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A Semiotic Exploration of Cultural Potential in EFL Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a Peircean semiotic approach to analysing the cultural content of EFL textbook materials. It argues that while traditional content analyses may provide valuable insights, they fail to provide a comprehensive picture of the cultural meaning potential of textbooks since they ignore a key element: how language learners interact with texts and visuals imbedded in the framework of a pedagogic task. We demonstrate how cultural meanings can emerge through processes of unguided semiosis, supported by sharing and reflection in a complex, non-linear and essentially dynamic learning environment. For this to happen, however, teachers may need to reconsider their current approaches to teaching culture, embrace complexity, and allow order to emerge from chaos in their classrooms. The paper suggests that collaboratively negotiated and shared (re)presentations of cultural meaning contribute to the development of the learners' global cultural awareness and prepares them for intercultural citizenship in our globalized world.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Textbook analysis, Semiotics, Complexity

Introduction

In recent years - mainly due to the effects of globalisation and the attention to the role world Englishes play (or should play) in education - teachers, materials writers and researchers have tried to discuss what role culture(s) should play in the foreign language classroom, how culture can be defined, whose culture needs to be targeted, and how it can be addressed in the classroom. The issue is obviously complex; foreign language teaching first and foremost needs to focus on developing learners' language skills. Yet, language and culture cannot be separated from one another even if sometimes it is difficult to determine what is meant by culture (e.g. national culture, pop-culture, high culture, etc.) or whose culture (British, American, youth culture, etc.) we need to deal with in the classroom. The issue is even more complex in the Asian context where English is often associated with a colonial past and where languages carry political, ideological and cultural 'baggage'. It is perhaps no coincidence that a renewed interest in the examination of culture in EFL seems to come from Asian countries and has taken a critical perspective (e.g., Yongbing, 2005; Yuen, 2011).

A static view of culture that dominated EFL for decades has given way to more dynamic models influenced by, for instance, Pennycook's (2007) notion of global cultural flows or the recognition of the legitimacy of multiple Englishes. These views have led to the realization that a target culture in EFL is no longer clearly definable, thus the prevailing idea of culture as a national concept has been replaced by a 'transnational or global/local approach, focusing on cultural complexity and hybridity' (Risager, 2011, p. 485). Furthermore, teaching culture today has moved beyond the integration of cultural content into the language syllabus. It aims to develop the learners' 'global cultural consciousness' (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) and promote their 'intercultural citizenship' (Byram, 2011); approaches that call language educators to facilitate the 'cultivation of a critically reflective mind that can tell the difference between real and unreal, between information and disinformation, between ideas and ideologies' (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 164). Such reflexivity enables students to learn how to be culturally and politically conscious citizens which, as Byram (2011) points out, is a commitment current EFL methodology often lacks.

Changes in how culture is conceptualized in the EFL lesson also call for a re-examination of teaching materials, more specifically for a fresh approach for the investigation of commercially produced textbooks. This paper thus first discusses a contemporary view of culture and how cultural content is identified and analysed in textbooks and then offers an alternative approach to analysing the cultural content of teaching materials. The key strength of this approach is that it highlights basic principles of meaning-making (semiosis) in order to draw attention to the potential of visual and textual elements in textbooks as semiotic resources. We advocate an approach to culture that exploits this potential to facilitate critical discussions about cultural practices, assumptions and representations. Such a dynamic perspective offers language teachers an opportunity to use existing materials yet foster a critical understanding of culture that is envisioned by progressive educationists and necessitated by a complex global reality.

A dynamic view of culture

Current theories on teaching culture in the EFL classroom place the learner in the focus of attention. Instead of viewing culture as a body of knowledge to be acquired, teachers are to facilitate learners' reflective understanding of cultural assumptions and beliefs through engagement with materials used in the lesson. Tseng (2002, p. 11), for example, proposes a 'progressive theory of culture' which 'allows us to restructure the curriculum in ways that highlight learner participation'. She builds on the ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce when she argues that generating new cultural understandings requires the interaction of the individual (inner) culture and a social culture (the outside world) of the language learner. Although Tseng herself does not explicate this, in Peircean (1980) terms, she refers to the process of semiosis whereby an individual, upon seeing a sign, generates an interpretant in their mind, i.e. a mental image of what the sign represents for them. Following her line of argument we can see that the interpretant, in our case a cultural meaning, is influenced by a framework of reference that both the learner's (and that of the target culture's) social context and their individual personal histories provide. Thus, certain cultural content may provoke different interpretations in different educational or situational contexts, and various individual interpretations within the same classroom.

