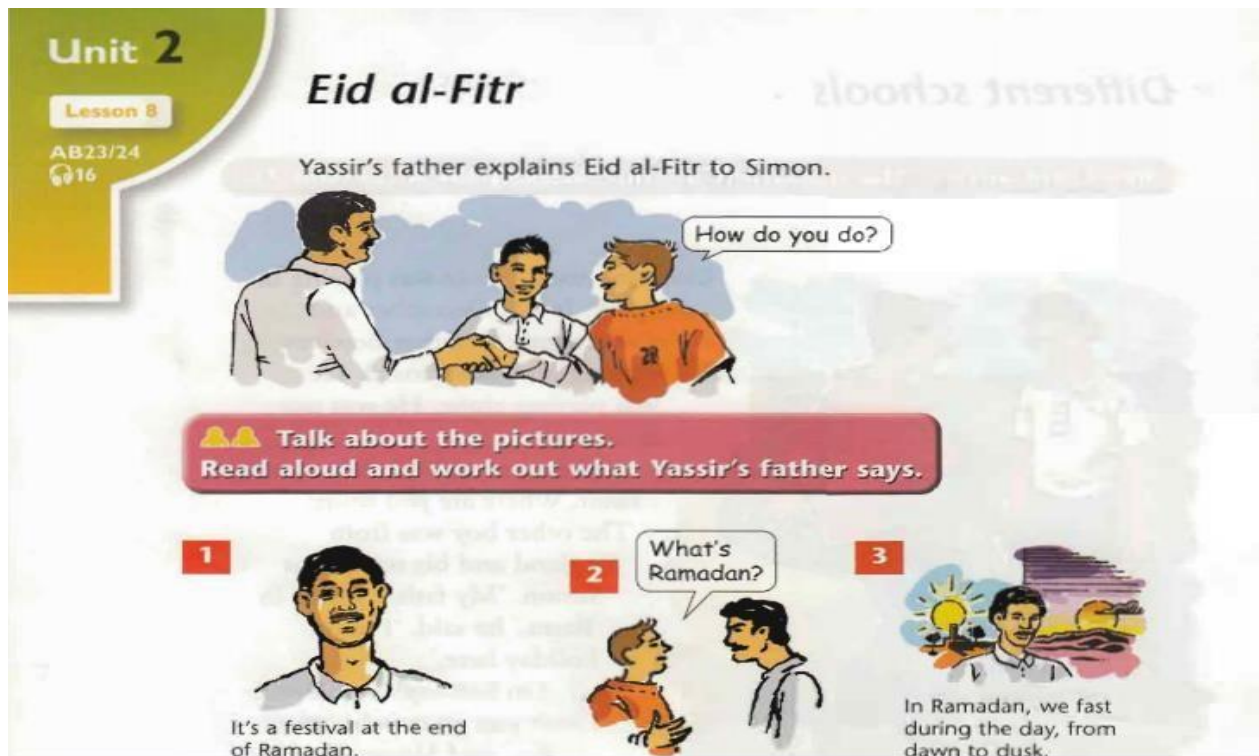
1. Type of Culture

In picture 1, the type of culture indicated is the source culture. This is typical of the use of Ramadhan as a theme. Ramadhan is the month of fasting for Muslims. Thus, the belief here is Islam and its customs, which are cultural aspects of the speakers who speak Arabic as their first language. Since Iraqi people, mostly Muslims, use the textbook, then the culture reflected here belongs to the **source culture**.

2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content

The cultural content in picture 1 relates to the **Practice** dimension represented by fasting during Ramadhan. Fasting this month is a conduct for Muslims where they stop eating and drinking from dawn to dusk. Also, the picture represents the **Communities** dimension by introducing 'yasssir' as Muslim and Simon as a person of another religion to have an idea about Muslim practices. **The person** dimension comprises the individuals Yassir and Simon.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

In picture 1, **the representative signs** consist of people talking about the fasting month and its customs. The pictures of 'the boy, man, sun, dusk' all represent the talk on Ramadhan.

