

The Representation of American Culture in EFL Textbooks in Hungary
Dorina Bálint

Abstract: In today's globalized world, it is gradually becoming more and more important to learn languages. In order to do that effectively, teachers and students need appropriate materials, tools and teaching aids to achieve their language learning goals. That is why textbook analysis has gained more and more importance throughout the past years, textbooks being among the most important teaching and learning aids. It is common knowledge that students are more inclined to acquire a foreign language if they are exposed to materials which interest them. The topics that pupils usually find interesting are cinema, technology, and culture. That is why this paper aims at analysing the various types of American cultural representation in two textbook series that are commonly used in Hungarian schools: the *English File* and the *Pioneer* series. They are analyzed in terms of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension from the perspective of American cultural representation. The findings are the following: although one way or another both series include certain elements of American culture, texts and tasks – in terms of vocabulary and syntax – tend to stay neutral, utilizing vocabulary that may represent all English standard varieties at once. It suggests a lack of cultural diversity, which is a serious shortcoming in terms of pluricentricity, but can be interpreted as an advantage in terms of contextual and grammatical coherence.

Keywords: textbook analysis, English File, Pioneer, American cultural representation, TESOL in Hungary

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1. Introduction

In today's world, languages and foreign language learning in general are becoming more and more important. If we want foreign language acquisition to be successful, and if we want our students to reach a certain level of language competence to be able to communicate their thoughts and feelings, we need appropriate tools, materials, and teaching aids. One of the most significant tools of a teacher is the textbook, which is why so much research has been carried out in the field of textbook analysis, especially EFL textbook analysis. Therefore, this paper's aim is to provide an overview of English as a Foreign Language textbook analysis from a cultural point of view in the Hungarian textbook market and education system.

It is a commonly known fact that language teaching has changed a lot over the history of humanity, and it had been a long process since we reached methods like *CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)* and the *Communicative Approach* of language teaching after decades of the application of methods like the *Grammar Translation method*. Over the years, researchers and teachers realized that students need to be exposed to such contents that they are interested in, so that they acquire a foreign language more successfully (cf. *CLIL*). An obvious way to do that is to introduce materials that include articles, interviews, presentations, etc. of the target culture (which, in this case, is the culture of the target language). Also, students may find some other foreign languages appealing exactly because of their cultural significance, background, and influence. As an example, Italian is one of those languages which attract students for the reason of the target country's cultural history.

However, reaching a certain level of communicative competence is not the only goal of incorporating cultural materials into the curriculum, but it is significant also for students to widen their horizon. It is important to learn about the different cultures of the world, therefore students get to know the world they live in better; how it works, how countries operate, how culture influences several decisions of human beings. This way, students have a higher chance of becoming intellectual, thinking beings, who know the world better, thus can navigate through life in an easier manner, developing and improving their inclination to critical thinking, as well as the realization of what they are interested in, therefore helping them to find their true passion.

These are all among the main reasons why this paper is dealing with EFL textbook analysis by looking at the representation of American culture in textbooks. The analysis is based on two coursebook series which are used in the Hungarian education system: *Pioneer*, and *English File*. Overall, they will be analyzed according to cultural contents through various tasks throughout the whole series (from level A1 to level C1-C2). The analysis has as its aim to be able to compare these textbook series, and to decide which one's editors and creators did a better job at incorporating cultural materials. By the end of this paper, I intend to provide information on which textbook series is more suitable for high school students from the perspective of cultural representation.

2. Literature Review

In their journal article, Alshenqeeti (2019) analyzes the presence of the source culture, target culture, and the international culture in EFL textbooks at public universities in Saudi Arabia (the title of the book in question is "Total English"). The study concludes with the following result:

there is a lack of cultural representation balance in these textbooks. The students are not really interested in the source culture but much more interested in the other two, so there is a lack of balance of these cultures represented in classrooms (Alshenqeeti, 2019). The study also argues that students should be included when deciding about which cultural aspects to study. Moreover, the study showed that students were pleased to see their source culture in textbooks, which should encourage EFL teachers to help students focus on how to utilize English as a foreign language in their own day-to-day lives (Alshenqeeti, 2019). But also, students need to be prepared for our globalized world, and it is possible thanks to English being an internationally important language.

