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Changing media – changing schools?

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Local culture and beyond in Portuguese-produced English language teaching (ELT) coursebooks

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Abstract
The issue of how to deal with ‘culture’ in the context of English language teaching materials is not entirely recent and much debated (Byram, 1997; Akbari, 2008). Seminal work in the field includes Kramsch (1993) who has extensively discussed the importance of culture, cultural space, the indivisibility of culture and language and learner identity. Our attention has also been drawn to the dangers of a ‘hidden curriculum’ with respect to cultural content (Cunningworth, 1995; Hurst, 2008) or the potentially hegemonic socio-political dimension of international coursebooks (Holliday, 1994; Gray, 2002). However, within the context of Portuguese-produced ELT materials, research is less widely available. Keywords: English language teaching; cultural content; coursebooks; Portugal.

1 Introduction
The centrality of coursebooks in the educational context has long been recognised, in general, as well as in the specific context of English language teaching (ELT). For example, Robert O’Neill, a successful ELT coursebook author and methodologist in the 1970s and 1980s stated:

‘...the use of published textbook materials as a basis on which to mould the unpredictable interaction that is necessary to classroom language learning. It is also suggested that learners who do not work from textbooks may be deprived of a useful medium of orientation and study outside the classroom.’

(O’Neill, 1982: 104)

More recently, the leading figure in ELT materials development research, Brian Tomlinson, also confirmed the continuing persistence of this view, while emphasising different lines of argument:

Proponents of the coursebook argue that it is a cost-effective way of providing the learner with security, progress and revision, whilst at the same time saving precious time and offering teachers the resources they need to base their lessons on.

(Tomlinson, 2012a: 158)

2 Coursebooks and Teaching
Indeed, not a few teachers would say that it is impossible to teach without a coursebook and for not a few learners (with limited economic resources) coursebooks provide their only opportunity to read and be in touch with the printed word (with literacy being among the highest rated values in contemporary European society). Among the general public, great trust is placed in the authority of the coursebook, perhaps even to the extent that what the coursebook says has more validity than what the teacher says. Indeed, many parents pay out large sums of money each year to corroborate this status (perhaps some 150–200 euros per child).

Research in Portugal (Diásvs De Carvalho & Fadigas, 2009) indicates that coursebooks play an important role in the relationship between schools and parents: the results of an online survey indicated that 59.48% of parents considered coursebooks to be ‘very important’ in helping them to accompany the schoolwork of their children (ibid: 8) and 94.61% of parents actually consult their children’s coursebooks to ascertain what their children are doing at school (ibid: 9). This research further demonstrates that parents also learn from their children’s coursebooks, that the subject matter of coursebooks provides topics of conversation among family members, that parents usually use the coursebook if they want to help their children study, that most parents (79.17%) prefer coursebooks to other educational resources (ibid: 14) and concludes that Portuguese parents consider the coursebook is “a learning resource which cannot be dispensed with in the education of their children” (ibid: 23).
3 ELT coursebooks in Portugal

In the Portuguese ELT coursebook market both international and local publishers compete for the same sales but while international publishers have by no means the upper-hand in the Portuguese market, they at the same time exercise considerable influence over the type of coursebook made available to the local market. The levels of competition and demand of a global market mean an international coursebook has to evidence both very high quality production values, as Tomlinson (2012b: 171) notes: “In my experience of language classrooms in over 60 countries, global textbooks attract teachers and learners everywhere because of their high production values and face validity” as well as an almost ‘teacher-proof’ approach to the use of coursebooks, a characteristic which was identified long ago by Swan (1992), quoted in Hutchinson and Torres (1994: 33) and requested in Bell and Gower (1998: 116) “books sometimes take important decisions regarding the what and how of teaching out of the hands of teachers who, having been absolved of responsibility, then sit back and simply operate the system”. These characteristics, along with the implied de-prioritising of pedagogical values that drive ELT materials production (see Tomlinson, 2012b: 271 for a succinct summary of six pedagogical principles), are then replicated in Portuguese-produced coursebooks since they are competing within the same national market.

However, in relation to ‘cultural content’ in ELT coursebooks, much of the published research has focussed on two distinct strands. Firstly, research has examined international coursebooks produced in the UK or USA for the international market; for example, see Gray (2002 & 2010); Ulrich (2004) or Caukill (2011). Or, secondly, the research has focused on how particular examples of these publication function in specific teaching-learning (national) contexts; for example, Basre (2006) on Argentina or Arkan (2005) on Turkey. In contrast, my previous research which provides the academic context for this paper focused on a specific teaching context, Portugal, only coursebooks produced specifically by local authors/publishers and a specific conceptual issue: How has cultural representation evolved over time (1981–2006) in these Portuguese-produced ELT coursebooks?

4 The research background

This recent research (Hurst, 2014a) used a corpus of four sets of three coursebooks, each set taken to represent a particular response to a moment of curricular change in relation to ELT in the third cycle (7th, 8th and 9th grades) of compulsory education in Portugal. This cycle of education is the only one which has consistently maintained ELT in its curricula over the period since the political upheaval in Portugal associated with the revolution of 25th April 1974 until 2006. In addition to its intention to reflect curricular change, the corpus was also moulded by a variety issues, initially their physical availability/existence, but also by a concern not to analyse coursebooks still currently on the market, which might produce commercially sensitive information; and also by an ethical concern to avoid conflicts of interest, given that the corpus contained only Portuguese-produced coursebooks, written by local authors, generally experienced teachers from the state sector, some of whom were still working in local schools.