The object in the picture comprises 'time' and 'Muslims'. The signs of sun and dusk denote the time or the period of fasting. People who speak on Ramadhan are naturally Muslim. So the objects of the signs denote the basic features of Ramadhan and fasting people.

The interpretant includes Ramadhan, Muslim people who fast it. The signs of people, sun, and dusk show that the object of the picture is a time particular for Muslims, and this time is related to Ramadhan.

Picture 2:
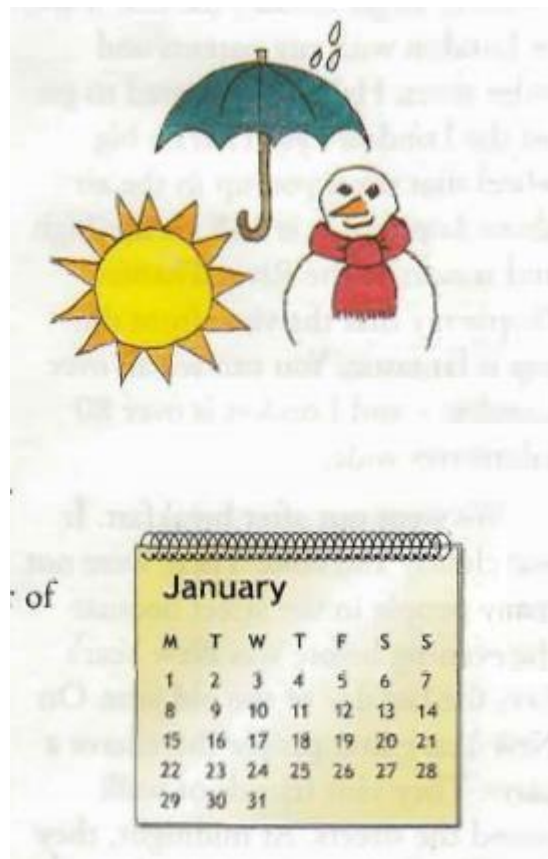
Type of Culture:

In this picture, the sign of ice man, umbrella, rain, and January denote the winter season, which is an international and general time. Thus, the type of cultural source is international.

2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content

The content here is about a season in the year. Winter is one month of the year that all humans on earth live. However, Iceman is a **Product** dimension of culture because it is a common symbol of winter in the Western world.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The signs are drawings of ice man, water drops, an umbrella, the sun, and the calendar of January. These signs are **representants (connotative signifiers).** They represent the following **objects:** an iceman is a symbolic man, water drops are rain, an umbrella denotes rain, the sun is warm, and the calendar is time.

This sign allows for the following interpretant: ice symbolises Christmas, water drops and umbrellas are related to rain, and the January calendar refers to the Christmas days that are cold, windy, and might be rainy or sunny. All signs together make up **Christmas interpretant**.

Picture 3:

1. The Type of Culture

The signs include a girl with a bucket, broom, painting, duster, and floorcloth. These signs show a girl who is cleaning and painting the house parts. These tasks are generally unrelated to a specific culture but to the whole world. Thus, the type of culture here is international.

2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content

The signs that show a girl doing house works lead to the **Practices dimension** of most human beings. It is part of our lives to clean our places. Thus, the cultural content is related to the living circumstances topic. **The Community dimension** here refers to women as mostly related to housekeeping work.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The signs are a girl, a duster and window, a bucket with water and a hand broom, floor cloth, a painting, a door, and a front yard. These signs are all **representant or connotative signifiers.**

The objects underlined are cleaning tools, girls, houses, and dirt.

The interpretant resulting from these objects is house works by girls. These interpretations show how we view the girls and their duties at home.

