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English Language Teaching Textbooks from Nicaragua and Norway: A Comparative Analysis of the Topics Presented in *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade and Enter 8*

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Abstract

Nicaragua's first official series of textbooks for English as a foreign language (EFL) in secondary schools was made available in 2016. This article presents a comparative analysis of *Secondary English Book*, which is the new Nicaraguan series, and *Enter*, an award-winning Norwegian series for the same age group. I use content analysis to identify the main topics presented in the two textbooks. The findings indicate that, while the Norwegian textbook focuses primarily on English-speaking cultures, the Nicaraguan one limits its topics to the local (Nicaraguan) culture. The Nicaraguan book seems to aim at strengthening the learner's sense of national pride and cultural values. The study also suggests that the two textbooks differ in the way they address the development of the students' moral and civic values and the way they try to motivate the learners to use the target language. I use the notion of "challenging" and "authentic" topics in my discussion of these issues.

Key words: English language teaching textbooks, Textbook analysis, Themes and topics, Secondary school education, English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Resumen

La primera serie oficial de libros para la enseñanza del idioma a nivel secundario se hizo disponible en Nicaragua en el año 2016. Esta investigación presenta un análisis comparativo de *Secondary English Book*, la cual es la nueva serie, y *Enter*, una serie noruega ganadora de premios dirigida al mismo grupo de edad. Mediante análisis de contenido, identifiqué los principales temas presentados en ambos textos. Los resultados indican que, mientras el libro noruego se enfoca principalmente en la cultura de países anglosajones, el libro nicaragüense se limita a la cultura local (nicaragüense). De ese modo, el texto nicaragüense parece apuntar al fortalecimiento del sentido y orgullo nacional del estudiante. El estudio también sugiere que los dos textos difieren en la forma en que abordan el desarrollo de los valores cívicos y morales del estudiante y en como intentan motivarlo a utilizar el idioma extranjero. Uso la noción de temas “retadores” y “auténticos” en mi discusión.

Palabras claves: Libros de texto para la enseñanza del idioma inglés, Análisis de libros de texto, Temas, Escuela secundaria, Inglés como lengua extranjera.

Resumo

A primeira série oficial de livros para o ensino do Inglês como idioma estrangeiro para o nível secundário na Nicarágua foi disponibilizada em 2016. Esta pesquisa apresenta uma análise comparativa do *Secondary English Book*, que é a nova série nicaraguense, e *Enter*, uma série norueguesa ganhadora de prêmios dirigidos à mesma faixa etária. Por meio da análise do conteúdo, identifiquei os principais temas apresentados em ambos os textos. Os resultados indicam que, enquanto o livro norueguês focaliza principalmente a cultura de países anglo-saxões, o livro nicaraguense se limita à cultura local (nicaraguense). Dessa maneira, o texto nicaraguense parece apontar para o fortalecimento do sentido do orgulho nacional e valores culturais no estudante. A pesquisa também sugere que os dois livros didáticos diferem na forma como abordam o desenvolvimento dos valores cívicos e morais dos alunos e na forma como procuram motivá-los para o uso do idioma estrangeiro. Uso as noções de temas “desafiadores” e “auténticos” para discussão dos resultados.

Palavras-chave: Livros de texto para o ensino do idioma Inglês, Análise do livro de texto, Temas, Escola secundária, Inglês como língua estrangeira.

Introduction

Nicaragua's first official series of textbooks for English as a foreign language (EFL) in secondary schools was made available in 2016. In this context, it is interesting to study what choices and decisions the authors have made. The overall purpose of this study

is to discuss the choice of topics in the Nicaraguan textbooks, by comparing it to a Norwegian series. By examining the textbooks through a qualitative content analysis, I want to shed light on the choice of topics in the two textbooks and also to discuss the possible implications of these choices.

There are several reasons why I have chosen textbook topics as the focus of this study. First of all, the topics will impact the students' language proficiency, including aspects such as their range of vocabulary and grammar. These topics may also empower learners to develop everyday skills and values and stimulate them to communicate in the foreign language (Siegel, 2014). My main interest lies in investigating if the topics in the books under study can be said to motivate the learners, to appeal to their interests and to arouse their engagement for learning the English language. In my discussion, I refer to the curricular guidelines in Nicaragua and Norway as well as principles for the selection of topics in English language teaching (ELT) textbooks found in research literature.

The research questions I address in this study are the following:

- Which topics are presented in the two textbook series?
- What are the main similarities and differences?
- How can those similarities and differences be explained?