On the other hand, Diana (2021) analyzes EFL textbooks for senior high school students from an Indonesian perspective. The study examines the representation of the source culture, the target culture, and international culture in EFL textbooks – just as Hamza (2019) did –, and the kind of tasks they usually occur in. Mostly, they can be found in reading passages (Diana 2021). The study also examines the presence of different cultures and their importance, analyzes cultures as for predominance, the differences between them, and according to cultural conventions.

Culture is a societal concept that is changing constantly and rapidly, together with the people who represent it. That is the aspect which Fernández Sánchez (2021) emphasizes, highlighting how today's constantly changing and developing world has changed our approach to languages as well. The rapid increase of globalization, the technological advances, the popularity of media and social networks all contributed to the English language becoming a lingua franca. According to the article, this process revealed the interdependence of language and culture (Fernández Sánchez, 2021). So, we need cultural skills to communicate without barriers. This also raises the importance of intercultural competencies (IC). Fernández Sánchez (2021) analyzes three textbooks, and concludes that all three seem to lack a varied and wide offer of deep culture, and an incorporation of IC components.

Hakander (2018) continues to work with the type of theory which puts the emphasis on the analysis of the source culture, target culture, and international culture – just like Hamza (2019) and Diana (2021). Moreover, the author examines the types of cultural representations that are featured in textbooks, and whether they differ in relation to what grade they are designed for, but in a Swedish context. The study concludes that in the textbook series which was examined (*Viewpoints 1, 2 and 3*), the predominant culture was the target culture, namely British and American culture (Hakander, 2018). The author analyzed the topics as well, which typically represent various cultures in textbooks, and the general topics are the following: literature, art, and film. But, according to the author, there is no rational reason to exclude other topics in favor of the above mentioned. Also, the role of the teacher is really important, because they are the ones who have to make the students aware of the cultural information they are presented with (Hakander, 2018).

Another important source for the present discussion is Huber (2023), specifically the chapter titled *Pluricentricity in textbooks*, in which the author analyzes two textbook series that are used in the Hungarian education system: *Pioneer* and *English File* (the 3rd edition of the latter). Although these books have both an American and a British version, the British one is analyzed due to the fact that it is the one available for schools in Hungary (Huber, 2023). The author argues that the fact that there are two different editions of the same series makes the whole process of cultural representation problematic. Instead, there should be a general version of these textbooks, where all varieties are included, since this would be the best and most beneficial for students (Huber, 2023). The three main areas they are examined in are: vocabulary, reading, and listening.

Raigón-Rodríguez (2018) analyzes EFL textbooks in a similar way to Hamza's (2019), Diana's (2021), and Hakander's (2018) works, only in a Spanish context. The main questions are whether the small 'c' culture (as in the values and beliefs, daily routines of a nation; the things that are less visible to people outside of said population) and big 'C' Culture (which includes

easily recognizable events, facts in relation to that culture; these are usually explicitly learned in an EFL environment) are incorporated into these textbooks, and if so, into which skill (Raigón-Rodríguez, 2018). Six textbooks are examined in this study, and the main aspect of analysis is whether cultural content is incorporated in newer editions of textbooks to meet the globalized needs of students. The study argues for the interdependence of language and culture; how culture influences language learning, and how they have to be acquired together to support one another. Culture not only develops language skills, but also helps develop the students' mind, and critical thinking. It is also important when it comes to citizenship education (Raigón-Rodríguez, 2018). According to the author, a more complex view on culture should be implemented into textbooks because at the moment mostly stereotypical behaviors are presented.

Rybková's (2018) research consists of similar aspects of analysis, and the study of intercultural dimension of culture in textbooks, but in the Czech Republic. The author examines the following textbook series: *New Headway*, *English File*, and *Navigate*, which can all be relevant as for the research topic from a Hungarian point of view as well. It is discussed how different cultures are represented in each of these, i.e. the cultures of English-speaking countries, non-English-speaking countries, Asian countries, African countries, and other countries (Rybková, 2018). In conclusion, the author argues that it is dangerous to represent cultures with stereotypes, which is why the creators of these materials are so conscious about avoiding these when it comes to editing textbooks.

