



## THE WAY STUDENTS SEE AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK

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### Abstract

The purposes of this article are to present the results of a pedagogical experience through a survey based on the students' perceptions from the textbook they follow in the English class and to answer the question: how do students see themselves represented in this textbook? The main instrument used to collect data was a survey. This survey was answered by 10 students. They analyzed the whole content of a unit in an English textbook written by a North American Publishing house. The reported results were classified under the next categories: English textbooks are seen as an important tool in the learning process, textbooks show a North American stereotype, content is not seen as a contextualized one and discrimination.

### Resumen

Los propósitos de este artículo son presentar los resultados de una encuesta acerca de las percepciones que los estudiantes tienen sobre los textos de inglés usados en clase y responder la pregunta: ¿cómo los estudiantes se ven representados en el libro? El principal instrumento utilizado para la recolección de datos fue la encuesta. Dicha encuesta, fue respondida por 10 estudiantes, quienes analizaron el contenido de una unidad de un texto escrito por una editorial americana. Los resultados arrojados fueron clasificados bajo las siguientes categorías: los textos de Inglés son una herramienta importante en el proceso de aprendizaje, los textos muestran estereotipos americanos, el contenido de los textos no se ve contextualizado y la discriminación.

**Key words:** stereotype, ethnicity, authentic material and discrimination.

**Palabras clave:** estereotipos, etnicidad, material auténtico y discriminación

## INTRODUCTION

I decided to make this report of a survey based on the students' perceptions from the textbook they follow in the English class, because from my experience I can say that books are the most common educational material that teachers use within a classroom. Byrne (2001), states that textbooks are a reflection of society and therefore, it is highly imperative that they do not improperly influence the audience in any way. The authors are usually the ones who select pictures, publishing houses are the ones who select the content that should appear on the pages of the books they commercialize.

The criteria that publishing houses take into account when selecting one picture or another is to show some social features that can influence students in a positive or negative way as it is shown in the conclusions, they express the way they see themselves represented in the textbook and it is not related to their real lives. Teenagers tend to stereotype, they give individuals specific characteristics according to their perceptions and sometimes, textbooks can be taken as a model for them to follow.

Finally, I would like to add that teaching English includes many things. It is not only to teach grammar, or to be focused on the improvement of listening, reading, speaking or writing abilities all the time. We, the teachers, need to be aware of the importance

of the existing relation between the language and the social and cultural factors in order to start to incorporate these issues within our classrooms, our classes and why not to our syllabus.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since this report was focused on how students see their English textbook, the following concepts are considered below: materials, stereotype, ethnicity, authentic material and discrimination.

### Materials

Materials are one of the most important issues for a teacher in the classroom; from the materials selected depend the successes or the failures of a class. According to Nuñez et al (2009), education should be inclusive rather than exclusive; this statement embraces materials development in the sense that all teaching and learning participants need to be involved in the decision of what knowledge and knowing is, so that their materials facilitate the teaching-learning process. In regard to this, it is relevant to highlight the importance of taking into account the opinion of the students, unless, to have in mind their needs and likes.

González (2006), in her reflections on materials use training in EFL, states that materials are an essential component in teaching, this author quotes Ramírez (2004)

definition of materials as anything used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language thus, materials can represent a source of motivation for students especially when they have the opportunity of having more dynamic classes.

### **Stereotypes**

A stereotype is defined as ‘an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our behavior in relation to that category’ Allport (1954, 19). Firstly, stereotypes lead us to draw our own pictures about what we will handle in a classroom. We have our perceptions about the material we will provide to our students and to do that we invite publishing houses to share their products but sometimes we do not analyze deeply how the material could affect our classes. Hewstone& Giles (1991, 271) argue that stereotypes are inherently ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ because they are illogical in origin, resistant to contradiction, or morally wrong. Follow a stereotype in an English textbook, is to portrait ideal people who speak Standard English in an ideal English setting, as professionals in English Language Teaching, we must reflect the great variety of users and uses of English today because teenagers get easily influenced by the surrounding environment.

