Teaching more than English in secondary education

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The issue of including controversial topics in the EFL classroom is not new. However, this comment briefly reviews aspects of textbooks produced in Britain for the general English class in terms of topics and discusses how critical pedagogy could be systematically developed through a negotiated EFL syllabus. The aim is to share what teachers are currently exploring at secondary schools in a part of Argentina.

(Un)controversial coursebooks

For reasons generally attributed to the production and marketing of mainstream coursebooks produced for the general EFL class regardless of where they are used, publishers avoid the inclusion of provocative topics in developing the units of work coursebooks may be divided into. This has produced a set of guidelines summarized as PARSNIP (Gray 2000; Akbari 2008). This acronym stands for the avoidance of topics related to politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, such as communism, capitalism, feminism among others, and pornography.

As Hillyard (2005) points out, when we study the topics material writers offer for the teenage EFL class, there is little controversial material. On the contrary, we find such themes as the family, sport, hobbies, travel, pop culture, festivals from remote countries, which bear no impact on students' lives, fashion, and food, among others. In her own words, 'there is little for adolescents to get their teeth into; there are very few life hooks' (ibid.: 328). This idea of lack of realness, as Leather (2003) puts it in her review of a textbook based on thought-provoking issues and taboos, has led to the belief that textbooks produced for an international audience are bland, and, to put it simply, boring.

Coursebooks are criticized not only for avoiding provoking topics but also for presenting a romantic view of countries such as Britain or the USA (Helgesen 2007; Viney 2007; Masuha, Hann, Yi, and Tomlinson 2008). In an attempt to avoid taboos and issues, material writers opt for selecting themes that are rooted in the British or American culture. However, the portrayal they offer of the target culture is far from being innocent. According to Gray (op. cit.) in his paper about the textbook as a cultural artefact, the target culture seems to uphold values and living standards that are better than those of the student’s culture, leading to the perception that the target culture is superior to the student’s. Even if textbooks do contemplate topics such as poverty, hunger, or even discrimination, they are contextualized in Africa or the Muslim world, creating the idea that poverty or discrimination is nowhere to be found in Europe or the USA.
Consequently, students need to be helped to become more critical of these aspects so as to evaluate the way in which cultures are represented in textbooks used by the international community.

The challenge

This critical view of coursebooks is very much associated with a broader aspect to be considered, EFL pedagogy applied to EFL contexts. Akbari (op. cit.) claims that CP should be given room in the ELT classroom. One of the advantages of CP is that, when teachers and students find international textbooks unappealing, it becomes a liberating force as it empowers practitioners to legitimize their theories of learning a foreign language in their context, having in mind the social matrix that education is part of. In other words, even if coursebooks come packed with their own agenda, teachers need to be aware of the fact that they have the power to create their own agenda, in fact, their own syllabus around topics of interest in their teaching–learning environment. What is more, teachers could use the ready-made contents suggested by the coursebook they have adopted to challenge sociocultural assumptions as well as representations from both the target culture and their own. Why do the poor have to be non-American? Why are upper-class John and Mary from London the only ones who plan holidays in the Caribbean? Do we not also discriminate against immigrants from neighbouring countries in Argentina? Teachers need to be empowered so that they can reject, criticize, and adapt the material they use in order to help their students develop their critical thinking skills. Better still, teachers may eventually create their own material, either as the main source or as a systematically used supplement to their teaching practices.

Our experience

In an attempt to make room for CP in EFL classes at one secondary school in Argentina, teachers have decided to adopt a two-part syllabus. On the one hand, teachers follow a mainstream coursebook for teenagers, which is used on a regular basis. On the other hand, teachers, together with their students, have agreed on a negotiated syllabus in which controversial topics have been included. While teachers suggested topics such as child abuse, gay marriage, drug abuse, discrimination, and immigration, students asked to discuss issues related to psychological disorders, divorce, politics, eating disorders, the Catholic Church, and single parenting among others. This negotiated syllabus, which is covered once a month, has been crystallized in the form of a sourcebook in which teachers have compiled authentic reading and listening material to develop activities aimed at the Argentinian teenage students at state schools in an effort to produce more contextually appropriate material (Block 1991; Peacock 1997). If, for example, gay marriage is an issue students would like to debate, why do we have to set it in a foreign country, when such a topic is currently an issue in Argentinian society?

This exploration is a local initiative and it is not claimed that the same should be carried out everywhere, as the experience is very much rooted in the Argentinian context. So far, students have warmly welcomed the material produced by their own teachers and their motivation has increased as they feel they can use their English to talk about real matters they would like to discuss openly, no matter the language.
References


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