

Teaching the Students and not the Book: Addressing the Problem of Culture Teaching in EFL in Argentina¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to discover teachers' attitudes towards culture in the EFL classroom in three different institutions in La Plata, Argentina. In order to do this, eleven EFL teachers who were using three different EFL textbooks (World English 3, Laser B1+, and Upstream B2+) were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. Also, with the aim of determining to what extent these textbooks reflect "the global coursebook" and whether they address Argentine students' cultural needs, a content analysis using an a priori approach was carried out. The results showed that these textbooks tend to deal with and to avoid the same topics and that they are not identity enhancers for local students. As for teachers' attitudes towards culture teaching, the results also indicate that teachers hardly notice this problem and do very little to remedy it.

Keywords: global coursebook, evaluating coursebooks, multicultural education, cultural identity, PARSNIPS, textbooks sanitization.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue descubrir las actitudes de los profesores de tres instituciones de La Plata, Argentina con respecto a la enseñanza de cultura en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera. Para llevar a cabo tal propósito, once profesores que estaban usando tres libros de texto diferentes (World English 3, Laser B1+, y Upstream B2+) fueron entrevistados usando un cuestionario semi-estructurado. Además, se realizó un análisis de contenido para determinar hasta qué punto estos libros reflejan el fenómeno del "libro global" y si tienen en cuenta las necesidades culturales de los estudiantes argentinos. Los resultados

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mostraron que estos libros tienden a tratar y evitar los mismos temas y que no ayudan a reforzar la identidad de los alumnos en cuestión. Finalmente, los resultados indican que los profesores difícilmente notan este problema y hacen muy poco para solucionarlo.

Palabras claves: libro de texto global, evaluación de libros de texto, educación multicultural, identidad cultural, PARSNIPS, saneamiento del libro de texto.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi descobrir as atitudes dos professores de três instituições de La Plata, Argentina com relação ao ensino de cultura na classe de inglês como língua estrangeira. Para realizar tal propósito, onze professores que estavam usando três livros de texto diferentes (World English 3, Laser B1+, e Upstream B2+) foram entrevistados usando um questionário semiestruturado. Além do mais, realizou-se uma análise de conteúdo para determinar até que ponto estes livros refletem o fenômeno do “livro global” e se tiverem em conta as necessidades culturais dos estudantes argentinos. Os resultados mostraram que estes livros tendem a tratar e evitar os mesmos temas e que não ajudam a reforçar a identidade dos alunos em questão. Finalmente, os resultados indicam que os professores difícilmente notam este problema e faz muito pouco para solucioná-lo.

Palavras chaves: livro de texto global, avaliação de livros de texto, educação multicultural, identidade cultural, PARSNIPS, saneamento do livro de texto.

The present work is a summary of the thesis for a Master’s degree in English Language from Universidad de Belgrano, Buenos Aires, Argentina. It focuses on the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom and attempts to show the importance of including culture, both source and international, in foreign language education.

My interest in this topic arose out of my own personal observation that the English textbooks I was using in the different institutions where I work include very little information about international culture, not to mention the local culture. I observed that, most frequently, textbooks deal with the British culture and occasionally the American culture,

but place little emphasis on other countries' cultures or on involving students' culture in the discussions.

Acculturation agents such as schools and teaching institutions should pay special attention to the issue of not leaving culture aside when teaching language. Acculturation is closely linked to identity development. Identity typically refers to an awareness of one's culture. As there is no nation without an identity, we Argentines should start by teaching our students about their own culture; only then will we be part of a united nation, a nation with an identity of its own.

Also, cultural diversity should be taken into account in order to raise awareness of differences and to teach students to be tolerant of these differences. There is a real need to avoid problems among students in multicultural regions where Argentine students share a classroom with students from border countries such as Bolivia and Peru. Argentina receives families from border countries who come to work and send their children to state schools. At school they have to share a classroom with Argentine students and problems derived from cultural differences arise. These problems could be avoided if intercultural matters were dealt with. English, being an international language, is necessary for all students, not necessarily now, but in their future working lives. If the English class could be used as an excuse to learn about different countries' cultures, including the Argentine, Peruvian and Bolivian ones, many of the problems mentioned could be solved.

Textbooks are an integral part of language learning in the classroom. As Sheldon (1988) has suggested, they "represent the visible heart of any ELT programme" (p.237). However, a number of researchers such as Porecca (1984), Florent and Walter (1989) and Clarke and Clarke (1990) have demonstrated that many EFL/ESL textbooks are socially and culturally biased. The question to be asked here is: what kind of cultural elements are introduced into ELT instructional materials? Do our teachers notice this? Do they do anything to incorporate the teaching of cultures not mentioned in these books? Do teachers teach about local culture? This, together with the issue of global coursebooks with prescribed topics sanitized for commercial purposes represent the main focus of the present research article.