Background

Textbooks play a fundamental role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (Harmer, 2015; Harwood, 2014; Hurst, 2014; Tomlinson, 2010; Ur, 2012). In many instructional contexts, they constitute the syllabus teachers are expected to follow (Harwood, 2014). In other words, textbooks may provide information about entire courses, as well as detailed materials for individual lessons (Byrd & Schuemann, 2014). For learners, textbooks may provide the major source of contact with the language, together with input provided by the teacher (Richards, 2001). Consequently, they have gained a special status among the vast amounts of possible teaching resources in foreign language classrooms.

Until recently, Nicaraguan secondary schools did not have textbooks specifically written for Nicaraguan learners of English. Instead, schools typically used American textbooks, as I myself experienced, both as a secondary school and a college teacher. Among the most commonly used were the series *Pathways to English* (Allen, Voeller & Robinett, 1984), which was broken down into six levels and used from grade seven to eleven in most public Nicaraguan classrooms. In some other cases, teachers used internationally top-selling textbook series such as *Interchange*, by the well-known textbook writer and scholar Jack C. Richards (1999). This situation changed in 2016,

however, when the Ministry of Education made available new textbooks for the teaching of English as a foreign language, books especially tailored for Nicaraguan learners in public secondary schools.

In Norway, the textbook situation is very different. Textbooks have traditionally played a prominent role in education at all levels (Selander & Skjelbred, 2004). Since nearly all publishing houses of a certain size produce textbooks, school administrators and teachers can choose among a number of books in all subjects, and publishers compete to 'win' the textbook market (al-Badarin & Maagerø, 2007).

The national curricula in Nicaragua and Norway are quite different. However, they both emphasize communicative competence as the main aim for the teaching and learning of English. The Nicaraguan Ministry of Education states that the subject also aims to help the learners express their ideas and opinions in English, and value their own cultural roots (Ministerio de Educación, 2009). In this regard, the curriculum states that the students

will show interest in and respect for the different ethnic, artistic and cultural manifestations of their community, country, region and the world itself, as part of their cultural development (Ministerio de Educación, 2009, p. 5).

Other than this, the Nicaraguan national curriculum offers limited guidelines for the teaching of English in secondary school.

The Norwegian national curriculum states that the main goal is to develop the learners' communicative competence, but English is also presented as a tool for gaining knowledge and personal insight. The subject should present the learners with social, literary and interdisciplinary topics and provide them with knowledge about people, places and events in the English-speaking world. The teaching of English should help promote learners' general education and help them increase their cultural knowledge (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013).

One main difference between the two curricula lies in the fact that the Nicaraguan curriculum highlights the development of local cultural values, while the Norwegian one emphasizes knowledge of the English-speaking world. Moreover, the Norwegian one states the need for students to work with literary and interdisciplinary topics, while the Nicaraguan one does not provide any specific information about topic selection. Both sets of guidelines leave ample room for educators to choose the kinds of topics that learners should be learning about. Naturally, they also leave it up to materials developers and teachers to select topics which learners may find relevant and motivating.

I investigate the new Nicaraguan series entitled *Secondary English Book* (Moraga, 2016) by comparing it to the Norwegian series *Enter* (Diskin et al., 2015). There are several reasons why I do this. Firstly, Norway has a long tradition of producing textbooks exclusively for a Norwegian market (Selander & Skjelbred, 2004). How, then, does

the opportunity to tailor a textbook for learners in a specific country manifest itself? Secondly, it is important for me to compare the very new Nicaraguan series to another locally produced series which is considered to be of high quality. *Enter* is recognized as a model book, as it won the 2016 best learning resource prize, awarded by the BELMA jury (Best European Learning Materials Award) (BELMA, 2016). According to the jury, *Enter* consists of rich material that takes students seriously, by presenting them with “challenging topics”. The jury also states that its topics are varied, relevant and age-appropriate.

ELT textbooks have been criticized for being based on the assumption that one-size-fits all and for presenting “sanitized” content and non-controversial topics (Gray, 2002; Harwood, 2004). This criticism applies, first and foremost, to books produced for a world market. However, textbooks tailored for specific audiences have also been found to provide reductionist and idealized presentations of reality (Bori, 2018). This may certainly make them less than interesting and motivating for students who are exposed to those books (Banegas, 2010; Masuhara, Hann & Tomlinson, 2008).

It has been claimed that textbook topics have been under-investigated, and there have been calls for research into this particular aspect of foreign language education. Siegel (2014, p. 363), for instance, argues that “whilst researchers and practitioners frequently discuss the authenticity of the language in textbooks, the authenticity and usefulness of textbook topics are rarely discussed or evaluated”. Scholars make the point that it is important for language teachers and educators to be aware of and use critically the social and cultural choices in textbooks and other learning materials, if the aim is to transmit to future generations material that is socially significant (Braga García, 2009; Hornberger, 2006). The study of textbook topics might be particularly relevant when the textbooks under consideration are the very first series that are locally produced (Lund, 2010; Lund & Zoughby, 2007). This is where my research aims to make a contribution. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no studies on the new Nicaraguan textbook series.