Weninger and Kiss (2013) pose a truly new perspective of analysis compared to the above mentioned, more wide-spread techniques: they argue that other aspects of EFL should be analyzed along with the material. The authors discuss that global cultural consciousness and intercultural citizenship are key outcomes of language learning (Weninger and Kiss, 2013). They suggest that it is not just the textbook itself that has to be analyzed but also the relations of students, teachers, and their perspective. So, not only the material, but mostly the activity in class should be examined, because if texts, images, tasks are examined together, it shows their interplay (Weninger and Kiss, 2013). As for semiotic theory, guided semiosis directs students' attention to some but not all details of the material, which makes it guided, and in a sense restricted (Weninger and Kiss, 2018). This paper also argues that culture is mostly used as a "linguistic resource" in textbooks, so cultural connotations are unexamined, which might reinforce stereotypes instead of challenging them.

Weninger (2018) continues their research topic, and moves it forward by proposing a question about whether the real world or an idealized world, which is progressive but students might not even recognize it, should be represented in textbooks. Her question opens the discussion for a very interesting field of research, and puts it up for debate and further examination.

Wickersham (2020) also represents the Swedish point of view of textbook analysis – just like Hakander (2018) did. The author examines international content with a national perspective in EFL textbooks. Also, he studies the surface and deep cultural content, the explicit and implicit content-perspective, and the representation of diversity in textbooks (Wickersham, 2020). The article argues that these materials provide basic information, perspectives, and competencies promoting the development of intercultural communicative competence (Wickersham, 2020). The paper states that these various cultural representations are surface level, objective, neutral cultural contents, and that there is only superficial consideration of diversity and ethnic relations (Wickersham, 2020).

3. Methodology

First and foremost, it is important to clarify that when I use the term 'American', I refer to cultural elements, pieces of information related to the United States of America. When I highlight a different finding, I name it accordingly.

It is worth noting that both textbook series that have been analyzed have a British and an American version as well. On this note, Huber (2023) highlights how disadvantageous it is in terms of the representation of pluricentric languages in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks. Nevertheless, as part of the research, the British versions have been analyzed because these are easily accessible in Hungary and are on the official textbook list of the Hungarian education system, unlike the American ones (Huber, 2023). These two series are the *Pioneer* series (through the levels of *Beginner*, *Elementary*, *Pre-Intermediate*, *Intermediate B1*, *Level B1+*, *Level B2*, *Level C1/C1+*) and the *English File* series (through the levels of *Beginner*, *Elementary*, *Pre-Intermediate*, *Intermediate*, *Upper-Intermediate*, *Advanced*) – the third edition of the latter. Although the third edition of the *English File* series is not the newest one, it is worth looking into since it is still widely used in public education in Hungary, and its volumes were published roughly at the same time as the *Pioneer* series.

The present research is based on the following methodology: the textbooks were analyzed according to three main components of skills and units: vocabulary, reading, and listening comprehension. In terms of vocabulary, I looked through the books and searched for specifically American words, phrases, and terms in a specifically American context. As for reading comprehension, following the methodology of Huber (2023) I analyzed the texts in each textbook, not only those that serve as a reading comprehension task, but those that are part of a writing activity as well. In this case, I looked for the representation of the USA in those texts – in terms of vocabulary and semantics. Furthermore, I analyzed listening comprehension exercises in terms of pronunciation, semantics, and vocabulary in an explicitly American context. In all three aspects, I counted all of the exercises and then I counted how many out of the total contained some kind of a representation of the United States.

4. Discussion: Textbook Analysis

The research findings are presented following the three language learning elements examined: vocabulary, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. In each section, information on both series is provided, as well as a juxtaposition of them in terms of cultural aspects. It is worth mentioning that the following topics are included to introduce cultural elements of the language: films and cinema, books and literature, arts, the world of celebrities, sciences, and interesting facts about our life.