Literature Review

The works of Nelson Brooks (1968) persuaded EFL teachers to recognize that the study of culture goes beyond the artistic expression and should focus on the personal side of culture, "the distinctive life-way of a people" (Brooks, 1968). There are now two widely accepted types

of culture learning. The first type is that referred to in current literature as ‘high-brow’ culture with a capital ‘C’, which involves the study of literature, art, history, music, etc. The other type emphasizes informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions and viewpoints, referred to as little/small-c culture (Alatis, Straehle, Gallenberger, Ronkin 1996:148). It is this last type that can be introduced to students at all levels of language learning.

As language and culture are inseparable, it is absolutely necessary to include culture in the language teaching process. In her book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Kramsch (1993) states that cultural awareness and the learning of a second culture helps the acquisition of a second language. Also, understanding the relationship between culture and language is important for understanding and becoming proficient in the process of intercultural communication (Matsumo, 2003).

According to Snow (2001), every time students use their English for genuine communicative purposes, they virtually always include an intercultural communication component. Intercultural communication skills prepare students for interaction with foreigners from a broad range of nations and cultural background. Research done by Dunnett et al. (1998) shows that intercultural understanding offers three benefits: it eliminates cultural imperialism, it raises students’ cultural awareness, and it solves some of the dilemmas of intercultural classrooms, for example, possible loss of cultural identity. Intercultural understanding, then, helps students to stabilize their self identity while comparing their culture to that of others.

English becoming an international language has resulted in positive and negative reactions and interactions between global and local forces with its logical linguistic, ideological, sociocultural, political and pedagogical consequences. For some individuals and communities, English has meant marginalization and hegemony; for some others, it has meant empowerment and upward mobility. The concept of English as an International Language, does not refer to any particular variety of English; on the contrary, the concept emphasizes that English is a language of international and, as a consequence, intercultural communication.

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Over the last two decades, particularly since the publication of Robert Phillipson’s 1992 *Linguistic Imperialism*, there has been a steady flow of books and articles with a critical stance towards the growth of English as the world’s most widespread and dominant language. Phillipson sees English as the language of world capitalism and world domination. He defines English linguistic imperialism as the

dominance asserted and retained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. His theory critiques the historic spread of English as an international language and the continued dominance of that language.

One of the areas of ELT that has significant implications for teaching and learning is language testing. When EIL emerged as a paradigm, a number of scholars have questioned the validity of traditional approaches to English language testing. These tests, and the textbooks used to study for these tests, measure proficiency against the so-called ‘native-speaker’ norm on the assumption that L2 speakers would use English only to communicate with native speakers (e.g. Brown, 2004; Jenkins, 2006b), which goes against reality.

If we continue importing ideologies and content from English speaking countries in the west, efforts to teach English as an international language will be in vain. In order to promote English for international communication, assessment practices must also be linked to cultural and contextual realities. Cross-culture interactional competence is increasingly important in societies where neighbours, co-workers, and colleagues are likely to come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To ignore cross-cultural pragmatics will only lead to prejudice, stereotyping, and alienation. Only when English is used to express and advocate local culture and values will it truly represent an international language (Smith, 1976). This is why it is important to evaluate the kind of textbook we are using, the kind of culture teaching it provides, the messages it passes, and it is also very important not to lose focus: if we want to learn about other cultures we first need to know about our own culture.

ELT publishing is a growing and highly competitive industry. At present, some publishers still provide lists of proscribed topics, while others rely informally on the acronym PARSNIPS (Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Nudity, Israel, Pork and Smoking (Helgesen, 2005). These are based on customers’ perceived sensitivities. Foreign buyers may reject materials that they see as culturally offensive. Consequently, coursebooks begin to look very much alike, the target culture(s) may be altered, and content can become uninteresting. The “one-size-fits-all” philosophy underlying the global coursebook means that safe topics recur again and again, resulting in coursebooks which are sanitized for commercial purposes (Gray, 2002).

Research Design

Research Questions

1. To what extent do *World English 3*, *Laser B1+* and *Upstream B2+* reflect the phenomenon of “the global coursebook”?
2. Do these textbooks help Argentine students reinforce their own cultural identity?
3. Do teachers who use these textbooks compensate for the lack of local elements? How?

Setting

The institutions chosen to carry out the interviews were three: Escuela de Lenguas (Universidad Nacional de La Plata), Instituto Cultural Argentino Británico (ICAB) and Colegio Nacional Rafael Hernández (Universidad Nacional de La Plata).

