VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS IN PORTUGUESE PRODUCED ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING COURSEBOOKS

Nicolas Robert Hurst

nrhurst@letras.up.pt
University of Porto (Portugal)

Abstract: This paper examines the role of illustrations in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) coursebooks produced in Portugal. Taking illustrations to be one pilar in the construction of meaning through the representation of culture, the discussion shifts between their use over the last 35 years and their potential as a source of innovation and improvement in this area of ELT materials development. The central issue relates to the need for illustrations to perform something more than a decorative function in ELT coursebooks. Further discussion deals with the general issue of cultural content in language teaching materials, its importance in relation to situating language learning as both meaningful and purposeful. There are clear links themes related to foreign language teaching methodology (the learner-centred approach) and to curriculum development (citizenship education).It is argued that local coursebook publishers and writers should pay closer attention to the importance of cultural representation in language teaching materials, in this case to the use of illustrations, as a way of optimising the long-held influence of coursebooks as significant educational instruments.

Keywords: coursebooks, Cultural, Representation, Illustrations, Improvements

Recent research in the field of coursebooks, while generally scant in respect of focussing on cultural content, has tended to focus on exploring intercultural perspectives in relation to English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology and materials; however, within this body of research, cultural representation has not been an explicit objective of study. But, given the symbiotic relationship between 'culture' and 'language', it is important to highlight the significance, in itself, of cultural representation as a crucial factor in the development of ELT materials. Hall (1997) defines cultural representation as meaning which is constructed through language, discourse and image; this definition affords a direct entry into locally produced ELT coursebooks via their use of dialogues, reading texts and illustrations.

With respect to the use of illustrations in locally produced ELT coursebooks, there is little doubt that the vast majority of illustrations serve merely a decorative purpose; this despite historical changes in the type and style of presentation of the illustrations, culminating in the current almost exclusive use of full colour photographs. Greater credence needs to be placed in the highly visually literate

school population of today: their ability to engage with and respond to visual stimuli is unparalleled in educational history. Research has shown that the addition of an 'active' pictorial element in combination with a text, for example, would particularly assist weaker learners to construct a mental representation as part of their processing of information and ultimately their comprehension (Schnotz & Bannert 2003; Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson 2003). However, easy-to-follow texts, that are highly concrete and have a strong appeal to the learners' interests, are likely to stimulate mental images that benefit cognition without the need for any extra 'external' additions (Carney & Levin 2002). Filling a coursebook with illustrations to make it more 'attractive' (and therefore, motivational) or more marketable is hardly a justification for the plethora of full colour photographs splashed throughout current publications and may, in fact, occupy valuable cognitive processing capacity in an extraneous rather than essential way (Clark & Mayer 2008).

The power of images as an ELT resource has long been recognised, especially in specific areas, such as the teaching of vocabulary, but this undeniably useful 'power' can also be harnessed for a more diverse range of teaching/learning activities; for example, speaking or writing activities might benefit from the use of various different visual forms, such as art, photographs, advertisements, web-based and learner-generated images. The argument that images are fulcral in foreign language (FL) teaching is highly convincing: "[i]f we are to conclude that image is an important factor understanding the meaning of a piece of language, we are grossly underestimating its importance. Image is meaning" (Keddie 2009: 8). Images have the advantage of naturally creating and implying meanings which can be explored through the second language (L2): there is a kind of 'information gap' created, as one learner may have a lot of pre-existing knowledge to bring to bear in interpreting a picture whereas the learner sitting alongside may not. When multiple images are employed, the process is also likely to naturally involve the learners in developing the content of lessons, giving the FL teacher more opportunities to exercise the currently held pedagogical principle of a learner-centred approach.

Close consideration needs to be given to how illustrations are employed in ELT coursebooks. Recent research has shown how well younger English language learners respond to picture books (Mourão 2013), a format where interdependent verbal and pictorial input support the comprehension of a narrative (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). With this format, the learners/readers can react and respond as well interpret and interact. Lado (2012) claims that picture books can help build awareness of the social and cultural foundations of language that may not be apparent to early level learners through more traditional style instruction. Greater emphasis should be placed on a more functional typology of illustrations for coursebooks: making use of interpretational (like a diagram or flow chart), transformational (like mnemonic devices) or organisational illustrations (like maps or pictorial instruction leaflets) rather than just representational illustrations that simply replicate an element of a text or exercise (Levin *et al.* 1987). Illustrations

may be 'active' also in the sense that the learners actually produce something using the images: a labelling exercise or matching images to different elements of a text describing a process. This technique would also favour FL learners with a visual sensory preference and more image-based learning style (Oxford 2003), as well as those who rely more heavily on their visual intelligence (Gardner 1999). Illustrations should be used judiciously with a clear pedagogical intent, regardless of whether the medium is a coursebook or PowerPoint presentation or a web-based exercise: it is the purpose which is important more than the medium.