Tseng (2002, p. 16) adopts a social constructivist view when she suggests that learning culture as a process involves 'a shared exploration' in which 'sharing individual meaning constructs with others, and reflecting upon those episodes of sharing' helps learners arrive at a better understanding of their own and others' cultures (see also Kramsch, 1993). Tseng (2002) offers examples for how to incorporate culture as process in an EFL syllabus, focusing on a) student-generated materials (e.g. 'Who I am', 'Family stories' or 'Journaling into culture') in which students provide the materials for cultural discussions, b) the use of authentic materials such as literature, newspaper reports, films, etc. that serve as the primary materials for individual responses and sharing (e.g. 'Confronting taboos', 'Culture as eating'), and c) project work in which learners study and share their interpretations of art in the target culture. Curiously, she does not discuss how her approach could be adapted by those using commercially available materials and textbooks.

Culture in EFL textbooks

The exclusion of textbook materials seems to suggest that Tseng (2002) does not consider these adequate sources to support the cultural meaning-making process. She is not alone in this view; other writers also criticize EFL textbooks saying that they 'offer an imbalanced representation of foreign cultures' (Yuen, 2011, p. 465) or that they fail to develop the language learners' intercultural pragmatic competence (Nguyen, 2011). In fact, there has been an ongoing debate in the professional literature on how teaching materials need to incorporate culture, or how such content is to be analysed. A number of papers have been published since the early 1990s on how language teaching textbooks should deal with cultural content (e.g. Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Dendrinos, 1992; Starkey, 1991) and a renewed interest in Asia – mostly critical – can be seen in recent years. Some of these focus on locally produced language teaching materials, for example Yuen's (2011) highly-critical investigation of secondary school materials used in Hong Kong or Wu's research on the cultural content of Chinese college

textbooks which found that ‘cultural content input has not received the due attention in designing and organizing’ (2010, p. 143) the materials. Others study the role of culture in globally produced textbooks and conclude that the materials do not encourage learners to be actively engaged in cultural reflection and meaning-making processes (Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011). Regardless of the research methodology they follow, they all seem to be dissatisfied with the approach the textbooks (and their authors) adopt in dealing with cultural content.

Most studies use either quantitative research tools, for example Yuen’s (2011) which applied frequency counts of cultural (re)presentations, or qualitative methods like Nguyen’s (2011) critical discourse analysis of speech acts in Vietnamese EFL textbooks (see also Camase, 2009; Gulliver, 2010; Yongbing, 2005), while others choose content analysis (e.g. Wu, 2010; Ya-Chen, 2007). Some studies focus on the textual information (words, reading texts, exercises, etc.), others prefer to draw on both visual and textual (e.g. Maslak, 2008; Yuen, 2011), yet others only select the visual content of the materials as the basic unit of their research. Although these studies have made significant contributions to the literature on culture in EFL textbooks, many published papers tend to take the analyst’s interpretation as a proxy for the way students interpret text and visuals. However, in a more dynamic, progressive approach, cultural understanding emerges through complex processes of meaning-making and is thus highly contextual. Additionally, while studies that illuminate cultural misrepresentations in textbooks are clearly valuable, they offer very little practical help to teachers who may themselves be aware of and frustrated by the cultural inadequacies of textbooks. Thus, in the next part of this article we will demonstrate how a semiotic analysis of textbook materials can reveal their cultural potential and help teachers guide foreign language learners to critically reflect on their own and others’ cultures.

A semiotic analysis of teaching materials

A semiotic approach takes as its key analytic task to explicate how contextual semiotic resources shape the process of meaning making. When we look at language learners’ engagement with textbooks, those resources include images, texts, as well as the activity within which those are situated, all of which assume meaning(s) through interaction with learners’ experiences. One fundamental characteristic of classroom learning that is sometimes overlooked in more traditional textbook analyses is that students’ meaning-making process is overtly shaped by pedagogic considerations. Such guided semiosis curtails the possible and legitimate meanings that can be generated through engagement with learning materials. Images, for instance, are usually not there to be freely interpreted as icons or symbols but rather act as denotational indexes; visual equivalents and reinforcements to lexical information expressed in surrounding texts.