Escuela de Lenguas is a school of languages. The languages taught there are English, French, German and Portuguese. It is part of Universidad Nacional de La Plata, which means that all its teachers are graduates from this university, and therefore, share the same teaching methodologies. Classes are of a size of about 10 students each. Students come from a similar socio-economic background. They belong to upper/middle-class families. In general, they attend private schools and practice sports and take English classes as extracurricular activities outside school.

Instituto Cultural Argentino Británico (ICAB) is an English language school. It is a representative institution in La Plata because it was the first English school funded and the only examination centre for Cambridge international tests in this city. It shares most characteristics with Escuela de Lenguas.

Colegio Nacional Rafael Hernández is a secondary school which is part of Universidad Nacional de La Plata. It is a state school, which means that students belong to all socio-economic backgrounds. As it is a famous school for its good reputation, families who could afford a private school still choose to send their children to this one. Being part of Universidad Nacional de La Plata, this school prepares students for university life, training them on how to become independent learners. Its teachers are also graduates from UNLP. This is the only state school in the city –together with two other secondary schools from UNLP- in which students acquire an upper-intermediate level of English.

These three institutions were chosen for a number of reasons. On the one hand, as my subject of study is culture in textbooks, the best option was to choose intermediate/upper-intermediate levels. These are levels that allow for a better exploitation of the topic, given that students are already prepared to understand texts with almost any level of difficulty. Public schools do not reach this level of the language, so I was forced to choose private institutions, such as the language schools I mentioned. On the other hand, however, these institutions are not very representative of all sectors of society because all their students belong to the same socio/economic class. This is why I decided to choose Colegio Nacional, the only state school in the city which reaches this level of English and also has a population of students which belongs to all social strata.

Textbooks

The selection of the textbooks depended on the textbooks of intermediate/upper-intermediate levels that these three institutions were using. Therefore, the choice of the institutions defined the textbooks I would be working with.

Participants

In order to choose the participants in my study, I contacted the coordinator of each institution and asked them to let the teachers know I would be contacting them. I also asked them to provide me with the name of one of the teachers who was using each textbook. When a teacher agreed to be interviewed and we had already met, I asked that teacher to provide me with the name of another teacher who was using the same book. I continued with this snowball sampling technique until I could find no more teachers who were using the same textbook in the same institution. The result was 11 interviews: 3 at Colegio Nacional, 4 at ICAB and 4 at Escuela de Lenguas. These 11 teachers were all middle-class women ranging between 28 and 60 years old who obtained their degree from Universidad Nacional de La Plata.

It is worth mentioning here that contacting teachers and persuading them to participate in the study was not an easy task. Many times a second or even third email had to be sent because no answer was received. I assume this must be due to time constraints. This is the reason why the coordinator was contacted first -for them to encourage teachers to participate.

Data Collection

Textbooks content

The basic method chosen was to analyze the textbooks using an a priori approach. First, I explored some concepts connected to culture and culture teaching from different authors; and then I analysed the coursebooks. Such concepts helped me to see what kind of cultural information the books contain. Some of the concepts used to design the instrument for analysis were: the definition of culture described by authors like Matsumo (2003), Lado (1986), Chastain (1988), Brown (2001) Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), Tylor (1929) and Brooks (1968); the distinction made by Brooks (1968) between Culture and culture, Kramersch's (1993) view of culture, the need for conceptual bridges between the cultural familiar and the unfamiliar described by Alptekin and Alptekin (1984), Mackay's (2004) questioning of the appropriateness of the native speaker model, Lantof's (2000), Holliday's (1994) and Kramersch & Sullivan's (1996) idea of respecting and building on local values and beliefs to strengthen students' identity, Cortazzi & Jin's (1999) categorization of textbooks according to their cultural orientation, Gray's (2002) distinction between the local and the global coursebook, and finally Helgesen's (2005) definition of the concept of PARSNIP.

The following are the questions I used to analyse the cultural content of the textbooks:

1. Does the textbook present any exclusive section for culture?
2. Does the textbook teach about any of the following "C" culture items: literature, art, history, music, geography, science, sport, institutions? If so, which item and from which country?
3. Does the textbook teach about any of the following "c" culture items: beliefs, values, norms, habits, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies? If so, which item and from which country?
4. Is the textbook culturally oriented towards the source culture, the target culture or international cultures? How can you tell?
5. Do listening passages present a variety of accents? Are these all native speakers' accents?
6. Does the textbook help to build conceptual bridges between the cultural familiar and the unfamiliar? If so, how?
7. Does the workbook present activities connected to cultural issues or does it just expand on activities connected to the four basic skills presented in the student's book?