Both teachers and coursebook writers also need to be visually literate in order to choose the most suitable forms of images for teaching: the images may represent different types of meaning in the same way that verbal texts do. Coursebook writers in Portugal are usually experienced teachers and are 'products' of training courses which predate the current educational interest in developing learners' visual literacy so they may neither have had the experience of nor any theoretical input about this type of approach. With this in mind, it seems unlikely that the materials they produce would seek to include constructivist rather than decorative use of illustrations or encourage learners to activate their visualization skills as a useful learning strategy (Arnold 1999; Arnold *et al.* 2007). Indeed, a brief survey of a recently published coursebook (a 2012 edition of a 7th grade coursebook) revealed only one illustration being used as an active part of the learning process, besides vocabulary picture-word matching tasks.

From a psychological perspective, the correct use of images can provide valuable input and assist in developing learning skills (Neumann & Segarra 2012), but this is by no means a complete 'solution' to the challenges, in relation to cultural representation, facing coursebook writers in Portugal today. At a macro-level, writers and publishers need to incorporate in their locally produced ELT materials a credible interpretation of 'culture' as a social construct which is "a matter of continuously reconstructed identities that range from age-cohort affiliation and sexual orientation, through loyalty to sports teams or involvement in particular interests or hobbies, to participant roles and other situational factors" (Durant & Shepherd 2009: 148). In addition, the diversity of the worldwide English speaking/using community needs to be brought to the forefront in decision-making about 'cultural content' to allow learners to observe and interact with both culturally divergent and convergent contexts of language behaviour (communication); the aim must be to increase levels of intercultural awareness and mutual tolerance. English is perhaps at its most useful in multilingual/multicultural contexts acting as a 'lingua franca' and the type of challenges that these contexts present can only be understood by learners who have benefitted from a teaching-learning approach that comprehends the cultural adaption and hybridization that are characteristic of contemporary, civil societies.

The avoidance of vague over-generalisations and simplistic notions which deny cultural complexity is of crucial importance. For example, 'place' as a criterion of cultural classification is highly selective and misleading, since within both regional and national borders great diversity may exist and the borders themselves may be

permeable to the extent of allowing for widespread differences in behaviours and attitudes to enter (and exit). Today what makes up a 'nation' is entirely debatable and the concept may be best approached as something that is imagined rather than real (Anderson 1983). Limiting the cultural content/connections in coursebooks to the traditional British, American or Commonwealth communities of use negates the transformational power of globalization in the 21st century, a major element of which could be termed de-nationalization or disassembling the national (Sassen 2006). The world in which the English language is located within coursebooks needs to be moved beyond the geographical towards the socio-cultural: to explore how different groups of English users interact within their own group and when in contact with other groups; to take on a Foucauldian perspective and think in terms of how social relations are figured and distributed in space and time as being the key to any 'geography' of human behaviour. In this way, writers and publishers may also guard against including cultural representations which legitimate (un-intentioned) colonial or neo-colonial practices, what Edward Said referred to as "the changing constellation of power, knowledge and geography" (1995: 215), wherein the figurative or imaginative value of a place may be converted and acquire a rational sense.

In particular, coursebook writers and publishers must deal with the critical issue of representation of the 'Other'. Indeed, with the publication by the Ministry of Education and Science on May 13th, 2013, of new curricular objectives (*Metas Curriculares*)[1] for the second and third cycles of ELT in Portugal, the intercultural domain is specifically identified as being one of seven key 'reference domains' which are to be articulated within the teaching of English. The preamble of the document states in relation to the intercultural domain the following: "[i]n an increasingly diverse and complex world, where English is the global language, the contents aim, through descriptions and comparisons of social and cultural backgrounds, to develop in the young an awareness of their own identity and the identity of the Other" (*ibid*. 2013: 5)[2]. Locally produced ELT materials need to embrace the notion of trying to help learners to reflect upon how different cultures experience the world differently and indeed that different cultures may have different notions of conceptualising 'Otherness' and experiencing 'Otherness' (Bizarro 2007). The production of a coursebook is selective and thus non-neutral and subjective by definition, which makes balanced descriptions/representations much harder to achieve (for example, with content which has religious overtones). The aim of promoting wider ideals such as 'openness' or 'tolerance' must be tempered by the knowledge that 'understanding' and 'acceptance' are only part of the process and that issues of power also need to be addressed (Olsson 2010); the culture of the 'Other' cannot be abstracted from the people who constitute and construct that culture if we are to avoid the risk of perpetuating existing hegemonic tendencies (Dias de Carvalho & Fadigas 2007).