Moreover, this paper shows the same results as Huber (2023) also concluded in his dissertation: as we progress through both series, we encounter gradually more and more cultural content, which is to do with the level of students' comprehension and acquisition.

4.1. Vocabulary

In terms of vocabulary, the results are ambivalent. Both the *Pioneer* and the *English File* series have sections dedicated to the comparison of American and British English, which is a plus, but when it comes to cultural representation, it fails to deliver as it would be expected.

In the *English File* series, there are specific sections throughout the entirety of the series dedicated to conversational use of the language, which is called “Practical English”. Here, students are provided with occasional comparisons of American English vs. British English language use, as in *shop = British English; store = American English (Elementary, p. 43)*. Although it is a nice attempt at incorporating the American standard as well – which is, by the way, at least as widely spoken worldwide as the British variety (Huber, 2023) –, the context in which they are mentioned is often British.

As another example, throughout the series, several topics on American culture are included, but the language of these texts is often “neutral”, which means that the vocabulary used is not predominantly part of one or the other's repertoire. For instance, in the *Intermediate* book of the series, there is an entire text dedicated to Steve Jobs and his career – which is related

to American culture –, but the language is neutral. Moreover, as part of the *Pre-Intermediate* edition, there are often several pictures representing US culture, and there are even various newspaper articles documenting American history, culture, etc. (as the text on page 14, where a text about the election of Obama can be found). Although they are part of the American heritage, the source of these stories is often indicated as: “Adapted from a British newspaper”, which is somewhat contradictory. So, it does not matter whether they include a text on Japanese culture or American history, in a way or another, these texts are always connected to the UK. Furthermore, whenever there is a text about American culture, it is solely culturally related to the USA, but the texts often do not include typically American English vocabulary because, as it has been stated before, the vocabulary of these texts is mostly neutral, not connected to specifically one or the other variety.

As Huber (2023) also included it, the usage of IPA symbols is another significant and interesting finding. In the *English File* series, to help pronunciation, only the British English pronunciations of words and phrases are included, which is a huge shortcoming in terms of pluricentricity.

When it comes to analyzing the *Pioneer* series, the results are not better. It was surprising to see how little amount of cultural content was included in the beginner and elementary editions of these books. It appeared as though they tried to stay as neutral as possible when it came to cultures: several movie posters were about fake, made-up films. However, at the end of every book in the series analyzed, a short section is dedicated to American and British English comparisons. These two varieties are compared on the basis of 1. spelling, 2. grammar and usage, and 3. other, where several other words and phrases are compared according to British and American vocabulary. Although it was great to find such inclusions, these sections were one or two pages in each book, which means that throughout the whole of the book, the usage of various (more than one) dominant varieties was scarce.

4.2. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension analysis is closely related to vocabulary analysis. As it has been mentioned several times before, the inclusion of specifically American cultural content was rare. The representation of British culture is dominant in both series, although it was surprising to see the representation of Canadian culture in the *Pioneer* series – it was as though when they included another culture (other than British), they were inclined to use Canadian materials.

In the *English File* series, American culture is often represented through the topics of movies, arts, books, and sciences. However, sometimes American content only appears in forms of typically American pictures of celebrities, artists, and movies, and usually they appear alongside of other cultures, so rarely, almost never by themselves. A significant advantage is the fact that in most units – in almost all of them, throughout the series – there can be found something USA-related: a text in which the speakers came from the US, a picture of George Clooney and Julia Roberts, a story about Steve Jobs, and so on, so forth. Nevertheless, these texts and tasks lack specifically American cultural terms and phrases. So, when American cultural elements appear, the usage of the British variety is dominant – which, however, can be beneficial in terms of consistency but is a serious drawback when it comes to pluricentricity (Huber, 2023).

In the *Pioneer* series, a similar tendency can be observed, since in these books the representation of American culture is more often in the form of pictures and figures. The language of the reading comprehension tasks always wishes to be more or less neutral, although the British English variety is dominant – in spelling and in grammar. As it has been stated before, the appearance of other cultures (i.e. other than British) shows a preference towards Canadian culture in several of the books – especially the *Beginner* and *Elementary* volumes. However, the analysis also shows that the *Pioneer* books often tend to avoid specificity in terms of cultural diversity, thus, it is not that they exclude American culture but they rather stay neutral as well (trying to represent all cultures at once).