8. Does the teacher's book suggest activities to include/compensate for the lack of the local?
9. Does the textbook bring any kind of complementary materials such as video DVDs? If so, do these materials deal with cultural matters? Target, international, or local?
10. Are any of the following topics dealt with: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, nudity, Israel, pork, smoking (PARSNIPS)?

Interviews

After the analysis of the textbooks, I compared the findings with those from semi-structured interviews with teachers who were using these textbooks. The questionnaire was intended to evaluate whether teachers are aware of the issue of culture teaching. The questions did not mention culture explicitly until the last one so as to obtain more honest answers and not give away the real purpose of the interview. The questions teachers were asked were open-questions connected to their likes and dislikes as regards the textbook they were using, their students' likes and dislikes, supplementary materials that they used and the reasons for using them, the appropriateness of the topics dealt with in the textbook and their idea of the concept of "cultural competence" together with its application in class. (See appendix A).

The kind of interview selected was a semi-structured one (Bogdan and Bikten, 1992, p.270). This kind of interview allows researchers to capture the specificity of the situation. Whereas a structured interview has a limited set of questions, a semi-structured interview allows new questions, called follow-up questions, to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says. Open-ended questions invite an honest, personal comment from the respondents; it can catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour which are the hallmarks of qualitative data. A funnelling process was also chosen. This is a process in which the interviewer moves from the general to the specific, asking questions about the general context or issues first and then moving towards specific points. A filter was used to include and exclude certain respondents; to decide if certain questions were relevant or irrelevant. The question format followed an indirect approach; the interviewer asked about a different thing and then made inferences. By making the purpose of the questions less obvious, the indirect approach is more likely to produce frank and open responses. This is also the reason why the questions in the interview were designed in Spanish; to avoid making the interviewee feel that their English

performance was being evaluated. The interview questions were piloted before carrying out the actual interview with the following objectives in mind: to check the clarity of the questions, to gain feedback on the validity of the interviews, to eliminate ambiguities in wording, to check the approximate time taken on each interview.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Textbooks

Table 1. English textbooks

	Upstream B2+	Laser B1+	World English 3
Systematic section on Culture	✓	X	X
C Culture topics	✓	✓	✓
c culture topics	✓	✓	✓
Cultural orientation	Target	International	International & source
Listening passages	British	British	American (Ss' book) Variety (video clips)
Conceptual bridges	✓	Only Personalization	✓
Culture in workbook	X	X	✓ (in reading comprehension sections)
Culture in teacher's Book	X	X	✓ (in "expansion activities")
Culture in complementary materials	X	X	✓ (in DVD)
PARSNIPS	X	X	X

The chart above reveals that only one of the textbooks, *Upstream B2+*, presents a systematic section on culture, but such section is always about an aspect of either the British or the American cultures only; and it appears every other unit, not in all units.

As regards topics connected to "C" culture, the three books deal with a variety of topics. History is dealt with in the three books, and

then other topics present are science, inventions, sports, education systems, art and literature. What is worth mentioning is that *Upstream B2+* deals mainly with literature topics, all of them connected to British or American writers. *Laser B1+* and *World English 3* are more neutral in connection to that.

As for “c” cultural topics, the three books present a variety of topics; but only *Upstream B2+* places a marked emphasis on topics connected to the British culture. Some such topics are: public phones in the UK, Fengshui in the UK, British jobs and unusual houses in Britain.

In connection with the cultural orientation, it could be said that *Laser B1+* is internationally oriented; its topics seem to be mostly neutral, not attached to any particular country or culture. *Upstream B2+* is clearly oriented towards the target culture. Most topics deal with the British culture or, on rare occasions, with the American culture. And *World English 3* is clearly internationally oriented but with an emphasis on the source culture. The textbook is always suggesting activities in which students have to talk or investigate about their own culture.

The speakers in listening passages in *Laser B1+* and *Upstream B2+* are native British speakers, and in *World English 3* they are native American. However, the videos of this last book present non-native speakers, such as Moroccan or Peruvian people speaking English, of course with their own accent.

As regards conceptual bridges between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the chart shows that *Laser B1+* does not help to build such bridges, in fact, it only personalizes topics to involve students in the topic. Students just have to talk about the topic under discussion in connection to themselves, their town or their country. In the case of both *Upstream B2+* and *World English 3*, the treatment is different. They go beyond the general “personalization” kind of exercise and ask students to investigate more specific aspects of culture.

In connection with the activities of the workbook, both *Laser B1+* and *Upstream B2+* only expand on the same kind of activities and topics as in the student’s book, they do not add any cultural content. However, in *World English 3*, usually while doing a reading comprehension activity, students read about something else connected to culture.