5 ELT and the concept of culture

Definitions of ‘culture’ are not in short supply; ranging from distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘popular’, between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’, between ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’, between ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ or even between capital ‘C’ and small ‘c’ culture. However, culture has many more dimensions than a simple dichotomy can explain (Hurst, 2014b). Culture is a social context in which people live out their lives in the real world: from the point of view of language teaching any interest in the culture (and the language) is not derived from a desire to understand these phenomena as mental processes or abstract structures but rather to include an anthropological perspective within our understanding: culture is a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973: 89). Language and culture are
social phenomena which are shared by all humanity and lie at the centre of our social life. "Human culture always includes language, and human language cannot be conceived without culture. Linguistic practice is always embedded in some cultural context or other" (RIJAGES, 2006: 4). The real world demands that language users are in some way culturally competent to an equal degree that they are linguistically competent and perhaps that one (language) cannot exist without the other (culture) and that this reality should therefore be mirrored in language teaching materials produced for the classroom context.

To speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. A person's mind is in a sense the centre of his identity, so if a person thinks in English in order to speak English, one might say that he has, in a way, almost taken on an English identity. That is the power and the essence of a language. Language is culture. (Wang, 2008: 59)

6 Specific ELT textbook research in Portugal

Hurst (2014a) examined in depth the way culture was represented in a specific corpus of textbooks following the guideline that representation is "the production of meaning through language, discourse and image" (HALL, 1997: 16). In this research, 'language' was interpreted as an analysis of dialogues present in the corpus, reading texts were taken to be 'discourse' and the textbook illustrations were 'image'. The analysis of the dialogues was informed by reference to LEECH (1998) and GILMORE (2004); the analysis of the reading texts was informed by reference to STEEN (1993), BYRAM (1993), RIVAS (1999) and CORBET (2003); and the illustrations were analysed following inspiration from PERALES & JIMÉNEZ (2002), HILL (2003) and KEDDEE (2009). The research is an original attempt to discern how the verbal and visual elements are 'connected' in the production of cultural representation.

In general, major improvements occurred between 1989 and 2006 in relation to the overall pedagogical quality of ELT textbooks produced in Portugal with respect to cultural representation. For example, in relation to dialogues, there was found to be an almost total lack of vernacular language which negates learners the opportunity to experience how different socio-cultural identities are negotiated as it is through such informal talk that degrees of solidarity with social groups are established and maintained (THORNBY & SLADE, 2006). Learners need to become increasingly aware of the importance of 'meaning' (in its broadest sense) and how it is conveyed and not just how 'form' is constructed. The idea that a simplified non-authentic dialogue gives the learners a better chance of achieving full comprehension, while superficially appealing is also not necessarily productive in the long term since full comprehension is rarely required in 'real world' contexts of language use. In relation to reading texts, there is a discernible shift away from artificial 'class texts' produced by the textbook authors or their associates to more authentic (web-sourced?) texts but with little variety in terms of type of text, the majority being descriptive or expository and little concern to do anything more with the 'content' than to show/describe what people do (in order to 'cover' the topics laid down in the national programme) but with little regard to the belief/value systems that affect/govern the way people act/live. Rarely are learners been confronted with issues related to identity and beliefs, the fundamental elements of any inclusive approach to cultural understanding and interculturality. Finally, in relation to illustrations, the enhanced production quality and increased use of colour photographs found in the more recent publications belies the continued disconnection with any pedagogical purpose: illustrations remain largely decorative in function. But using illustrations as prompts without necessarily having any associated specific language input (vocabulary matching exercise?) could certainly cause learners to produce and provide their teachers with evidence/information as to how to proceed in order to build on what the learners already know. These textbooks would have been greatly enhanced by requiring the learners to confront and react to the illustrations rather than just look at them in passing as they work on texts or exercises.
7 Recent developments

By way of updating the research referred to above, 3 more recent editions of Portuguese-produced 7th grade ELT coursebooks were examined for the purpose of my IARTEM presentation in Lisbon (in September 2017). The coursebooks were ‘New Wave 1’ (2011 edition), ‘New Getting On 7’ (2011 edition) and ‘Spotlight 1’ (2010 edition). Under consideration here then is a qualitative analysis of how these coursebooks deal with cultural representation in the unitized topic of Home-Family Life, as determined by the national programme for the 3rd cycle. The conference presentation format allowed time for the only two perspectives to be discussed: how the topic is initially introduced and how the topic is further developed in subsequent activities.

