Cultural Categories for EFL Textbook Analysis

MARÍA CRISTINA SARASA, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Facultad de Humanidades, Departamento de Lenguas Modernas, enerbasa@argenet.com.ar

Abstract

This paper explores cultural categories for analyzing EFL textbooks. Conceptual headings are derived from research carried out by an interdisciplinary team working in Mar del Plata University. The investigation centers around a key question: what is the relationship between the foreign language, culture, and education, as presented in schoolbooks? To answer this complex and also controversial inquiry, the author will examine notions guiding the study of cultural representations implicit in EFL textbook design.

Introduction

This paper intends to examine diverse cultural categories for studying ideologies underlying EFL textbooks. The research was initially triggered by the concern, based on empirical data, that EFL education, in terms of curriculum organization and assignment of tasks, is controlled the world over by the use of printed materials (Johnsen 1996: 145, 150). This issue has become much more pressing in Argentina since the passing of the Federal Education Law, which mandates compulsory English instruction in grades 4-12. Thus, extended English language teaching in the local milieu requires new and more materials for classroom use. In general terms, English instructors usually scrutinize texts by taking into account their linguistic contents, methodological approach, attractiveness of visual design, and paralinguistic load. However, the EFL teaching profession seldom challenges the implicit presence of ideologies underpinning the textual presentation of linguistic content of the target language.

In her book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Claire Kramsch (1993: 12) provides a highly critical explanation of foreign language teachers’ apparent failure to address ideological issues in their field:
“Foreign language education has been characterized up to now by the search for a "middle landscape". It has always tried to solve conflicts quantitatively by taking a little bit of this and a little bit of that from several, often opposing viewpoints […]. By refusing to be ideological, this approach has in fact espoused a middle-ground conservative ideology, recognized by its positivistic, pragmatic bent, intent on assimilating conflicts by minimizing them […].”

This paper will thus be centered around a “throughline” question (Stone Wiske 1999: 105): what is the ideological relationship between the foreign language, its culture, and education, as presented in schoolbooks? While acknowledging the intricate and even controversial nature of this inquiry, the author will nevertheless proceed to examine some ideas that can guide the study of cultural ideologies underlying EFL textbook design. In broad terms, categories to be expounded on cover socially constructed notions and beliefs about the following issues: Is linguistic knowledge, or content, “neutral”? Are the facts, forms, information, and definitions displayed in EFL textbooks ideologically “impartial”? What is the epistemological basis for their presentation in books? What do we understand by the terms “culture”, the “culture of education”, “mother/foreign language culture”? How does the discourse of the textbook articulate these multiple cultures? Is linguistic content separated from the cultural context in which the foreign language operates? Does the textbook take into account students’ previous schematic knowledge? And most important of all: if teachers are not mere transmitters of textbook-packaged contents, how do they construct the complex ideological facets of the knowledge presented in books? The paper will conclude by suggesting that the categories defined can constitute an initial descriptive-interpretive framework for teachers to start exploring the cultural ideology of the texts they use in their everyday classes.

The Nature of Ideology

The author will now proceed to cluster the questions posed in the Introduction and to answer them by defining categories for analysis. The first three were as follows: Is linguistic knowledge, or content, “neutral”? Are the facts, forms, information, and definitions presented in EFL textbooks ideologically
“impartial”? What is the epistemological basis for their presentation in books? Textbook analyst Egil Borre Johnsen (1996: 111-112), in his book Textbooks in the Kaleidoscope, claims that ideology includes “everything”. He defines this term as a system of values, presented with varying degrees of explicitness, which are permanently being either defended or assaulted. In textbooks, ideology involves an explanation or interpretation of social reality. This reality may deceptively be shown as objective, but it is nevertheless partial, since it expresses the ideas of different socio-political groups, embodied in this case by authors, editors, and publishers. It thus follows that no EFL textbook is ideologically free, since its crafting is imbued with notions regarding the nature of the language to be taught, the cultures of its speakers and learners, and the instructional approach to be followed by teachers in the classroom.

As to the epistemological basis of textbook contents, and their actual textual representation, the former do not simply involve an inventory of topics. The contents of a given discipline have to do with its logic, its main theoretical principles, the problems it investigates, the relationships between different areas within the discipline, and between this subject and other fields of study. The nature of knowledge in textbooks revolves around the question: how do we know that we know what we know? David Perkins (1997: 89-90) states that there are four levels of understanding pertinent to the teaching of any discipline. These are:

1. **Content**: this is the lowest level and involves knowledge of the data pertaining to the discipline. This stage is mostly concerned with the routine reproduction of information.