As for the teacher’s books, *Laser B1+* has got a section called “Additional Task” which suggests teachers the kind of “personalization” activity mentioned before, but it does not go into detail in connection with the source culture. *Upstream B2+* teacher’s book just explains how to go about the exercises in the student’s book, but it does not suggest

any kind of extra activity; and *World English 3* teacher's book has got a section named "Expansion activity" which does advice teachers on how to focus on the source culture as well as the international culture.

With regard to complementary materials, *Laser B1+* brings a CD ROM with extra vocabulary, grammar and use of English sections, none of them dealing with cultural matters. *Upstream B2+* does not bring any complementary materials; and *World English 3* brings a DVD with short videos, some of which deal with international cultural matters.

Finally, none of the books deal with or even mention topics connected to PARSNIPS. *World English 3* seems to be the most internationally oriented in connection to culture. It also seems to focus more on "c" culture topics than on "C" culture topics. Precisely, it is in the "c" culture topics that one can gain a better appreciation of how much emphasis is placed upon cultural matters associated with a variety of countries and cultures. Also, this textbook is apparently the one that pays the most attention to including the source culture (that is, the learners' culture) in topic discussions. It systematically presents activities in which students have to do research about their own culture and compare it to the one under study, which is not necessarily the British or American one.

The textbooks *Upstream B2+* and *Laser B1+* prepare students to sit the Cambridge First Certificate Exam (FCE), which is clearly the reason why the focus is placed on the British culture. Now, it could be argued that the organizations that promote this kind of exams, in this case, Cambridge University, make use of the "excuse" that they are testing students' level of proficiency to help spread their own culture and values. This is in line with Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism, which holds that the British Council fosters the promotion of "hegemonic" culture and values through the medium of English. And this is the reason why traditional approaches to English language testing have many times been questioned; they still measure proficiency against the so called "native speaker" norm, as is the case of the FCE. According to Phillipson's (1992) theory: linguistic and cultural imperialism, by spreading English the way they do, English speaking nations -especially the UK and the USA, which are countries very much devoted to the English education business- benefit in a variety of ways. No other language provides work for so many of its speakers. They can work as teachers, translators, materials writers, and publishers, to mention but a few.

The solution to this inevitable imbalance of resources and power in the world might be in line with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) and Canagarajah's (2002) suggestion: decolonizing the approaches to TESOL by emphasising the local.

Teachers' interviews

The following chart shows the most relevant information obtained from the interviews. What is included is my translation of verbatim transcription.

Teacher	Likes	Dislikes	Cultural Component
T1 (ICAB- 34 years old- Upstream B2+)	"The emphasis on writing."	"It's too similar to other books. The topics are not very meaningful."	"Cultural competence means having the tools to participate in different cultural settings". "It is connected to using the foreign language in contexts where the foreign language is the mother tongue."
T2 (ICAB- 35 years old- Upstream B2)	"The way grammar is exploited."	"The design."	"Cultural competence is using one's culture to be able to transmit meaning and understand the other person."
T3 (ICAB 53 years old- Upstream B2)	"The units are very long, they have a lot of drilling."	"The layout."	"The topics in the book are appropriate for the students. The book deals with technology, the environment (which is such a European topic...) I think students feel totally identified with the topics." "I think that textbooks are very rich, that we teachers of English teach much more than English, all the books bring a lot of world knowledge, there are a lot of references. I think that a teacher of English has a general view of the world through English textbooks...I think working with textbooks written abroad is very much enriching. We, Argentineans, are always looking abroad, they –foreigners-aren't. Our life is abroad, we know a lot about everywhere; they don't. No matter they are cultured or not".

Teacher	Likes	Dislikes	Cultural Component
T4 (ICAB 28 years old- Upstream B2)	“The division into modules.”	“Cultural references.”	“I don’t like some questions that have to do with the cultural references. Maybe, they are a bit far away from our particular context, as it happens with most textbooks. But one always tries to find ways of getting it closer to students. There are things that students don’t get to understand, maybe because they have never been in a situation like the one the book brings up.” “I’d like a book which presented listening activities with a variety of accents; for example from South African or Asian people speaking English as a second language; which is a more real situation than the ones this book presents.”
T5 (60 years old- Colegio Nacional-World English 3)	“It has very nice pictures.” “It’s very complete; you’ve got a DVD....”	“It’s too demanding, too long for the little time we have.”	“Cultural competence is being connected with other types of knowledge, previous knowledge...”
T6 (37 years old- Colegio Nacional- World English 3)	“The way topics are presented, the fact that topics are appropriate for students, the fact that it’s authentic materials the book presents...”	“It has little practice for weak students.”	“I think the book aims at that, at looking at diversity and making students aware of it or making them know other realities different from theirs and learn to accept them and give an opinion about them. It has to do with that: with being able to evaluate their and other people’s realities, valuing their own culture in relation to that of others and learning that there is no culture that is better than another.”
T7 (50 years old- Colegio Nacional- World English 3)	“I don’t like anything.”	“I particularly don’t like it’s approximation to transformational and structuralist grammar.”	“Cultural competence is the respect for what is different.”