Theoretical considerations

What is a topic?

“Topics” is used hereafter to refer to the main theme or subject in textbook chapters through which the language is introduced to learners, following Siegel’s definition (Siegel, 2014, p. 364). As already indicated, in addition to providing learners with appropriate and useful language, textbook topics need to follow up the aims in the curricula which focus on the development of the learners’ general education and cultural knowledge. Textbook topics should also, ideally, help motivate the learners for work with the language.

What do English language learners need to learn from ELT textbook topics?

Scholars such as Sawyer (2014) claim that the role of school is to help learners acquire significant knowledge required for “expert adult performance”. She argues that today we live in what many call “a knowledge economy”. In this economy, memorization of facts and procedures is not enough. Learners need to be able to take responsibility for their own, continuing lifelong learning. This knowledge may include facts and procedures, but also deeper understandings which allow them to reason about real world problems. Learners should be able to use this knowledge outside the classroom. Rajala, Kumpulainen, Hilppö, Paananen and Lipponen (2016) point out that children and young people spend considerable time in out-of-school learning settings. They underline how important it is that learning is understood as part of living in different sociocultural contexts, not as something that takes place exclusively in formal education.

My claim is that ELT has a responsibility to follow up perspectives such as those described above. The teaching of the English language is not only concerned with language proficiency, but also with the development of students’ general knowledge and everyday skills (Lund & Zoughby, 2007). It thus follows that textbooks should meet learners’ societal needs (Tomlinson, 2003). Moreover, school textbooks ought to aid the development of the ethical and moral values connected with the duties and obligations of belonging to a community. Learners should be prepared for active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner (Moore, 2013).

Language education and textbooks should contribute to the learner’s general education, regardless of culture or context. Lund and Zoughby (2007, p. 69) put it like this:

(...) foreign language instruction can contribute to a broader educational undertaking than just the development of practical language skills. Young people need to learn more than language. The world needs youngsters with a sound understanding of their own identity and their own values, young people who are also well informed about and open towards a variety of issues in the world around them.

In short, language learners need more than language input. They need relevant input that can help them interact successfully in their local context as well as in the world community. The teaching of English can be an arena for the development of such competences, and textbook topics can help learners move towards this end.

The importance of “challenging topics”

Lasnier (2017), the contact person for the BELMA jury, points to the fact that ELT textbooks usually deal with very conventional and recurring subjects. For this reason, he says, the BELMA jury emphasized the inclusion of “challenging topics” in their evaluation of textbooks in 2016. Through using this term, the jury wished to encourage textbook writers to present original, innovatory and demanding issues that require learners to participate more actively and really engage with the language.

Siegel (2014) uses the term “authentic topics” to refer to the topics that foreign language learners actually talk about in their daily lives, especially in their experiences outside the classroom. She suggests that the choice of textbook topics is of great importance, as relevant and “authentic” topics may facilitate student engagement, willingness to communicate and, ultimately, language learning (Siegel, 2014, p. 363). This statement is supported by Lund (2010), who points to the fact that learners find it more motivating to put in the great effort and commitment that learning a foreign language requires when they are provided with the opportunity to work with materials they find interesting, appropriate, and relevant.

The term “challenging” is defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2017, online version) as “requiring considerable physical or mental effort”, and [...] much time, effort, or careful attention”. Applying the definition to textbook topics, the term “challenging topics” may be understood as topics that require extra mental effort from the learner. Such topics should go beyond the presentation of common issues in ELT textbooks, such as vocabulary about body parts and the learner’s own community, and should aim to help learners develop their critical thinking skills, i.e. judgements of whether something is good, bad, valid, or true (Hornberger, 2006; Tomlinson, 2016).

Knowledge of the world and knowledge about local culture

As we have seen, both the Nicaraguan and the Norwegian national guidelines highlight the need to teach learners about culture. Samovar, Porter and Stefani (1998, p. 36) define culture as:

the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

Their definition gives ample room for interpretation and discussion. Scholars such as Hinkel (2014) make a distinction between *visible* and *invisible* culture. The former is to do with aspects such as literature, history and festivals (often referred to as “big C Culture”), while the latter refers to aspects such as specific beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions and feelings of specific cultural groups (often referred to as “little c culture”).