2. **Problem solving**: this phase comprises those strategies needed to work out problems typical of each discipline, and actual problem-solving practices characteristic of the subject.

3. **Epistemological level**: this stage entails accounting for the nature of knowledge in the discipline. In other words, it means knowing about
and practicing the ways in which experts in the field justify their knowledge of issues in the area.

4. Research: this is the highest level and comprises actual research into different topics, i.e. the construction of new knowledge within a given field. It includes formulation of hypotheses, data gathering and processing, and reporting of results.

If these categories are applied to the most cursory inspection of any EFL textbook, the study will begin to yield a number of preliminary answers on the ideological nature of the printed material. The ideological and epistemological bases and justifications for textbook presentation of content and selection of learning tasks are always conspicuous, either by their absence or presence. In other words, they are always covertly implied, no matter whether they seem to be missing. What the textbook edition includes is just as important as what it excludes.

The Nature of Culture

The next set of queries focused on the issue of culture: What do we understand by the terms “culture”, the “culture of education”, “mother/foreign language culture”? How does the discourse of the textbook articulate these multiple cultures?

The central thesis in Jerome Bruner’s book *The Culture of Education* (Bruner 1997: 12, 21-22) is the notion that culture shapes individuals’ minds by providing the toolbox with which they construct their world, and build their perceptions of self and power. Bruner sees the creation and negotiation of meaning as culturally situated, since, in his view, humankind is the creator of culture but is at the same time reciprocally created by that culture. He defines culture as a way of solving problems, a way of life, and a mode of thinking through which people construct, negotiate, and institutionalize what may be
called “reality”. As such, culture is made up of values, rights, exchanges, obligations, opportunities, and power.

Bruner (1997: 31-62) emphasizes the psycho-cultural aspects of education, which can be summarized around three main concepts:

1. The social construction of knowledge, where the creation of meaning is the result of a permanent interaction between an individual and his/her society.
2. The key role of language in the construction of knowledge, since the former is perhaps the most powerful weapon for externalizing thought, thus playing a central part in cognition.
3. The politico-cultural dimensions of education, because it embodies the way of life of a given culture.

In the field of foreign language teaching, Kramsch (1993: 2) defines the target language culture as involving the following features:

“[..] difference, variability, and always a potential source of conflict when one culture enters into contact with another. Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.”

As to the relevance of these notions to EFL textbook analysis and the English-speaking culture/s they represent -or fail to-, the reader may have inferred that no society is monocultural. Thus, the presence -or absence- of cultural diversity and difference, including the mother cultures of text users, also reflects the ideology of the materials under study. Kramsch (1993: 233-258) posits the view that, in the foreign language classroom, a third culture, which is neither native nor foreign, is socially created, reflecting the particularities of that educational time and setting.

The Nature of Integration
This section deals with the integration of systemic and schematic knowledge: 

*Is linguistic content separated from the cultural context in which the foreign language operates? Does the textbook take into account students’ previous schematic knowledge?* Cem Alptekin (1996: 53-61) discusses Widdowson’s definition of these two kinds of knowledge and their presentation in EFL materials. Systemic knowledge stands for knowledge about the formal aspects of language, while schematic knowledge represents socially acquired cultural knowledge. These are acquired concurrently since childhood in the case of the mother tongue and culture, but the same can not be said of the foreign language experience. To begin with, the textbook may include no connection at all between the language being taught and the cultures of its speakers. In addition, lack of schematic knowledge in the EFL learning situation usually hinders the comprehension and acquisition of linguistic data. Finally, the presentation of totally alien cultural contents may also jeopardize the processing of systemic information. How can these two types of knowledge, both in L1 and L2, be made compatible in textbooks? The answer lies in a dialectical interplay between Kramsch’s aforementioned notions of difference and conflict and the introduction of universal concepts that aid comprehension of the unfamiliar. And here comes the point where students’ previous knowledge plays a substantial part.