Teacher	Likes	Dislikes	Cultural Component
T8 (42 years old- Escuela de Lenguas- Laser B1+)	"I like the fact that it has a specific preparation for FCE."	"It lacks contextualization."	"I suppose cultural competence refers to the knowledge that students can acquire of the culture of the language they are studying."
T9 (55 years old- Escuela de Lenguas- Laser B1+)	"I like the topics, they are interesting for the age of students, and the organization."	"It's a bit monotonous, the activities are predictable."	"I suppose cultural competence refers to the general knowledge about different topics."
T10 (38 years old- Escuela de Lenguas- Laser B1+)	"It provides good preparation and training for FCE."	"The vocabulary section lacks contextualization."	"...there are many students who come from schools that belong to Universidad Nacional de La Plata, so they have good cultural knowledge. Maybe what the book does not present -which is one of the topics being mentioned in methodology these days- is the different cultures, intercultural awareness. This book hasn't incorporated that yet, and maybe it's difficult for us teachers too, at least for me. I find it difficult to bring those kinds of topics to students; which are interesting... The fact that there is no one single "correct" English, but there are many, which also depends on the function, where we use it, what for, etc.... But I believe that one, as a teacher, has to provide that knowledge..."
T11 (45 years old- Escuela de Lenguas- Laser B1+)	"The design, the pictures, the organization."	"No, there is nothing I don't like."	"I think cultural competence is connected to being able to relate what students are seeing in the book with what happens in other cultures."

As regards teachers' likes, two of them mentioned the topics (T6 and T9). They said they were appropriate for the students but did not make any reference to the issue of culture.

Out of all the teachers in the interviews, only two of them mentioned topics as part of what they did not like about this book, but only one (T4) made an explicit allusion to cultural references. She said that they are far away from students' realities. What she meant by this is that the topics dealt with in the book do not match everyday aspects of their lives –“c” culture topics- so students do not completely come to understand what they are discussing because their everyday context is different, because they find themselves discussing situations they have never experienced, such as earning a living or writing a letter applying for a job.

It is important to mention here that the teacher who showed herself aware of the cultural issue under discussion was the youngest. One could conclude that a possible reason for this is that she is less “automated” in her everyday work than the rest of the teachers. She has been working for less time -let alone preparing students to take the FCE- and it is also less time since she has finished university and her training may be fresher than that of the rest of the teachers.

One encouraging conclusion that can also be gathered from this is that, at least nowadays at Universidad de La Plata -which is where this teacher studied- the importance of reflecting upon culture appears to be emphasised. Older teachers are either too immersed in the preparation of students for the FCE and they have become less critical of textbooks and methodologies, or they were not trained to identify this kind of flaw in textbooks when they did their teacher training course.

As regards the issue of what is meant by “cultural competence”, it seems that such concept is little developed or in its early stages here in Argentina, or at least among this particular group of teachers and institutes, because the answers to this question were too varied. Teachers hesitated considerably when they gave an answer.

Here again, the teachers who were the closest to the intercultural issue were again the youngest, especially T4. She suggested doing listening tasks in which students could listen to two non-native speakers communicating in English, a clear sign that she is well aware of the present-day need for multiculturalism.

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When asked about the concept of cultural competence, T10, one of the youngest, was the only one to mention the concept of “intercultural awareness”, to realize that the book she is using lacks it and to admit that it is also the teacher's job to show the local cultural knowledge to students. Another teacher (T6) mentioned comparing students' own culture to that in other countries, but the rest referred only to the acquisition of general cultural knowledge and the acquisition of

knowledge about the culture students are approaching by learning English (the target culture), as if the English language had to be associated with one culture only.

As for the rest of the questions in the interview, they are not worth mentioning because the issue of culture did not come up. At no time did teachers realise the questions were heading towards that direction until the last two questions arrived, in which the word “culture” was explicitly said.

Results

The analysis of the three textbooks together with that of the interviews has revealed the following. As regards textbooks, topics vary very little from book to book, especially between the two books that prepare students to take the FCE. The three textbooks share the topics of education and the environment. Other common topics shared by at least two of the three textbooks are: people, transport, communication, travelling, art, sport, health, money and emotions -all of them very general and little controversial topics. No textbook deals with topics connected to the local culture; what they do is –to a greater or lesser extent- try to make learners talk and do research about their own culture. And no textbook deals with any of the topics connected to the PARSNIPS acronym.