There are many different ways of portraying culture. However, in foreign language education, the teaching of culture has often been limited to the transmission of information about the people and the “high culture” (big C culture) of the target country (Kramsch, 1993, p. 205). ELT textbooks typically convey information about English-speaking countries (e.g. the UK and the USA). In recent years, some textbooks also present countries where English is used as an international language (Banegas, 2010). As some researchers have pointed out, textbooks need to provide motivation

for the students to get into contact with people from other parts of the world. Lund and Zoughby (2007, p. 207), for example, claim that “the whole point with foreign language learning is to be able to meet, to experience, to see and to learn new things”. In this sense, ELT textbooks should “spur the learners’ interest and curiosity” towards other cultures.

It is natural to think that locally produced textbooks often focus on the promotion of national cultural topics, rather than global ones. Hornberger (2006) argues for relevant and contextualized content in textbooks and other learning materials that goes beyond language teaching. She asserts that such content can constitute “a strong support for the learner or user of the texts”, as relevant materials can help the learners incorporate the issues they learn about in their own experiences (Hornberger, 2006, p. 17). Lund and Zoughy (2007, p. 208) concur with Hornberger (2006), in their analysis of ELT textbooks for Palestinian students. They found that these textbooks helped learners speak about their own everyday experience and background, something which is highly relevant for any user of a language.

Materials and method

The scope of the materials

This study is a qualitative comparison of two textbooks; one from Nicaragua (*Secondary English Book*) and one from Norway (*Enter*). For purposes of comparison, I chose textbooks from the same grade (8th grade) that were written at about the same time. *Secondary English Book* consists of only a learner’s book for each grade. *Enter* consists of a learner’s book, a teacher’s book, an additional resource book called *Basic Skills*, and a supporting website. For purposes of this research, only the learner’s book will be analyzed.

The books are divided in units/chapters, and several topics can be found in each unit/chapter. For instance, as we will see, the final unit of the Nicaraguan textbook is called “Health”. Within that unit, we find the topic of “Sexually transmitted infections”. Likewise, unit six in the Norwegian book, “Science”, features the topic of “Inventions”. In order to provide a more thorough description of each topic, I will also refer to the kinds of texts that are featured in each unit, and what the learners are expected to do with the text, with a main focus on the learning outcomes that seem to be expected.

The analytical procedures

The comparative study of the textbook series builds on content analysis. This research method is defined as a strict and systematic set of procedures for the rigorous analysis, examination, and verification of the contents of written data. This method is considered effective for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified

characteristics of messages. Content analysis is also useful for examining trends and patterns in documents, reducing large data into meaningful categories (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017).

I chose to adopt a qualitative focus of content analysis, since this focus is concerned with meaning and interpretation (Schreier, 2012). Moreover, in qualitative methods of textbook analysis, depth presides over breadth. Consequently, the results tend to be richer with regard to understanding what information is presented in a text (Pingel, 2010). This is the main purpose of my study; to investigate *what* is included in the two textbooks and *why*.

The analytical procedures in this study were the following. First, I read the selected material, in order to obtain an overview of its structure and components. Then, I identified the main topics unit by unit. This was done by looking for key words and key themes in the units. I grouped the topics in three categories which emerged from the principles for topic selection identified in the Theory section. This was done in accordance to Krippendorff (2004, p. 105), who states that “categorical distinctions can also result from a theory that has been adopted for an analysis”. The categories are:

- a) Knowledge of the world and knowledge about the local culture
- b) Helping learners become responsible citizens
- c) Motivating learners to use the English language

I then used these categories in my comparison of the topics in the two textbook series and in my discussion of how the textbook authors seem to have interpreted and followed up the guidelines established by the national curricula.

My study has obvious limitations. Qualitative content analysis helps understand what information is presented in a text. However, the findings cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can provide (Pingel, 2010). My study covers the analysis of two textbooks that are both part of a larger series. For this reason, the results cannot be generalized; it cannot be claimed that the findings reflect the content of the other textbooks of the series. However, the findings can contribute to providing insight into the principles that seem to govern the choices made by the textbook authors.

Analysis of the topics presented in the two series

The topics in Secondary English Book – 8th Grade

Table 1 gives an overview of the main units/chapters along with the main topics presented in the two textbook series.