Picture 4:
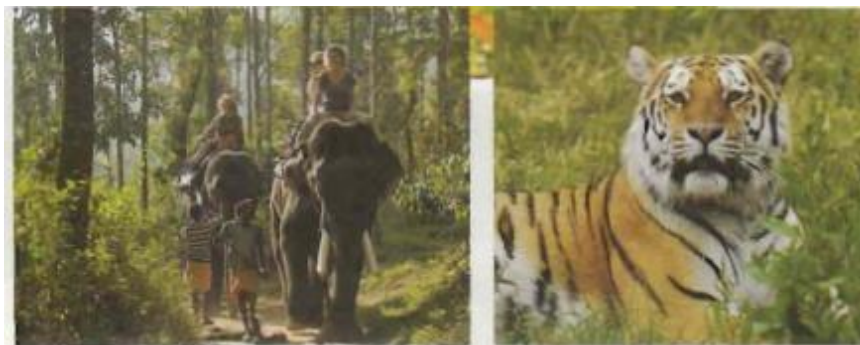
1. The Type of Culture

The signs are tiger, wood, elephants and elephant riders in India. This sign denotes that the culture here is **international** since it is unrelated to Arabs or English.

2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content

The signs show nature in India by highlighting its natural elements, like wood's life. Accordingly, the cultural content relates to the **communities, practices, and person dimensions** since nature and living and working with such animals is a practice of Indian communities and individuals.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The tiger, woods, elephants, and riders **are representative signs**. They denote the following **objects** wild animals, big animals, and Indians. The interpretants are wildlife, Indian **everyday living circumstances and natural existence.**

Picture 5:
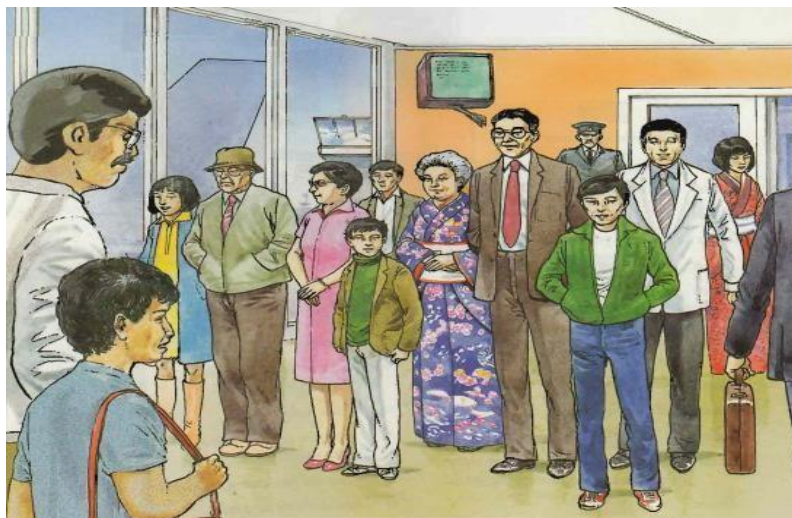
1. The Type of Culture

The picture shows a lot of signs for people of different genders and ages. Moreover, the sign of the grandmother wearing a kimono tells that she is from Japan, as supported by the lesson content. The facial shape of other men indicates their Japanese identities. Fuaad, the Arabic boy, is visiting his friend in Japan. Japan is neither Arabic nor English, and as a result, the culture here is **international.**

**2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content**

The pictures show friends visiting each other in a country with different customs (as apparent by Kimono customs), and this is an eastern south cultural **Product**. Thus, the picture addresses different **communities (Community dimension),** including Arabic and Japanese**. Practice** dimension is included to introduce the Japanese habit of welcoming guests at the airport.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The signs of men, women, children, airports and travellers represent meaning (connotative signs). **The objects** denoted are travellers, friends, and families (connotative signifiers). The signs allow for the following

interpretant: a boy (Fuaad) and his father visit Japan, where his friend Yuki and his family are waiting for him in the airport wearing traditional customs.