However, there are marked differences between the American edition and the two British ones, and we can speculate about some possible reason for these differences. On the one hand, the American textbook is not oriented towards any international exam, at least explicitly; therefore, it does not need to follow any exam pattern, or the typical topics in any of those exams. On the other hand, the two British editions are oriented towards the preparation of the FCE; therefore, the kind of activities and the topics are very much like those in the test.

Besides, the fact that *World English 3* is produced by Heinle and the National Geographic can explain a lot about the greater amount of cultural information in it. The National Geographic is a well-known monthly magazine that has been published by the non-profit National Geographic since 1888. It has an international circulation. Its articles deal with a range of subjects, some political in nature, and most relating to the natural world and its intersection with modern culture. Consequently, the combination of an international circulation and modern culture could be the key to the explanation of this emphasis on international culture.

As regards teachers, there is a parallelism between their age and their level of awareness of the presence/absence of (local) cultural content in the textbooks they use. The younger the teacher, the more aware they are of this issue. Sometimes there is also a parallelism between this awareness and their work place. The teachers who work at the Instituto Cultural Argentino Británico – the only Cambridge examination centre in La Plata- seem to be the ones that notice the least the lack of (local) culture and are focused the most on making students succeed in the actual exam. It could also be said that their level of awareness is in line with their level of compromise to revert such situation.

I might also speculate about some possible reasons for this disinterest in cultural matters on the part of teachers. One reason for this could be a lack of a strong national identity. We Argentines seem to share an identity only in connection to football. Only once every four years, when the world plays a football world cup, do we seem to share a common identity, a nationality and a flag. Otherwise, we are a discontent people, always admiring and praising other societies. One of the interviewees expressed it very clearly. She said: “I think that textbooks are very rich, that we teachers of English teach much more than English, all the books bring a lot of world knowledge, there are a lot of references. I think that a teacher of English has a general view of the world through English textbooks...I think working with textbooks written abroad is very much enriching. We, Argentineans, are always looking abroad, they –foreigners-aren’t. Our life is abroad, we know a lot about everywhere; they don’t. No matter they are cultured or not.” (my translation)

Another reason, yet connected to the previous one, might be the traditional tendency of middle-class Argentineans to see ourselves as Europeans. This explanation coincides with the fact that the teachers who do not see European textbooks as foreign are the middle-aged and above. The youngest, who are more distant from this tradition, were the only ones to notice alien elements in the textbooks under analysis. It seems the traditional view of the “Generation of the 80s” is still alive. The project of this group of presidents consisted in, as regards the economic aspect, inserting our country in the international division of work by means of producing raw materials and food, and importing most of the processed products consumed in the internal market. As regards the social aspect, it consisted in trying to change native habits through the immigration of working force and making our customs more similar to those in Europe. As for the political area, the idea was to form a modern state by imitating those in Europe in order to offer guarantees to the foreign companies which invested in our country.

One further possible reason for teachers not noticing cultural issues in textbooks might be the unrealistic syllabus in connection to time that teachers have to cope with both at school –Colegio Nacional Rafael Hernandez- and at private institutes.

In the case of private institutes which use textbooks oriented to preparing students for international exams the problem is time constraints plus commercial interests. Parents still have the idea that what is foreign is far better, and it is they who want their children to have a foreign certificate of English. This idea is what encourages private institutions to make a profit off education. Some private institutions are so much at the service of their “clients” that they only devote themselves to making their “clients” pleased with their service, in this case, making their students pass foreign exams. The result: no time left for issues outside the syllabus. It will be remembered that Phillipson’s (1992) concept of ‘educational imperialism’ states that local decision-makers in the educational field which maintain strong links to inner circle countries tend to promote the educational ideologies of those countries, hence strengthening the hegemony of inner circle countries and restricting the ownership of language to ‘native speakers’ or countries located in the ‘inner circle.’ As Jenkins (2006a) suggested, by accepting and promoting the use of only standardized tests developed in the English speaking West, such as the FCE, a tacit acceptance is created that the countries that develop these tests are the custodians of English and the rest of the world their “clients.”

Teachers who work in these kinds of places are so indoctrinated that they accept orders as they come and do not stop to question the kind of education they are providing, especially teachers who have been working in the same institution for a considerable number of years.

Limitations

This study would certainly have greater validity if a larger number of participants selected from a broader set of contexts and also a larger number of different textbooks had been studied.