Unit/ Chapter	<i>Secondary English Book – 8th Grade</i>	The topics	<i>Enter 8</i>	The topics
1	Descriptions	Personal information, family members, and parts of the city or town	A fresh start	School life (e.g. uniforms, school subjects, schedule, etc.)
2	National identity	Nicaraguan culture, Nicaraguan national symbols, Central American countries and nationalities, Indigenous people in Nicaragua, tourism in Nicaragua	Heroes	Superheroes (e.g. Spiderman, Batman and Robin Hood) and terrorist attacks
3	Food	Food groups, currencies and prices, household activities	Britain	The geographical location of Britain, British foods and drinks, multiculturalism in Britain
4	Clothes	Clothing items, shopping for clothes	Action	Sports and games
5	Leisure time	Sports and games, Nicaraguan celebrations	Disasters	Natural disasters
6	Health	Environmental education, littering, illnesses, sexually transmitted infections	Science	Famous inventions around the world, illnesses
7	-		India	India, basic information

Table 1: Overview of the units/chapters and topics presented in the two textbooks.

The first unit in *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade*, which is called “Descriptions”, shows the learner how to introduce him- or herself, “in order to meet more people and make new friends”, as the book states (Moraga, 2016, p. 2). Here, the learner is introduced to basic personal information, vocabulary about family members, places in a city or town, and several examples of descriptions of people and places.

Unit 2, “National identity”, focuses on instructing learners about their own country and culture. It presents the names of Central American countries and their respective capital cities. It presents detailed information about the country’s flag, as well as its national bird, tree and flower. The unit also features factual information about indigenous people of the Pacific region and the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, as well as information about traditional dances, costumes, and tourism. The main aim of the whole unit is summarized as follows:

As Nicaraguans, we should have loyalty and respect for our national symbols as signs of patriotism. Because tourism is developing in Nicaragua, it is necessary and important to know about our symbols in a foreign language, English (Moraga, 2016, p. 30).

The third unit, which is called “Food”, gives information about typical Nicaraguan food and food groups. The aim of this topic is to show learners how Nicaraguan foods and drinks are “representative of our diversity” (Moraga, 2016, p. 58). The unit also informs learners about prices and currencies, and especially about their own currency, the Cordoba. In addition, the unit has information about household activities, such as cleaning, cooking and doing the washing up.

Unit Four, “Clothes”, starts by introducing the names of common clothing items, for both boys and girls. Moreover, it presents the learner with basic vocabulary and structures

that are important when shopping for clothes. The topic is developed through visual images of clothing items, dialogues and reading passages

The fifth unit, called “Leisure Time”, presents information about sports, as well as famous Nicaraguan and other Latin American athletes. It also contains some information about games, such as ping-pong and chess. Other aspects of Nicaraguan life, such as celebrations (e.g. Independence day, Mother’s day, etc.) are also covered.

Finally, the sixth unit, “Health”, starts by introducing the learner to a brief glossary of words related to environmental education. Here, substantial information is given about the importance of protecting one’s country, and special emphasis is given to the problematic issue of littering among Nicaraguans. The unit also presents vocabulary about body parts and common illnesses, as well as common medicines used in Nicaraguan society. The unit concludes with information about AIDS and other serious diseases.

The texts and activities

The topics in *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade* are presented through a variety of texts and activities. The learners are expected to work with reading passages, charts and dialogs, visual images and maps (especially in unit 2) which they have to discuss with a partner. In addition to this, the activities ask learners to describe, complete and match information. Learners are also given crosswords, which they must solve independently or with a partner.

The topics in Enter 8

Enter 8 opens with a unit called “A Fresh Start”. This unit offers the learner information about objects, people and activities in secondary schools. The unit introduces vocabulary and structures which learners can use to present themselves and introduce others, and they learn how to describe everyday life at school. The main topic deals with subjects such as time, school subjects and school uniforms.

The second unit, which is called “Heroes”, helps the learner acquire language related to heroes, real or imaginary. The unit mainly consists of information about American and British characters such as Captain America, Spiderman, Batman and Robin Hood. Terrorist attacks is also an important topic in this unit: this part mainly deals with the Twin Towers attack in the United States in 2001, and it highlights the role of firemen as “real” heroes. However, the unit also features information about the race for the South Pole, in which several Norwegians took part (Diskin et al., 2015, pp. 60-64). Naturally, these topics are presented by way of colorful visual images, reading passages and extracts from newspapers.

As its name suggests, Unit Three, “Britain”, mainly discusses aspects of Britain and British culture. The unit shows where Great Britain is located, provides information

about typical British food and drink, and helps the learners understand why Britain is a multicultural society. The textbook explains that “Britain is not a large country in size. This small country has influenced the world through language, music, politics, and in many other areas” (Diskin et al., 2015, p. 70). As expected in a unit dealing with geographical information, the topics are presented through maps, flags and visual images of tourist sights, but there are also reading passages.

The fourth unit, which is called “Action”, helps the students learn about different sports and games. Moreover, it features information about popular films, such as *The Karate Kid*. The topics are developed through visual images, extracts from films and a board game called “On Your Marks” (Diskin et al., 2015, pp. 124,125).