Let us consider a concrete example to illustrate these claims. We have selected a page from an online sample unit (Unit 4: Disaster!) from the second edition of Engage; a textbook published by Oxford University Press for A2-level English (Manin et al., 2011, p. 38). The top half of the page is occupied by a textbox that contains two large images of scenes from the movie *2012*, as well as a summary of the film’s plot (about 13 complex sentences long), with the title of the movie also appearing in large font. In one image, placed as the banner of the textbox, we see a man (played by actor John Cusack) who is carrying a young child on his back, both looking

intently in one direction in the middle of what looks to be a snowstorm. The second image on the left and under the banner shows a small propeller airplane flying in a city with skyscrapers collapsing around it. There are three tasks following the text, all three focusing on checking students' comprehension.

In their engagement with the semiotic resources present in this activity, learners are not free to create meanings. It is quite likely that the images as well as the text trigger certain interpretations in students as they make sense of them using their own and their peers' experience and points of reference. Perhaps they have seen the movie and want to share that experience. Perhaps they recognize the actor in the picture and want to add a comment about another film in which he starred. Perhaps they are airplane-buffs and start to study the image to determine what type of airplane it is. But unless the teacher provides the interactional space to voice and discuss these associations, such processes of unguided (and completely natural) semiosis become muted or at best utilized as a pre-reading activity. The first task following the text instructs learners to 'Read and listen to the article. Check which natural disasters are in the movie'. Thus any previous unguided meaning-making through connotative links is now firmly redirected towards a focus on denotational content: what the text is about. Such denotational work is the purpose of the other two tasks on the page, where students are asked to put sentences in order and then to answer a set of comprehension questions. Although the text and visuals may be classified as examples of American culture (as they are based on a Hollywood movie), they would probably not be seen as cultural information as the text itself is not an explicit passage about a cultural product, practice or figure. We also want to note that there are no activities in the following three pages that relate the text or the topic to culture.

Perhaps this is one reason why Tseng (2002) and others who propose critical cultural engagement have opted for designing their own materials. After all, culture teaching often surfaces in EFL materials as information texts about festivals and food, offering little in the way of reflective understanding, since most textbook writers still consider grammatical and communicative competence, and not global cultural citizenship, to be the ultimate goal of foreign language learning. This is obvious in the sample we briefly examined where texts and visuals are explored only for their semantic and grammatical meaning (c.f. Johns & Davies, 1983) but not for underlying cultural assumptions.

Identifying and utilizing cultural potential

Tseng (2002) emphasized that learning takes place when learners negotiate tensions and differences in their interpretations. This essentially Vygotskian (e.g. 1978) idea also underlies our approach to how cultural meaning potential should be harnessed in foreign language lessons. First, it needs to start with unguided semiosis; allowing students to interpret texts and images without the didactic filter of a task that steers them toward denotation. We suggested possible spontaneous reactions from students to the text and visuals we described in the previous section, but there are countless others. Let us assume that the movie itself seems to capture their interest the most (in which case, we might add, we are already stepping beyond strict denotation since we're considering the cultural object itself, with the images acting as icons and not mere indexes of vocabulary items found in the text). Students can even watch the trailer to add to the text and images already present in the book. It is impossible to predict exactly what points of tension or

difference there would be, but there are several avenues along which particular cultural beliefs in connection with the text and the movie could be surfaced and interrogated, and thus the cultural meaning potential of the activity explored.

First, we may decide to use the text/visuals as a starting point to a critical discussion of Hollywood movies. Such discussion could be set off by students' spontaneous reactions when they hear the word 'Hollywood', and then move on to why students like or dislike Hollywood movies. It is also possible to incorporate more fact-based aspects of culture in these dialogues, for instance by checking whether students know where Hollywood is. Depending on students' experiences, another possible area to explore would be the whole genre of disaster movies; what they are, why there has been a recent deluge of such movies, and why people seem to be drawn to them. Using the text and the movie and student's chain of association as a trigger, a third option for critical discussion concerns environmental problems. Again, students can relate this issue to the movie first, then to their own immediate context, negotiating their understandings about reasons as well as solutions to various facets of environmental degradation.

It is important that such discussions do not simply fulfill the purpose of 'target language practice'. That is the difference between a pre-reading activity that merely purports to activate background knowledge and vocabulary, and a critical, reflective discussion that aims to impact on a learner's thinking and disposition. Students would be expected to voice their views, as well as their reactions to others' views, trying to negotiate differences as well as an understanding of how those differences have been shaped by their social and personal histories. In such discussions, teachers act as facilitators to help students in the process of 'recognition, exploration, and reflection' (Tseng, 2002, p. 16).