Hewstone& Giles (1991, 271) claim that the whole purpose of relating stereotypes to behavior is to see what stereotypes do, not just what they are. Bearing in mind the fact of teenagers connect their behavior with the images that the world provides, we cannot continue reinforcing the lack of authenticity in most of the Colombian boys and girls with the use of American images.

### **Ethnicity**

According to Isajiw (1990), the concept of ethnicity depends on the meaning of other concepts such as ethnic group and ethnic identity. Ethnic group refers to ethnicity as the collective phenomenon; it is a community-type group of people who share the same culture. Ethnic identity refers to ethnicity as an individual experienced phenomenon, it is a manner in which persons, on account of their ethnic origin, locate themselves psychologically in relation to one or more social systems, and in which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems. Ethnicity itself is an abstract concept which includes an implicit reference to both collective and individual aspects of the phenomenon. Ethnicity is a social-psychological process which gives an individual sense of belonging and identity. It is, of course, one of a number of social phenomena which produce a sense of identity. Regarding these concepts of identity I can tell that they are not entirely expressed in the textbook selected to analyze. Students at school are being taught to treat and value people from their context but not from other races.

### **Authentic material**

Authentic materials are mainly designed for native speakers. These materials expose students to real language used in context and to the cultural information. In addition, these authentic materials motivate students and keep them on task (Peacock, 1997).

When talking about authentic materials, it is believed that the teachers must be

encouraged to apply them in their teaching practice, and when we did a critical analysis of the content in the English textbook, we found that real situations from Colombian life are not present along the unit.

In Mindt's (1996: 247) words «bring textbooks for teaching English as a foreign language into closer correspondence with actual English». English in textbooks must be intended for the different uses and users in foreign countries in which English is taught. Let us have in mind that learning a foreign language implies knowing not only their grammatical rules or abilities but knowing about the beliefs, customs and traditions of the foreign culture.

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination will be defined as different treatment to individuals that, apart from being of different groups, have similar observable characteristics. Hence, exclusion might be understood as discrimination in access. Both exclusion and discrimination are sources of inequality between-groups, and may interact reinforcing their effects.

Some English textbooks show the inequities between women and men representations. Wolfson (1989) describes that when men and women in similar positions are addressed differently, the effect can be discriminatory.

Therefore, the right to an education that is free of discrimination is bilingual and bicultural for language. People have the right to an education in their own language and culture. Connecting this vision with this report of a survey, teachers must relate English with native language, in the sense of getting closer to the reality of our own setting and needs.

It is worth noting that understanding the above concepts allows having a better comprehension of the interpretation of the collected data because these aspects are all immersed into the answers and opinions that students identified when analyzing the content of the unit of the book. Students recognize that materials are important for a teacher when explaining a topic in a class and more important when those materials are authentic because they get involved into the process of learning a language in a better way.

On the other hand, aspects related to ethnicity, stereotypes and discrimination are present not only in the book they follow but everywhere, in every setting they are surrounded so they can detect them when they are asked to interpret what they are shown.

## **SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS**

### **The Context**

This survey was applied in a public school in Boyacá. The school offers an education program based on the public education policies. According to PEI (2009: 3), its study plan is articulated with Educative Revolution established by MEN as the model for creating its curriculum. In its objectives proposes to know and to defend the equality of rights and duties and the understanding of the difference to look for a better life.

### **The Students**

The participants of this survey were 10 students. They are from a public institution.

The students ranged in age from 15 to 17 years old. They attend two hours of English classes throughout the week from Monday to Friday. They are eleventh graders and they were randomly selected.