Unit Five, “Disasters”, gives factual information about record-breaking natural disasters from different countries, across different continents. The learners can read about volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and tsunamis. The unit features extracts from international stories, books and newspapers. Examples of these extracts are *The Kick Off* by Dan Freedman and *Titanic: The Unsinkable Ship* (Diskin et al., 2015, pp. 158-160; 162-166).

The sixth unit, “Science”, provides information about famous inventions from around the world. It also describes some common illnesses and symptoms, as well as first-aid measures, in order to “keep someone alive until an ambulance arrives” (Diskin et al., 2015, p. 176), or to keep themselves safe. In addition to this, it shows the learner how to present statistical information through graphs and diagrams. This is related to math as a school subject.

Finally, the seventh unit, “India”, presents information about this country, such as Indian history and culture, main cities and famous people. Several pages are devoted to Mahatma Gandhi, a central person in Indian history, and Ganesha, a popular Indian goddess. These pages are filled with large visual images and reading passages.

The texts and activities

Enter 8 contains a variety of texts for reading as well as images and extracts from novels, magazines or newspapers. The learners are expected to read and to study and then analyze and discuss what they have read and looked at. They also get the opportunity to play board games and do quizzes.

The main similarities and differences

Knowledge of the world and knowledge about the local culture

The two textbooks have significant differences in their selection of topics. *Enter 8* is mainly dedicated to presenting information about the English-speaking world. The book has two whole chapters that discuss different aspects of Britain (chapter 3) and the

United States (chapter 2). Moreover, one chapter deals with India (chapter 7), a former British colony. The topics cover aspects of these countries such as their population, food, fashion, languages, history, religions, famous people and heroes (visible aspects of culture).

There is no trace of this tradition in *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade*, which mainly focuses on Nicaraguan culture and identity and, to a lesser extent, other Central American countries. Throughout the book there are many examples of this, as the learners read about issues such as national symbols, ethnic groups, and tourism. Such aspects are instances of visible culture (Hinkel, 2014). However, the book also addresses national values, gender equality and serious illnesses and how they should be viewed in society. Those topics refer to instances of invisible culture (Hinkel, 2014), and it can be argued that they represent the kind of “challenging” and “authentic” topics mentioned earlier.

The topics of *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade* seem to be chosen primarily in order to aid the development of the learners’ sense of national identity and pride (invisible aspects of culture), in correspondence with the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education’s aims for the teaching of English (Ministerio de Educación, 2009). We find a clear example of this in the second unit, where the topic deals with nationalities. Here the learner is presented to a short dialogue. The text producers start the dialogue with the statement and question: “You talk like a Nicaraguan. Are you a Nicaraguan?”, and follow up with this answer: “Yes, I am. I am proudly Nicaraguan”.

Enter 8 refers to the learners’ own culture only to a limited extent. One example of this can be found in the third unit, “Heroes”, through a reading passage called “The Race for the South Pole” (Diskin et al., 2015, pp. 60-64), which informs the learner about Roald Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole. This is an example of visible, big C culture (see Hinkel, 2014). No topics in *Enter* can be said to deal with Norwegian “invisible” culture.

Helping learners become responsible citizens

Secondary English Book – 8th Grade features topics that are clearly designed to help learners develop moral and civic values. One example of this can be found in the second unit of the book, which deals with environmental education and features the following untitled poem:

Nicaragua is our home.
I promise to throw my trash away,
and keep it clean every day.
I will respect the water and the land,
and protect it with my two hands.
Young and old, we all need to care,
because Nicaragua is our home to share
(Moraga, 2016, p. 140).

Enter 8 does not address topics which seem to directly aid the development of the learners' civic values. However, it contains topics that have to do with the learners as responsible citizens. The sixth unit, "Science", for example, deals with illnesses. The book presents vocabulary and information about common infections, for example a cold, a cough, a headache, etc. Moreover, it addresses "First aid" as a topic, with the intention of giving the learner tools to help others in case of an accident or an emergency.

The Nicaraguan book discusses also illnesses as a topic. It defines the term *sexually transmitted infections* and encourages learners to go to the hospital if they suspect they may have one of those infections. The book includes recommendations such as "Take care of yourself always. Be faithful to your partner and use condoms. The most effective way to prevent infection is abstinence" (Moraga, 2016, p. 157). HIV is also addressed as a serious illness among the Nicaraguan population. The following dialogue is an example of this:

- A: What does HIV stand for?
B: It stands for human immunodeficiency virus.
B: What's that?
A: It's the virus that causes AIDS. It has no cure.
B: Wow! That's scary!
(Moraga, 2016, p. 158).