4.3. Listening Comprehension

The listening comprehension tasks are the ones where cultural diversity can be incorporated into the material in the most creative and least problematic way possible. During these tasks, pupils get to know the pronunciation, intonation, grammar, and semantics of various varieties of English, which is a great advantage in terms of pluricentricity. However, in the analyzed textbook series, the difference between grammar and semantics does not appear in the name of coherence (for students to be able to see the distinctions, they are provided with the “extra” materials in various sections, and at the back of the books).

As mentioned previously, in the *English File* series, there are specific sections in between units throughout the entirety of the series dedicated to conversational use of the language, which are called “Practical English” (from the *Beginner* to the *Intermediate* volumes), and “Colloquial English” (in the *Upper-Intermediate* and *Advanced* volumes). In these chapters, students are welcome to watch several videos of an American girl visiting a British boy in the UK (“Practical English”), or read about and listen to interesting stories, texts, interviews on topics regarding culture or sciences (“Colloquial English”). Although the pronunciation of the American English variety is represented and ‘guaranteed’ with each “Practical English” and “Colloquial English” chapter, it is used in neutral or British contexts. According to the findings, there is no listening comprehension task that contains only American speakers of English.

As for the *Pioneer* series audio files, it can be safely stated that the standard British English pronunciation is the dominant one – since the British versions were analyzed. However, the interesting thing is that throughout the levels of the series, the CDs contained different types of audio files (apart from listening comprehension tasks), namely Vocabulary, Reading, Listening, Speaking, Pronunciation, and Intonation. It is a matter of importance, however, that as the level is higher, these aspects are progressively fewer (e.g. while the *Beginners* CD contained all of the above mentioned categories, the *Intermediate B1* contained only three out of the six).

Generally, going through the files, as the level is getting higher, the length of the audio files is also getting longer (e.g. at *Beginner* level the files are one or two minutes long, whereas the files at a *C1/C1+* level might even reach the seven-minute boundary). Analyzing the files, there are a couple of occasions when cultures – other than the British – are mentioned, but clearly the British culture and the standard British variety of English are dominant (it is true for both textbook series). There are some instances where the British and American pronunciations are in juxtaposition – mostly in the Vocabulary parts –, and there are even audios where the speakers clearly speak with a standard American English. And although some other cultures are mentioned as well (e.g. Australia, Canada), they are merely present, and the speakers almost unanimously represent the British variety.

All in all, the conclusion on the *Pioneer* series is that, similarly to the *English File* series, the British variety of English is the dominant one, and the percentage of the American English content (whether it is the cultural context, or simply considering the pronunciation) is almost insignificant compared to the dominance of British English.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the *English File* and *Pioneer* series concluded with the expected results: since in Hungary the British versions are used, the cultural and linguistic aspects of the British variety are undoubtedly dominant. In both series, American culture is often represented through pictures of celebrities, movies, books, and texts about the previously mentioned topics, with sciences and facts completing the list of topics. Although both series include several pictures, texts as representation of American culture, it often does not show in terms of vocabulary, semantics and/or grammar. The reading comprehension tasks – and texts included in writing exercises – often use neutral language, trying to include all varieties possible and not to make distinctions, as well as to stay coherent when it comes to grammar, in which case the British

variety is dominant. Both series include additional material for showing the distinction between British and American English varieties, but these constitute a very small part in each textbook. The representation of American culture in these textbooks appears significantly in listening comprehension tasks, where pupils encounter the pronunciations of several varieties of English, but still in a British context in some form.

In conclusion, the results of this research support the evidence shown in previous papers that cultural diversity is still not represented well enough in textbooks. This research can be brought forward with the examination of the reason European education systems prefer to choose the British versions of textbooks – instead of the American ones –, and also with further research on why there are several editions of these textbooks instead of one, culturally truly diverse and representative coursebook. Moreover, interesting results could be found with interviewing textbook editors and publishers on the importance of cultural representation and diversity in textbooks.

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