### Data Collection

The main instrument that was used to collect information was a survey because it makes an emphasis on gathering a range of responses to set items from a range of people. As this is not a deep research but just a report of a survey, these results allow me to explore students' perceptions and opinions. This survey was answered by 10 students. They analyzed the whole content of a unit in an English language textbook written by a North American Publishing house by answering some questions which facilitated me to make conclusions on their answers. The book is composed of eight units and each one of the units is conformed by the following parts: grammar, vocabulary, communication and pronunciation, skills culture spot project, workbook and study tips. Then, the information collected was tabulated, compared and analyzed in order to report the results.

### Findings

The research question intended to be answered through the next findings is: How do students see themselves represented in the textbook they follow?

**1. ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS AS IMPORTANT TOOL IN THE LEARNING PROCESS.** The textbook becomes a useful tool that can be used to assist teachers and students in the classroom making the learning process easier for both of them, for a teacher because

it helps to save time when planning lessons and for students because it can be an attractive way to introduce a topic. As the textbook contains a workbook with more exercises to develop as homework, some students think that the textbook is helpful for them at home because they can go back to the explanation, develop the exercises and reinforce what they have studied in the class, in this way, the students who work autonomously will improve their English level gradually.

*«Podemos practicar lo aprendido» (Student #1)*

*«We can practice what we have learnt in the class» (Student #1)*

*«El libro me ayuda con algunas cosas que no entiendo y luego puedo revisarlas en casa» (Student #2).*

*«The textbook helps me with some things I don't understand so I can review those things.» (Student #2).*

*«Nos aporta conocimientos y nos ayuda a subir nuestro nivel.» (Student #3).*

*«The textbook contributes to our knowledge and it helps us to improve our level» (Student #3)*

### 2. NORTH AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes have positive and negative effects. Most of the times the effects are negative and they can be harmful for the teenagers because they can behave based on their perceptions. Harrison (2004) claims that stereotypes can give individuals stereotypical perceptions, which are defined as «socially constructed notions, often based on fallacious or limited information that can possibly have detrimental consequences or reproduce maladaptive stereotypical behavior.

In consequence, analyzing some students'

answers and relating them to the theory of stereotyping, it is found that they feel that the textbook is showing an ideal North American model in terms of living, housing, physical appearance, sports, leisure activities, clothing, food and music, among others. In other words, the book shows a stereotype of North American teenagers who have a different way of life from Colombian teenagers; they do not feel identified with them.

*«El libro muestra imágenes de adolescentes americanos y los adolescentes de Colombia son diferentes». (Student #4).*

*«The book shows images of American teenagers and Colombian teenagers are different». (Student #4).*

*«La realidad de los adolescentes que se ven en las imágenes difiere de la nuestra». (Student #5).*

### 3. CONTENT IS NOT CONTEXTUALIZED:

The content shown in the book is not related to students' lives because there are ways of living that they do not relate to their personal life, the book shows an ideal of perfect life. In the book, people look fine; they live in modern cities, they use means of transportation that students do not and they are in places that they can only see in books, movies or internet. It is relevant to mention that the social conditions of the students who answered the survey at school are from rural areas and many of them have not been in a different town or city.

*«Las costumbres nuestras son distintas a las Americanas que son las más visibles en el libro». (Student #6).*

*«Our customs are different from the American ones which are the most observable in the book». (Student #6).*

An aspect that catches students' attention is the way American students appear on the images, that is to say, they are supposed to be at school but they are not wearing a uniform or they can have long hair, Colombian students make comparisons and claim that it is totally different to their reality, they have to wear a uniform to be in the school and boys are not allowed to have long hair.

*«Deberían tomarnos una foto y ponerla al lado para que vean que acá las cosas son diferentes» (Student #5).*

*«They should take us a picture and see that things are different here» (Student #5).*

This is a clear example of the idea that students need to relate what they see when learning to their real life, as it is exposed by López, et al (2009), when students learn a language they need to be engaged not only with the language but within the culture as well. When students learn about the culture of the language, they change their way of thinking and these changes allow them to successfully adapt to the values and traditions of the other culture.