As to students’ previous knowledge, common sense would dictate the view that learners do not come to the class in the form of empty vessels to be filled with textbook information (and neither do teachers, for that matter). On the preceding pages, this paper discussed Bruner’s social constructivist view of education, and the current section has emphasized the fact that students already possess knowledge about their native language and culture, however informal or imperfect it might be. In the same way, beginner learners already hold rudimentary perceptions, no matter how misconceived or misconstructed they result, about the target language and its culture. (Resnik and Klopfer 1997: 34-41; Williams and Burden 1997: 42-44). Teachers also bring to the
class their own values and beliefs about instruction and their subject, based on their different degrees of pedagogic experience and formal academic background. It thus follows that every single EFL language classroom is a unique environment with a myriad of distinctive features and variables. The problem is that most EFL textbooks, for unavoidable reasons of salability and profitability, are geared to as large an “international” market as possible. This means that there is little room for individual teacher’s and learner’s previous knowledge variation, since text contents have to be standardized, in the negative sense of the word, to achieve massive consumption. Thus, textbooks are generally pre-packaged by native speakers of the language working for multinational printing houses, with little consideration as to the actual nature of the book users. These issues also bear serious ideological implications, the challenging of which rests in the hands of educators, as the next section will show.

The Nature of Literacy

The last inquiry reads as follows: If teachers are not mere transmitters of textbook-packaged contents, how do they construct the complex ideological facets of the knowledge presented in the texts? Giroux and McLaren have urged teachers of all subjects to turn into critical intellectuals (Giroux 1993: 262-263, 285-295; Giroux and McLaren 1998: 85-86; 164-167). This means that educators should become critically and politically literate. In other words, these literacies involve reflecting on the principles that guide and contextualize pedagogical practices, and discussing how dominant ideologies inform the generation and transmission of knowledge, in this case through textbooks. These actions naturally dictate a critical reading of materials, taking into account the links between culture, language, and ideological power. Critical revision of schoolbooks, in its turn, demands actual reading –i.e. understanding and constructing knowledge--; interpreting –i.e. creating texts
within texts, raising issues, and generalizing; and critiquing –i.e. setting one's own text against that of the book. This type of study considers the whole discourse of the textbook as related to the material forces through which individuals and groups acquire their own voice and thus become culturally empowered. By means of these processes educators could enter into a dialogue among themselves and engage in the same practices with their students. The latter would, in their own turn, also become critically and politically competent and culturally empowered. The world “dialogue” is used here in its Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1994: 426-427):

“Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological model of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole –there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue […]. A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized dialogue is authoritative or absolute.”

If instructors are to acquire critical strategies for the judgment of their classroom materials, teacher educators show become concerned about fostering this blueprint in the curricula of college and university teacher education programs, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The following section will provide specific suggestions regarding this proposal.

Discussion

This paper has briefly touched on a number of concepts that can constitute a starting point for analyzing EFL textbook design at a level that moves beyond its purely linguistic aspects. The main notions under discussion have to do with the identification, definition, and justification of ideology, content, culture, and integration between culture and content. These are either explicit or implicit, over or covert in any book aimed at learners of English as a foreign language. These categories have been summarized here on a theoretical
basis, because their interpretation is a necessary prerequisite for actual textbook study. In other words, any investigation must begin by clarifying its operational terms. Needless to say, these meanings must be refined as the research progresses. At the same time, they have to be broken down into units of analysis that would allow a classification of the features observed in the textbook. These would be the qualitative foundations for a description of the specific ideological and cultural features the EFL teacher wants to explore. The description, in turn, would uncover the presence or absence of the features the instructor is looking for. The final stage would be the interpretation of the description in the light of the original theoretical data, and further reduplication of the whole experience using another text.

As a teacher educator herself, the author would like to conclude by restating the need for the early introduction of critical awareness concerning ideology and culture in EFL teacher education programs. She also wishes to emphasize that this consciousness is obtained with the help of judicious “new strategies” (and tools), i.e. critical and political literacies. How are these acquired and appropriated? In the case of pre-service EFL teacher education, special subjects on textbook analysis and cultural studies should be included in undergraduate curricula. As to in-service teacher development, this requirement could be met by traditional seminars conducted by experts. On the other hand, teachers themselves can start their own study groups to further collaborative reflection on and exploration of textbook ideology (Clair 1998: 465).

In previous sections, this paper has repeatedly alluded to the concept of culture in its socio-political denotation. However, the reader should also remember another meaning to this word, associated with the idea of cultivation (Tishman et al 1998: 13-14). The author has taken the liberty to elaborate on this metaphorical use of the word culture, to suggest that both undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs should provide
systematic occasions for the aforementioned literacies to be sown and allowed to flourish.

(2728 words)

References


**Biographical Note**

Maria Cristina Sarasa is an EFL Teacher Educator at the UNMDP, where she teaches English History and Overall Communication. She also coordinates admission to the local EFL Teacher Education Program, belongs to an interdisciplinary research team, and does extension work. She has recently obtained a postgraduate degree in higher education.