
Do coursebooks favor interculturality in the English classroom?

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Kumaravadivelu¹ (2014) claims that, in the field of English Language Teaching, dominant hegemonic forces exercise power in an invisible manner, imposing center-based methods and center-based materials that conceive contemporary societies as characterized by processes of globalization and interculturality. These models tend to blur the cultural processes and idiosyncratic characteristics that define ways of learning and understanding knowledge that are inherent to specific communities. In this view, coursebooks are tools that introduce linguistic, pedagogic and social frameworks that may inhibit teachers from developing their own personal teaching styles, as well as pedagogies that are appropriate to their contexts.

The research project *Legitimando perspectivas y prácticas locales II: El papel de los libros de texto en la tarea docente y en el desarrollo del sentido de agencia de profesores de inglés* (UNMDP), aims at analysing the pedagogic models proposed in coursebooks used to teach English in our local context, and inquiring into the influence that those models may have in our classrooms. This presentation explores the extent to which interculturality, as the processes of interrelations and communication of knowledge and values among different cultural groups seen as equal, is favored or hindered in coursebooks.

Introduction

In our country, the field of English language teaching has been dominated by pedagogical models generated in English-speaking countries since its beginning, and the coursebooks used locally, produced and commercialized in the world market by mainstream publishing houses, are very rarely written by non-native speakers.

Kumaravadivelu (2014) claims that dominant hegemonic forces hold their power through the constant imposition of new teaching methods, and that those methods are the door to other aspects of teaching such as materials, exams, curriculum design, etc. These pedagogical models tend to ignore the

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¹ Kumaravadivelu, 2014. The Decolonial Option in English Teaching: Can the Subaltern Act? en TESOL Quarterly. Vol. 0, N° 0.

idiosyncratic characteristics that define ways of learning and understanding knowledge that are inherent to specific communities, since they assume that our societies are all characterized by processes of globalization and interculturality in the same way. In this view, coursebooks are tools that introduce linguistic, pedagogic and social frameworks that do not contribute to accepting the value of each interpretation of the world as unique, and, therefore, may inhibit teachers from developing their own personal teaching styles, as well as pedagogies that are appropriate to their contexts. Understanding and acknowledging teachers' dependence on coursebooks could be a good start to contribute to teachers' professionalization, and, in that sense, it could be relevant to generate critical awareness to avoid that coursebooks become limitations to teachers' work.

The study

In the last ten years, our work as teacher educators and researchers at Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata has been devoted to studying the impact of foreign pedagogical models in our classrooms. In the course of previous studies, some of the information gathered gave us a hint as to the power of ELT coursebooks as a strong limitation to student-teachers' range of possibilities to display their own teaching styles and generate situated proposals. It was observed that student-teachers tend to take refuge in coursebooks to plan their lessons, without questioning the coursebooks' proposal. Therefore, a new study to explore this issue is now under way.

López Hernández (2007) argues that any attempt at innovation in education must take into account the role played by coursebooks in the teachers' conceptualization of their professional work, and he warns us about potential difficulties in professional competence development if teaching materials production is in the hands of a reduced number of commercial companies that monopolize the teaching scenario. Undoubtedly, coursebooks play a central role in teaching practice in most disciplinary areas, and they define contents, ways of working in the classroom, and even dictate whole programmes of studies (Caputi, 2020; Cilia et al, 2004; Borg, 2003; Prendes Espinosa, 2001; and others)²

In this sense, the research project we are involved in at the moment aims at interpreting and describing the role of coursebooks in teachers' work and the development of teacher agency. The study is concerned with the extent to which ELT coursebooks allow for the development of teachers' personal and situated teaching styles and proposals.

One of the issues discussed in the project is the extent to which published materials for teaching English emphasize the development of intercultural competence or if they only focus on language teaching. A strong focus on the linguistic component of language teaching, to the detriment of the socio-cultural component, is never a naïve decision. If interculturality is the aim,

teachers need to reflect upon

In this line, a central claim of the project is that interculturality and intercultural competence are usually defined from the point of view of the hegemonic powers, i.e. it is assumed that learners of English need to develop intercultural sensitivity and awareness in order to learn the foreign language.

"We have a good chance of dealing successfully with the foreign world if we manage to activate such socio-cultural categories of our own world that give us a firm foundation for, metaphorically speaking, 'building bridges' between our own world and the foreign world which enable us to venture into the foreign world in our imagination (cf. Neuner, 1994). Thus we can expand our own experiences, realise similarities and negotiate possible differences. This may also help learners to come to terms with a possible discrepancy and tension between their own view of the foreign world (interim world II) and the pre-conceived picture that is presented in the 'official interpretation' of the foreign world (interim world I)." (Paramenter, 2003. p.48)

However, discussions about the extent to which ELT materials present the foreign culture as willing to 'build bridges' and negotiate meanings, and as part of a complex interconnected world, are not so common.