In the social sciences, a triangulation method is often used to compensate for possible biases in results, to facilitate validation of data through cross verification from more than two sources. In particular, it refers to the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. The idea is that one can be more confident with a result if different methods lead to the same result. Therefore, more than two methods are used in studies to double or even triple check results.

One way of carrying out such method could be to study the reactions that students themselves have in connection to the study of their own culture, which could be done by means of different possible methods such as class observation, interviews with students, surveys or students' diaries. This would provide us with one more tool to come to conclusions as regards teachers' attitudes to the teaching of Argentinean culture. Usually, students' reactions reflect in some way or another that of their teachers. Therefore, a three-dimensional study: publishers, teachers, and students would allow us to gain a deeper sight into this topic.

Conclusions

Going back to the original aims of this study, we can conclude that these three English textbooks do reflect the phenomenon of the "global coursebook". The topics they discuss are all rather general with no attempt to discuss any controversial issue that could offend any culture. No topic in the list of "prohibited" topics are mentioned (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, nudity, Israel, pork and smoking), which makes most textbooks very much alike. As Gray (2002) suggested, these kinds of "global" textbooks are sanitized for commercial purposes. The more general/global the textbook, the more worldwide publishing houses can sell without the need to devote any extra money to the writing of different editions according to the different cultures' demands.

The second research question referred to whether these textbooks helped Argentine students reinforce their cultural identity. *Laser B1+* and *Upstream B2+*, which focus on the preparation for the FCE do not offer any help in this regard. As for *World English 3*, it does, but in an indirect way, by suggesting activities in which students have to investigate about and discuss their own culture, but at no point do we find any explicit information or any explicit intention of dealing with the Argentine culture.

Finally, as regards the third question, most teachers do not even notice the lack of the local in textbooks, if anything they notice that some topics are quite apart from students' realities but they do not link this to the issue of culture. And if they happen to try to compensate for this lack, it is just by bringing the topics closer to their students' lives, which does not mean treating topics exclusive of the Argentine culture.

It is a fact that English has become an international language; therefore it does not belong only to native speakers in English-speaking countries. The fast and wide spread of English suggests that English need not always be linked to the culture of those who speak it as a

first language. Instead, as McKay (2004) suggested, the purpose of an international language is to describe one's own culture to others.

The main aim of culture teaching, as recognized by most scholars today, is to develop students' intercultural understanding and help them with intercultural communication. To be able to fulfill this aim, learners need cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and a set of skills, which comprise the learners' intercultural competence.

To improve the situation of culture teaching in EFL in Argentina, more attention in the future should be paid to the training of teachers. Working teachers should have in-service training for them to understand the importance of (multi)culture teaching and to learn how to incorporate it in class, even when the books they are using do not deal with the issue. More comprehensive and in-depth education of teachers would be one way to get closer to the ideal situation in which culture forms an integral part of each language class.

Although the present research does not pretend to be exhaustive, it accomplished its main aims and provided an insight into culture teaching and learning. Clearly, the topic requires further research as well as more diverse research methodology, such as classroom observation and interviews with students. This would give a better overview of the reasons behind the unsystematic culture teaching and would give feedback for teacher trainers on what kind of training teachers especially need. It is also hoped that teachers and their institutions will be encouraged to take a critical, adaptive approach to applying material.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. ¿Qué es lo que más te gusta del libro que usas? (What do you like most about this book?)
2. ¿Qué es lo que menos te gusta del libro que usas? (What do you like least about this book?)
3. ¿Qué es lo que más les gusta a tus alumnos del libro que usas? (What do your students like most about this book?)
4. ¿Qué es lo que menos les gusta a tus alumnos del libro que usas? (What do your students like least about this book?)
5. ¿Usas material extra para complementar el libro? ¿Por qué? (Do you use extra materials to complement the book? Why?)
6. Si es así, ¿qué secciones del libro consideras que es necesario complementar ó adaptar y qué tipo de material extra usas? (Do you think it is necessary to complement or adapt any section in the book? Which? How do you do it?)
7. ¿Te parece que los temas que trata el libro son adecuados a la realidad de tus alumnos? (Are the topics appropriate for your students?)
8. Muchos autores hablan de la “competencia cultural” de los alumnos ¿Qué entiendes por “competencia cultural”? (What do you understand by “cultural competence”?)
9. ¿Cómo se enseña la competencia cultural? (How can you teach it?)

Follow up questions (question 7)

10. ¿Cómo harías para acercar el libro a la realidad de los alumnos? (How would you make the book come closer to students?)
11. ¿Crees que los alumnos se beneficiarían de alguna manera? (Do you think students would benefit in any way?)
12. ¿En qué forma se beneficiarían? (How?)

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