The whole issue of 'subject matter content' needs to be brought to the forefront

1   This publication available at http://dge.mec.pt/metascurriculares/index.php?s=directorio&pid=21
2   Translated quotation.

of any discussion of ELT materials; the more recent coursebooks surely bear witness to a greater sensitivity to the issues involved, particularly to do with being more gender and race inclusive, in terms of the population of the coursebooks and the use of non-sexist language. But, at a deeper level, issues to do with social/domestic role stereotyping, marginalisation and visibility/omission still need further attention (Ritchie 2005), especially with respect to the ageism (older people are almost entirely invisible even in these coursebooks). Locally produced ELT materials display a positive evolution in this respect but do not demonstrate a full grasp of how influential cultural representations may be in the formation of learner identities. For example, with the topic of 'jobs', there is evidence of gender and status imbalance in the 'Extreme' series (2006). Coursebook writers can consciously promote gender equity through various linguistic techniques (use of the generic '*they*' or even the abbreviation '*s/he*' which actually forces the female element to be placed first rather than in the traditional pairing of '*he or she*') and through the choice of content (verbal and visual texts) either produced by women or which depict women as heroes or inventors (Lee & Collins 2009). More generally speaking, more opportunities should be attributed in coursebooks to allow learners to develop their awareness of the issues related to gender, age and ethnicity, to explore the diversity that is inherent in today's English speaking world (which includes Portugal) and to understand that the coursebook is only one, limited version of that reality (Yamada 2010).

The 'what' of coursebook content is largely decided by the Portuguese national programme and the 'how much' is constrained by the number of hours allowed for that programme each academic year, but the treatment given to the content is in the hands of the writers and publishers (López Barrios 2008). The treatment should not negate or trivialize elements such as cross-curricular relevance or providing the learners with a cognitive challenge: the aim should not be to just entertain or 'occupy' the learners but rather to provide a spark, to generate FL production employing higher order thinking skills. Portuguese produced ELT coursebook writers should give careful consideration to both explicit and implicit meanings in the context of illustrations. It is not only what the picture shows, but also what the picture says: something which is individually determined by each learner. In this way, the cultural content can take the learners beyond the banal, safe confines of the traditional EFL coursebook into areas that may have been considered too polemical or even taboo in traditional approaches to coursebook design. How culture is represented may be the springboard for a more creative and interactive utilization of the coursebook by both teachers and learners. Content rich materials are more likely to produce language rich responses.

In truth, a largely superficial concern with cultural content on the part of Portuguese ELT materials' producers is evident in their coursebooks, especially in the earlier years; the problematization of cultural representation in FL coursebooks has only recently appeared to be on the agenda of Portuguese policy makers (this despite Cunningsworth pointing out its relevance in his 1984 discussion of checklists and materials evaluations). How much time, effort and resources

should teachers devote to helping learners develop an understanding of their own culture, different world views, different cultural practices, different value systems, and so on, remains far from clear. Materials in Portuguese produced coursebooks still reflect a simplistic view of culture limited to a few facts and cultural trivia to do with fame, food or festivals when more serious issues deserve the learners' attention: "[i]t is particularly important to have young people reflect on the economic strings attached to the export of cultural products and icons, especially concerning the multi-billion dollar entertainment business and to explore less advertised but equally important aspects of the cultural life of other communities" (Barletta Manjarrés 2009: 155). More care is required in the choice and use made of celebrities: they should be treated as opportunities to introduce more serious issues; for example, Brad Pitt has said the reason he is not married to his partner, Angelina Jolie, is that he believes everyone in the USA should have the right to marry the person they want to regardless of gender. This surely is of more importance than his wealth, good looks or latest film. The ELT coursebook is both a provider of knowledge, using various different forms of representation, and a lens through which to view that knowledge. Coursebook writers and publishers need to be much more sensitive to the representations that pervade their 'products' and perhaps give consideration to extending the concept of the 'language reviser' they already employ to include a more rigorous 'check-up' of the cultural content.

Given that "the textbook is one of the most enduring and familiar aspects of classroom life" (Boostrom 2001: 241) and their centrality to most teachers' approach to schooling, the lack of research that focusses specifically on theoretical aspects of ELT coursebook content, design and, particularly production is surprising. It should be acknowledged that there have been improvements in this field since 1974 and some of these improvements may be seen as co-occurring with improvements in the provision of training in FL didactics by Portuguese higher education establishments (Alarcão 2010). However, further progress is still required: to make sure that the coursebooks **connect** with the learners and also allow the learners to **reflect** on what they read/see in the coursebooks. Portuguese produced ELT materials should assist in generating local learners' critical awareness by exploring problems, contradictions and issues in relation to these learners' real world and their actual life experiences (Canagarajah 2005). Locally produced coursebooks should have a clear advantage in this respect, compared to coursebooks produced overseas for the global market, being able to include both the local and the global cultural perspectives: learning materials should reflect a pluricentric attitude to English as an international language (Jenkins 2006). Portuguese coursebook writers have the obligation to make their materials responsive to the local culture, as well as the target or international culture making use of the learners existing knowledge and experiences (Shin *et al.* 2011). Learning implies the personalised construction of meaning(s) by individuals; these meanings are co-constructed by language and culture, the two being inseparable, intermeshed and interactive.