Picture 6:
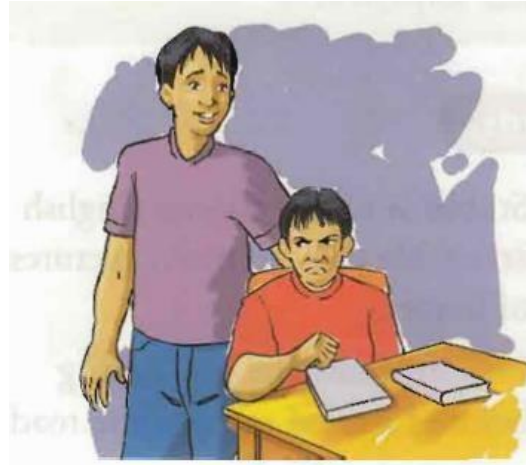
1. The Type of Culture

The picture shows two signs of two boys. The angry one is Jassim, and the other is Ahmed. From the name, it appears that the boys are Arabic; hence, the culture type is the **source culture**. It denotes the culture of the mother tongue, which is Arabic.

2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content

The signs include two boys and a table with books. Moreover, that indicates that they are school boys by using **Product** dimension (books) and practices (study). The boy is angry about losing his money and thus cannot buy a present for his friend's birthday. The signs show the boy standing, placing his hand behind Jassim's back with a smile. Jassim represents the **Person** dimension indicating the Iraqi Community.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The boys, table, books, and angry facial gestures are **representants (connotative signs),** while the object of these signs is 'school boys'. These represented objects allow **interpretants** to be friends at school with a matter to discuss.

Picture 7:

1. The Type of Culture

The culture here is source culture due to the character of Yassir, a snake, and deserts which are all more commonly found in Arab lands. The picture shows a boy with his friend in the desert where they find some water to drink, but a snake bites his friend. It shows that the boy Yassir calls the police, who come in a helicopter.

2. The Dimensions of Cultural Content

The signs are ordered successively to tell a story of two friends facing danger in the desert. Thus, the cultural dimension here is the **Place** (desert). **The person** (Yassir) dimension guides the Arabic source culture.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The boys, desert, water, snake, mobile phone, and helicopter are **representants or connotative signs.** They represent **objects** like people, wild animals, an emergency state, and a dangerous place.

The signs are clear to narrate the exact story. The interpretants resulting from these signs are that the boys are friends in a bad situation in the desert where they need water and doctor. Also, the mobile phone helped call for a helicopter with a doctor to treat the snake poisonous bite.

Picture 8:

1. The Type of Culture

The picture comprises four different views from different countries. The first sign on the left is for Japan, and the next is for Oman, France, and India. Since the four signs are related to different cultures rather than the source or target culture, the culture type in this picture is **international.**

2. The Type of Cultural Content

The picture shows the four different natural views and a city street to set out **Places** due to the different natures of the countries reflecting different cultures.

3. The Semiotic Analysis

The signs are a huge mountain, a mosque with a lake and boats, and woods and elephants. These are all representant signs. **The objects** represented are nature and the environment.

These objects and their representatives are interpreted as countries with different natural characteristics. Japan is the interpretant of the mountains, while Oman is the interpretant of the mosque with bots in a lake. India is the interpretant of the elephants in the woods.

Conclusion

The current study has examined the cultural content of eight pictures from the first intermediate textbook (English for Iraq). The analysis has revealed the following conclusions concerning the research questions:

1. The type of culture employed is international mainly, representing different cultures like Muslims, Japanese, Indians, etc. Source culture is also employed by referring to Muslim practices like Ramadhan. Nevertheless, the Target culture is somehow absent.

2. The dimensions of culture employed are product, practices, communities, and persons. These dimensions all represent culture. However, the perspective dimension is not employed in the selected pictures.

3. The semiotic system is the vital and basic element showing the culture meant to be represented. The semiotic system consists of objects, representants, and interpretants employed to denote culture. Signs used show the persons, their practices, and products, indicating communities and cultures.

The three frameworks complement each other to denote cultural content, and thus, the research questions the been answered.

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