The materials/activities from these coursebooks do not help learners to become more aware, more reflective, more critical and more equipped to perform their own meanings, as is expected of trans-cultural users of language incorporating the role of cultural mediators (ZARATE et al, 2004). In New Wave 1 (2011, 22–24), there is no attempt to focus on the cultural content: the family in question is fictional (The Simpsons, an attempt to invoke TV’s The Simpsons?) and the main task is match snippets of text with the cartoon illustrations. There are 6 true/false ‘comprehension’ questions and then the focus shifts to possessive adjectives which are again required/demanded in the ‘development task’ of writing 5 sentences about ‘your family’. In New Getting On 7 (2011, 42–43), there are more opportunities to explore the content, at the lead-in stage and through the provision of more substantial, richer texts. However, the subsequent ‘comprehension’ questions are a matter of matching phrases to speakers in the texts and vocabulary work. The ‘development phase’ basically repeats the lead-in but in the form of a pair-work activity. In Spotlight 1 (2010, 38–39), there is potential to explore 5 texts about ‘families around the world’ but the main task consists of matching colour photographs with these texts: a minefield of stereotypes is made available to the learners which a novice or underprepared teacher would find hard to avoid. In any case, the subsequent activities highlight possessive determiners and the possessive case before allowing the learners to listen to 3 teenagers talking about their families and then, finally, writing a ‘short text’ about their family. The aim having a strong focus on cultural content is not to change the learners’ identities, rather it is about providing opportunities for the learners to become better equipped to construct their own self (RISAGER, 2006). There is no need for English teachers and learners to become in any way auxiliaries for some kind of cultural or linguistic English-speaking empire (EdGEE, 2006). Learners need to be engaged in the social practice of using the English language while at the same time respecting the local economic, social and educational context (PENNYCOOK, 1994).

A general conclusion about these examples is that local writers/publishers need to re-formulate their concept of ‘target culture’ towards a more international model which does not imply a cultural approximation or assimilation but rather adopts a more dynamic, intercultural slant. Learning English in this educational context, the 7th grade in the Portuguese state school system, has little or nothing to do with so-called ‘integrative motivation’. The attitude to ‘cultural content’ is still rather tangential or incidental; there needs to be more recognition of the centrality of cultural content, since content rich materials are far more likely to provoke language rich responses.

8 Future tendencies

As we move towards increasingly digital, multimedia, interactive formats of materials delivery, dealing with cultural representation will mutate into something even more dynamic and complex. We have to reject representations that see culture as something static, homogeneous and apolitical, that communities either have or do not have (CANALE, 2016). Increasingly, learners of English in Portugal, and around the world, will have access to authentic materials through digital technologies via the Internet that are not coursebook derived and that enable them to develop a critical cultural awareness by themselves. Coursebook writers must adapt to this new era and its almost limitless resources in ways that are still hard to imagine, but which represent a huge opportunity in helping learners to learn in different ways. For example, the availability of online dictionaries could radically reset the lexical range/coverage and level of difficulty of some reading texts; or the instant availability of video clips, that provide a degree of contextualization that no 2D resource can achieve, could reset the way practice
activities are set up. However, computer assisted language learning (CALL) and teaching software have not turned out to be the educational panacea that some authors had predicted (MUKUNDAN & NIMECHISALEM, 2008, 2011), neither have coursebooks disappeared, perhaps because of their symbolic function, as they represent ‘stability’ and ‘structure’ (PARRISH & LINDER-VANBERSCHOOOT, 2010), an important epistemological value within the educational system in Portugal which has been subject of much uncertainty and hierarchically imposed change since 1974.

9 Conclusions

ELT coursebooks are characterised by their use of the target language to organise and direct the way the learners (and teachers) approach the proposed classroom activities aimed at teaching the target language. The instructions, the exercises rubrics and so on are formulated in the L2 in such a way as to be clearly understandable and ‘doable’; there can be no room for doubt otherwise the lesson will not proceed smoothly. In addition to this collateral ‘exposure’, learners must experience and practice the language through a wide range of communicative events; this is a sociocultural perspective on learning. The coursebook should ‘scaffold’ learning, providing support for collaborative learning experiences as well as explicit teaching (HORSLEY & WALKER, 2006).

Coursebooks must include a greater variety of exercises and texts, place more emphasis on the authenticity of the language modelled and employed, use more visuals to help transmit meaning and construct meaningful contexts. The predominant position of local publishers in the Portuguese market allows for a more contextualised educational resource which takes on board these insights, broadly speaking to ‘humanise’ the materials more, to allow more ‘space’ for personalization and choice. Coursebooks are undoubtedly cost and time effective educational instruments which through necessity form the basis of many classes delivered in heavily loaded ELT timetables. However, coursebooks should not be taken at ‘face value’ (i.e., they are just a means to teach another school subject, a foreign language); they are dynamic, cultural artefacts which should be critically reviewed and evaluated in a much more systematic manner. Coursebook writers and their publishers should be much more engaged with the teachers (and learners) who actually make use of the coursebooks; for example, user feedback should be much systematized and influential than is currently the case.

Coursebook writers in Portugal still have an important role to play; their responsibilities should also include re-training and development sessions so that the creative spark that guides the production of their materials. Writers must take into account new insights from research in the field rather than simply perpetuate a strong-selling format (an increasingly glossy, teacher-targeted package). In the same light, publishers should also be more willing to evaluate their ‘products’ using criteria other than sales figures.

References