For this study, ELT coursebooks for secondary school education will be selected, since at that level there seems to be a stronger emphasis in ELT materials on the development of global citizens capable of generating changes in society. Also, most of the researchers involved have ample experience in teaching English in local secondary schools.

As regards ELT, the current regulations that guide our practice in formal secondary education in the Province of Buenos Aires, i.e. Diseños Curriculares (DC), introduce the concept of interculturality as a way of strengthening citizenship education. Interculturality is defined as a way of understanding oneself as well as one's own culture as integral parts of a complex, interrelated world, and, since each culture builds a space for its own significance from its own context and sensitivity, interculturality implies understanding and accepting the unique value of each interpretation of the world. As specified in the DC, schools, as the places where the intercultural encounter occurs, are involved in generating the integration and exchange of experiences, valuing the interaction with others as a learning experience, recognizing the knowledge that each person possesses, creating bonds among the different individuals that guarantee that their diversity and differences do not turn into educational inequality.

According to UNESCO in its document for The 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

"Interculturality" refers to the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural

expressions through dialogue and mutual respect. (p. 14)

Along the same lines, in the chapter *Interculturally Relevant Pedagogy: Developing Contemporary Approach*, R'boul (2020) defines interculturality as the dynamics and processes involved in the co-construction and negotiation of meanings, attitudes, and perspectives during intercultural interactions. The author argues that it is important to take into consideration learners' native culture for the selection and design of instructional activities and contents.

As regards intercultural competence, Leeds-Hurwitz (2013) refers to it as "having adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different cultures."

Also, in reference to the development of intercultural understanding and consciousness in ELT materials, López Barrios, Villanueva de Debat and Tavella (2008) analyzed coursebooks used in Argentina and Southern Cone nations and concluded that the coursebooks do not promote intercultural awareness. Their study showed that the coursebooks included insufficient instances of the target language in authentic use, gave prominence to global matters in detriment to local issues, paid more attention to characteristics of the lifestyles in the UK and the USA disregarding other English-speaking countries, and made few attempts to establish links with the learners' experiences.

In this framework, and considering that interculturality has to do with equality, each individual's culture and the co-construction of meaning, the questions that motivate and guide this research project are:

- Do coursebooks achieve a balance between the treatment of the linguistic component of language teaching and the socio-cultural component?
- Do coursebooks allow for the co-construction and negotiation of meanings?
- Do coursebooks present a view of English culture as homogenous, with values, concerns and perceptions shared by all its members?
- Do coursebooks acknowledge that the English language is characterized by variation and variety?
- Do coursebooks offer opportunities for students to compare their own meanings and understandings, of the uses of the language for instance, to the ones presented in the book?
- Do coursebooks present global concerns as if they were the concerns of all humankind?
- Do coursebooks invite learners to share the concerns of their own communities in comparison or in relation to global concerns?

- Do coursebooks provide opportunities to challenge stereotypes?
- Do coursebooks incorporate popular culture in order to help young learners to find points of contact with their realities and develop critical thinking abilities?

The project is in process at the moment, and the next step is to define the categories of analysis that will allow us to examine coursebooks, in order to find evidence to answer our questions. Some of the aspects to be analyzed, for instance, will be oral and written pieces of discourse and the visual information that accompany them. In this respect, some of the indicators to be considered could be content, year and place of publication in the case of authentic material, types of discourse, social groups addressed by or in the texts (gender, age, nationality, etc.). Also, pedagogic activities will be examined, and, in that sense, instructions, aims, roles assigned to teachers and learners, distribution of work, i.e. who is allowed to manage topics and exercises, will be some of the features considered.

The aim of this presentation is to share our concerns about the topic, together with the rationale for our study. We intend to promote reflections and discussions upon teachers' possibilities of generating equitable interactions among different cultures, and shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect by using the ELT published materials currently on the market. As Caputi (2014) argues:

"... la profesionalización del rol docente por la que tanto se lucha implica un estatus académico que solo es posible sustentar con un trabajo concienzudo de lectura, de investigación, de capacitación permanente, de análisis crítico, de creatividad e innovación y que, de ningún modo, puede sostenerse a través de las propuestas editoriales que "sirven en bandeja" todo lo anterior y que reducen al docente a un simple ejecutor de una melodía compuesta por otros."

Approaching EL teacher education from a critical perspective may give local teachers power to question the current power imbalances and the cultural hegemony of dominant groups, and develop pedagogic proposals that are suitable and beneficial for their own varied teaching contexts.

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- the contents they teach, and the contexts in which they teach.