### 4. DISCRIMINATION

Pictures and content in this English textbook reinforce the idea of discriminatory behaviors, because it presents non representative and equitable roles for both men and women.

*«El libro siempre muestra más hombres que mujeres». (Student #7)*

*«The book mainly shows more men than women». (Student #7)*

Students think that the treatment given to women in the book is not fair. The shown images of women correspond to maids, waitress or secretaries and the shown images of men correspond to lawyers, doctors or important executives. Men are well dressed and elegant while women are not. Students

categorize jobs and professions as important and less important, they think that men are more important than women because of the images they see in the book.

*«Los trabajos más representativos los realizan los hombres y las mujeres realizan trabajos poco importantes». (Student #8)*

*«Men work mainly in representative jobs and women work in less important jobs». (Student #8)*

Analyzing these opinions from students and taking into account what Wolfson (1989) describes that when men and women in similar positions are addressed differently, the effect can be discriminatory, it is clear that there is an idea of discrimination between men and women and students perceive how images are being shown with a sense of chauvinism. On the other hand, this use of discriminatory images could disadvantage women because there is a misunderstood thought that there are some tasks that can only be performed by women.

## CONCLUSIONS

This report of a survey examined a unit of a textbook to see if the students felt identified with the content of the book. In consequence, I found that most of the students think that the images displayed through this unit of the book and content, show an ideal model of the American way of life. Thus, this school textbook is designed for teenagers with an idealistic model of life. The authors have not taken into account all the students' needs and likes, for example the students from the towns and rural areas who live in precarious conditions some of them are students who do not have energy at home so they do not watch television much less they have access

to the internet.

Textbooks are social constructions, the authors and publishers are presenting broad messages from a culture different to theirs and learning a language implies learning culture as well. The analysis of the survey shows that this book provides a context which is not related to our students' reality, in other words, it is not contextualized. In this sense, López, M. et al (2009) state that it is of vital importance to integrate the culture of the region in which the students live with learning English. It is relevant for students to be considered as important members in the learning process and teachers need to take into account the students' social background instead of following what the textbooks suggest to do.

It would be relevant for the students to be taught English through their culture, not only the American one. Colombian culture is not included in the textbook as this is from an American publishing house, the names, the places and the situations presented in the textbook are all American which are not relevant for all the students.

Broadly speaking students see an English textbook as a helpful tool for the teacher and for them as well. First of all because they can go back on the activities suggested by the book at home, so they can take advantage of it if they want, the pictures are colorful and the activities are interesting and dynamic. But on the other hand, they do not see themselves represented in the book because it does not show any aspect of their culture so they do not feel identified with its content.

Authors and publishing houses should

consider the way they are designing textbooks for different cultures and include not only the American one but a variety of ethnicities and cultures, besides, they should take into account that they are designing books for learners who are not American but from many parts of the World. Even though, I dare to say that perhaps we, the teachers, are responsible for this kind of reactions from our students because we are the ones who select the textbooks we are going to follow in our classes. Books are a useful tool but not the only one, let us start creating our own material where we can mix language and culture in order to engage our students in the process of learning a language.

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## APPENDIX

### SURVEY

**DIRECTIONS:** This survey intends to collect information from the students about the textbook they follow in their English class. The data will show how the students see themselves reflected on the text.

#### PERSONAL DATA

Age:

Gender:

#### TEXT ANALYSIS

1. Do you follow a textbook in your English class?

YES \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_

2. Do you think that the English textbook is an important tool for learning English?

YES \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What race or ethnic group do you see in the book? Select them:

- American
- Indian
- Black or African
- Asian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. In the above question, if you selected or not the Latino racial category , explain your reasons

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you relate the content of the book to your own life?

Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you feel identified with the characters of the book?

Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you think that there is a balance between the representation of male and female gender in your book?

YES \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Does the text take into account the audience and show the pictures according to your age?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What kind of content would you like to see in your English book?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Do you think that your English textbook stereotype teenager as models to follow?

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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