There must be 'flexibility' in the coursebooks to allow this process to flourish: the focus should be on how the coursebook facilitates this kind of learning rather than how easy it is to teach from.

Increasingly, learners of English in Portugal will have access to authentic materials through digital technologies via the Internet that are not coursebook derived and that may enable them to develop for a critical cultural awareness by themselves. Coursebook writers must adapt to this new era and its almost limitless resources in ways that are still hard to imagine, but which represent a huge opportunity in helping learners to learn in the different ways that they learn (Oxford 2003). For example, the availability of online dictionaries could radically reset the lexical range/coverage and level of difficulty of some reading texts; or the instant availability of video clips, that provide a degree of contextualization that no 2D resource can achieve, could reset the way practice activities are set up. However, computer assisted language learning (or CALL) and teaching software have not turned out to be the educational panacea that some authors had predicted (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem 2008), neither have coursebooks disappeared, perhaps because of their symbolic function, as they represent 'stability' and 'structure' (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot 2010), an important epistemological value within the educational system in Portugal which has been subject of much uncertainty and hierarchically imposed change. Coursebook writers in Portugal still have an important role to play; their responsibilities should also include participating in re-training and development sessions so that the creative spark that guides the production of their materials can take account of new insights from research in the field rather than simply perpetuate a strong-selling format, perhaps as an increasingly glossy, teacher-targeted package. In the same light, publishers should also be more willing to evaluate their 'products' using criteria other than sales figures.

Extensive listening and reading (possibly with a component of literary texts), areas which are still neglected even in the 2012 'crop' of 7th grade coursebooks, should be given more prominence as a means of making more explicit the need for FL teachers to deal with up-to-date notions of culture and cultural representation as part of a more multi-dimensional approach to FL teaching and learning. Young people (all people?) are more likely to engage with learning materials that stimulate their senses, their emotions and even their bodies, materials which encourage them to make associations or connections with their own life experiences (their own cultures): the focus should always be on meaning and not the practice of an arbitrary sequence of language forms. The predominant position of local publishers in the Portuguese market should allow for a more localised 'product' which takes on board these insights, broadly speaking to 'humanise' the materials more, to allow more 'space' for personalization and choice. Coursebooks are undoubtedly cost and time effective educational instruments which, through necessity, form the basis of many classes delivered in heavily loaded ELT timetables, but coursebooks should not be taken at 'face value' (i.e., they are just

a means to teach another school subject, a foreign language): they are dynamic, cultural artefacts which should be critically reviewed and evaluated in a much more systematic manner than is currently the case. FL teachers should be trained to become the leading lights in this process, since they are the ones who have to try and achieve successful outcomes working with these materials at the 'chalk face', a fact which had been recognised in Portuguese legislation (*Lei 47/2006, de 28 de Agosto; artigo 2º, f*) but not put into effect.

In consonance with Tomlinson (2012), in his 'state-of-the-art' article on materials development in an international context, it should be stated that FL learning in Portugal needs to be much more exploratory (helping the learners to discover patterns and features in the language) and much more experiential (providing learners with much more experience of the language in use). Portuguese produced coursebooks tend to have an informative focus (language as a system) and an instructional focus (providing practice exercises) which overpowers the more socio-cultural aspects of the learning process mentioned above. The emphasis in Portugal has been on providing materials that local teachers will find 'comfortable' to work with, with respect to their own (historical) training background. The way that ELT coursebooks are produced and published in Portugal allows no opportunity for systematic piloting of the materials to be included in coursebooks. To compensate for this, there need to be review procedures for coursebooks (Amrani 2011) which should include the learners as well as the teachers' reactions so that the development of future coursebooks might be better informed (improved). There is a tendency in Portugal for 'winning formulas' to be replicated (across publishing houses) and repeated (by coursebook writers) even when there is major policy change at national level: the wrapping paper may change but what is inside the parcel remains largely the same. Perhaps by including in the posited review procedures, in addition to learners and teachers, other interested parties (such as academics, parents' associations, other coursebook writers or people from exam boards), it might be possible to manage innovation in Portuguese ELT materials development in a constructive, 'bottom-up' manner. Future academic research should seek to provide frameworks which can help measure the effectiveness of these 'new' materials, an area where the surface has barely been scratched.

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