If we take culture to be not simply an overt information about the customs or artifacts of (national) cultural groups but also a set of beliefs and values that are expressed and, to a large extent, reproduced through semiotic (i.e., linguistic, visual, kinetic, architectural, etc.) activity, then textbooks are in fact rich repositories of cultural meaning potential.

Teaching cultural complexity

The first step in exploring and exploiting the cultural content of textbook materials is to recognize their potential and learn to notice it. This is not easy. Most of us have learnt to treat language as a neutral medium of communication, a transparent code that enables us to transmit ideas to one another, or to express emotions. Looking at texts and communicative practices as expressive of cultural assumptions requires an understanding of language beyond its denotational function and accepting learning as a complex, dynamic process. When we recognize that the development of global cultural consciousness and intercultural citizenship requires teachers to embrace a view of culture as a process of 'becoming' rather than 'being', then it is time we questioned the hegemony of a linearly-structured educational experience.

Our analysis of the example material clearly reveals a linear process of education in its design; learners first study the text and answer comprehension questions of increasing difficulty to provide evidence of their learning. All the activities and questions in the example are closed-ended, i.e. they require one particular response as their only correct solution, resulting in

extremely high teacher control over what happens in the classroom. Furthermore, nothing unpredictable can happen in the lesson; the teacher knows how much time there is to be given for the reading task, which activity to do first, and what answers students will need to suggest as evidence of their 'learning'.

Such a linear process, however, is far from the actual reality of how learning unfolds in a natural setting. We suggest that learning, including the development of intercultural competence, is a complex, dynamic phenomenon. This implies that teachers need to create conditions in which students 'have a capacity for change, are alert to alternatives, sensitive to difference, and open to experiment' (Clarke & Collins, 2007, p. 164) if meaningful learning is to take place. Of course, that may lead to chaos, but chaos in complex systems is understood as 'order without predictability' (Mallows, 2002, p. 3) referring to the teacher's role as regulator in eliciting different cultural interpretations and facilitating the sharing of these in order to arrive at collaboratively negotiated meanings.

Tseng's (2002) emphasis on the individual in the learning process and our own semiotic analysis of materials suggest that cultural meaning-making takes place at the individual learner's level 'without a single master plan directing what and how and when it is learned' (Clarke & Collins, 2007, p. 163). Through unguided semiosis, learners should first be encouraged to explore their own understanding of texts and visuals without the constraints of a pedagogic task that channels their attention to only the lexical or grammatical features to be learned. As facilitators of cultural explorations it is important that teachers acknowledge unpredictability and accept that they need to create a possibility where meaning emerges through a seemingly chaotic classroom situation. In other words, they need to consider replacing specific learning objectives with 'a clear pedagogical intent for the class' and creating conditions that allow this to be 'negotiated through the interactions brought forth, acknowledged, and responded to by the various members of the classroom community' (Clarke & Collins, 2007, p. 167).

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that traditional approaches to analysing the cultural content of EFL textbooks, important though they are, offer little practical help to teachers as they ignore the cultural meaning potential the materials may carry. One of the main reasons why this happens is that these analyses assume that the meanings they uncover in the teaching materials are universal and are shared by all participants in the teaching/learning process. However, based on Tseng's (2002) work and using Peircean semiotics (1980), we pointed out that texts and images can carry multiple meanings for users and it is the teacher's task to facilitate the processes of reflection and negotiation through which shared cultural understanding emerges.

By applying a semiotic analysis of a sample textbook material we demonstrated that although denotational indexicality, i.e. that images and texts 'point to' one another for the purpose of reinforcing lexical or grammatical items, is a prevailing feature of language teaching materials, teachers can discover possible processes of natural semiosis. Using this as the springboard for discussion, their role is to be mediators between a multitude of viewpoints, meanings, and perspectives, guided by an overall pedagogic intention they have for learning. We discovered that what appears to be on the surface a culturally neutral language learning activity can in fact

be used to develop skills that are needed for developing intercultural citizenship and global cultural awareness. Thus, we suggest that instead of supplementing textbooks with multiple resources, teachers should consider analysing and adapting the materials already at their disposal. Through the adaptation of texts, visuals and, most importantly, tasks, it is possible to create a non-linear and dynamic cultural and language learning experience. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that a progressive view of culture requires a teaching approach which understands the complexity of the meaning making process. An approach which embraces uncertainty, and accepts that learning is a dynamic and unpredictable process which emerges through the interactions of participants and their ideas.

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