This topic, then, informs the readers about the serious consequences of sexually transmitted illnesses. Clearly, issues such as HIV and other sexually transmitted infections are more challenging than common everyday infections, and it can be argued that the Nicaraguan textbook here presents more potentially "controversial" issues than the Norwegian one.

Motivating the learners to use the English language

It seems obvious that *Enter 8* intends to both entertain and appeal to the age group and, thus, motivate learners to use the language inside and outside the classroom. The units that deal with popular culture such as Spiderman and Karate kid are typical examples of this. The book also includes information about tourist sights in Britain (Chapter 3), cheerleaders, and the popular film *The Karate Kid*, which was released in 2010. In this sense, the textbook authors seem to have taken seriously the task of catching the learners' attention. Moreover, the intention might be to motivate the learner to explore the world of film characters on the Internet or television and practice the target language in out-of-school settings.

Enter 8 also seems to appeal to the learners' interest when it presents science-related topics such as inventions (e.g. computers, the snowmobile, the television, etc.). Such topics may be interesting and motivating for learners who were born in the so-called

“digital era” (see Erstad, 2005). In the Nicaraguan textbook, the authors also try to appeal to the learners’ interest. Here, the topics are related to baseball, soccer and tourism. Baseball and soccer, the most popular sports in Nicaragua, and Nicaraguan tourist sights get extensive coverage in the book.

Discussion

There are clear differences between the Nicaraguan and Norwegian textbook in terms of topics. Whereas the Nicaraguan textbook deals primarily with the local culture, the Norwegian textbook focuses on the English-speaking world. Moreover, the two textbooks differ in the way they address the development of the students’ moral and civic values and the way they might motivate the learners to use the target language. In this section, I will contextualize and discuss some of the major differences. Central to my discussion is a consideration of the inclusion of “authentic” and “challenging” topics. I argue that by discussing this particular aspect, I will help shed light on how the textbooks aim to help learners become responsible citizens, and to help them use the language inside and outside the classroom.

Knowledge of the world and knowledge about the local culture

Why does the Norwegian textbook choose to focus more on English-speaking cultures? Firstly, the national curriculum requires that it does so (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013). Norwegians have close historical and cultural ties with Great Britain and the USA. Through popular culture, children are also exposed to cultural expressions along with considerable language input. The English language has a central position in Norwegian society, and this is valued by the Norwegian Ministry of Education. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that *Enter 8* intends to link up with issues and topics that learners are already familiar with, and the kind of English they meet in their everyday lives. This concurs with previous findings, such as Lund’s study (2007) of another Norwegian series of textbooks for eight grade, *New Flight 8*.

However, by not focusing on their local culture, *Enter 8* can be said to deprive the Norwegian learners of the opportunity to reflect on local issues, and to develop the skills required to be able to communicate about their own situation in English (McKay, 2003). As Lund and Zoughy (2007, p. 208) put it: “Being able to speak and write about one’s own background and everyday life is, of course, highly relevant for any user of a foreign language”.

The main reason for including “local” rather than “international” topics in *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade*, seems to be the objective of strengthening the learner’s Nicaraguan identity. This objective follows the guidelines of the national curriculum (Ministerio de Educación, 2009). The topics in the Nicaraguan textbook aim to help the learners to love, respect and take care of their country, to respect others and to be

good citizens. This is not very surprising, given that Nicaragua is a developing country which is still in an era of nation building. Moreover, it is a country which does not have much teaching material that assists this aim. This finding concurs with the findings of Lund's study (2010), where she discovered that the first official series for the teaching of English in Namibia was produced primarily in order to help build national identity and national pride.

Nicaragua has traditionally struggled with foreign intervention, especially from Spain during the colonization period, and from the USA in more recent times (see Maagerø & Torrez, 2015; Zelaya, 2015; Zeledón, 2010). This has brought about political discord, and people in Nicaragua do not always have a positive image of these particular countries. Something similar can be said about the way in which the inhabitants of Nicaragua's Caribbean region think about Great Britain. Perhaps the decision of the authors to not focus on the USA or the UK can be explained by their reluctance to touch on ideological or politically controversial issues.

However, by not focusing on cultures of English-speaking or other countries, the students may lose the opportunity to reflect on more global issues. This situation is, according to some scholars, not a very desirable one, as students may also fail to develop the skills required to be able to communicate with people from other parts of the world (Lund, 2010).

Helping learners become responsible citizens

In Nicaragua, the development of national pride may be seen as a prerequisite for becoming a responsible citizen. In addition, *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade*, instructs the learners to take care of the environment and, particularly, to not litter. Most importantly, the book covers sexually transmitted infections. It is interesting to note that this kind of information is presented to eight-grade learners, i.e. adolescents of 13 and 14 years of age, and that these are seen as potential victims of this and other social problems (see Tórréz & Maagerø, 2016; Maagerø & Tórréz, 2015; Maagerø & Zelaya, 2012). When the textbook mentions the importance of faithfulness to one's partner and the use of a condom we see a clear intention to contribute to the students' moral upbringing.

It may seem that *Enter 8* focuses on the development of the learners' civic and ethical skills only to a limited degree. It can be argued, however, that by reading about dramatic episodes in world history such as devastating natural disasters and terrorist attacks, learners can think about the current world situation and reflect on how they can protect themselves or contribute to a better and safer world.

Motivating learners to use English

Secondary English Book – 8th Grade is mostly limited to presenting factual, non-controversial, information about Nicaragua and its visible culture. Throughout the book

we find informative texts that provide a positive picture of Nicaragua and its culture. Everyday problems and challenges such as unemployment, political diversity and social injustice are not dealt with. Apart from the texts that cover environmental issues and sexually transmitted infections, then, the contents of the book must be said to contribute to one main aim: to promote national identity and pride. Whether or not this content is motivating for the learners, seems to be of less importance.

Enter 8, on the other hand, clearly aims to appeal to the learners' interests. The book presents age-relevant information and activities which encourage them to relate personally to the material. For example, learners are asked to read about different popular cultural expressions and to express their opinions of what they read. They are also required to discuss with a partner what they would do in specific situations, for instance in a terrorist attack such as the 9/11 one in the US. All these activities seem to contribute to the overall aim of the book: to help students link up their previous knowledge and their own experiences with the topics they are presented for in the book.

“Authentic” and “challenging” topics

Both textbooks must be said to contain an ample number of “authentic” topics, namely topics that foreign language learners actually talk about in their daily lives and in their experiences outside the classroom (Siegel, 2014). *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade* focuses on basic knowledge about Nicaragua. In trying to promote national pride, it emphasizes positive aspects of Nicaraguan culture. It provides the learners with language they can use in everyday situations, it teaches life skills, and it does not shy away from touching upon controversial issues such as sexually transmitted diseases. All of these topics must be seen as highly relevant for the learners and their everyday communication practices.

The authors of *Enter 8* have also, clearly, wanted to include topics which the learners will experience as relevant and “authentic”. There are texts and images related to the learners' own school day and to their experiences with sports and games. Foreign countries are, to some extent, presented by way of topics the learners probably know about already, such as British tourist destinations and the terrorist attack in New York. The most conspicuous attempt to link up with the learners' own interests is the emphasis that *Enter 8* places on different expressions of popular culture.

However, it could be questioned whether the topics in *Enter 8* really are “challenging” for the learners, the way the BELMA jury claims. Topics such as terrorism and disasters are, of course, highly relevant. Still, it is probably not as challenging for Norwegian learners to read about problems in distant countries as it would be to read about challenging issues in their own country. As we have seen, *Enter 8* does not include such topics. There is also a lack of topics related to aspects of “invisible culture”, topics which could have challenged the learners to consider their own practices, beliefs and values in

relation to those of others. In other words, the notion of “challenging”, as implied in the BELMA jury’s comments may simply refer to topics that are not boring for students, topics which are intended to catch their attention and motivate for their engagement with the language.

Concluding remarks

This study investigated the main topics in two series of ELT textbooks, used in Nicaragua and Norway. The idea was to shed light on the choices that have been made as well as on the choices that could have been made in the two countries. The main findings indicate that the two textbooks differ considerably in their presentation of topics. While the Norwegian textbook focuses primarily on the English-speaking world, the Nicaraguan one limits its topics to presenting the national culture.

The study also suggests that the two textbooks differ in the way they address the development of the students’ moral and civic values, and the way they might motivate the learners to use and to work with the target language.

Topics in ELT textbooks may have an impact on the student’s learning, as they may contribute to the development of general skills and stimulate them to use language inside and outside the classroom (Siegel, 2014). For this reason, I have identified and discussed the differences between the topics in the two books. I believe that my discussion can help text producers and publishers from both countries balance their contents in future revisions or publications of their books.

Although this analysis was limited to two textbooks from two series of books, I would argue that the eighth grade textbooks actually provide a good picture of the tendencies in the series as a whole. All in all, *Enter 8* and *Secondary English Book – 8th Grade* represent two different approaches to selecting topics. These differences point to important issues that perhaps should be given more attention in the development of future textbooks in Nicaragua and Norway.

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