

Chapter 16

ELT materials and children's rights: Gender, agency and citizenship education²⁷

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The path I have followed

I have a B.A. in Education, with a major in English and Spanish, from the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional in Bogotá-Colombia. I also have an M.A. in Applied Linguistics for Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá, Colombia. I am currently working as a teacher in the B.A in Foreign Languages program at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá.

In recent years I have taught research and pedagogy to pre-service EFL teachers and as a result, my research has focused on the identities of EFL pre and in-service teachers, bilingualism and discourse analysis.

The start

Since the issuance of the United Nations Convention on Children's Rights in 1989, the place of children in society has gone through a major change. The new approach treats children as active subjects, with minds of their own and a specific role in society, not as mere objects who need to be protected.

²⁷ This chapter draws on my thesis for the M.A in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia) in 2011, "Children as Subjects with Rights: Discursive Strategies in EFL Colombian Textbooks for Children".

With that in mind, I decided to analyze a series of Colombian textbooks for teaching English to primary school students from a critical discourse analysis perspective (Van Dijk, 1993) in order to discuss the way the material portrays children and their discourses about children as subjects with rights.

I was motivated by reports from the UNICEF (2010) and the Bogotá newspaper *El Tiempo* whose conclusions stated that Colombian children were being silenced and discriminated by society. The purpose of my study was to determine the extent to which Colombian English textbooks were supporting the new concept of children as subjects with right. From the evidence of the textbooks, I found that children's enjoyment of some values and rights was acknowledged but they are still restricted by a Colombian monoculture that intends to homogenize. Judging by the activities and illustrations in the textbooks, there are limited opportunities for children to actively participate in society. The textbooks employ three discourses. The first, which deals with gender and race, upholds the ideal of equity and diversity but might have included more references to ethnic minorities or young parents, in order to avoid a homogenized view of society (Soler, 2006). The second, which deals with children's rights, acknowledges that they are active subjects of their own development, capable of acquiring knowledge and becoming active citizens (Pineda et al., 2009), yet the activities in the textbooks offered few opportunities for them to participate in society beyond providing referential information. The third, which uses short stories, examines some aspects of the agency and value systems of children and seeks to make them aware that they are active subjects with rights and have/hold duties as citizens.

What I became aware of

The study led to three main findings:

The materials used in the classroom should not be taken for granted

One of the most profitable branches of the ELT sector are educational materials, mainly textbooks. This means that publishers expect to make money from them and use certain techniques of marketing. They import Western-oriented contents which rely on stereotypes of the Third World and a standardization of correct English which reflect a colonial attitude (Motha, 2014).

As language teachers, we tend to rely on those imported contents and rarely question them (Appleby, 2010), instead of appreciating the value of local bodies of knowledge and discourses. It is clear that these textbooks do not meet everyone's needs (Azarnoosh et. al, 2016), since diversity is part of humanity and, of course, of a classroom. It is not easy to find a reason why we teachers unquestioningly accept their contents: perhaps we are afraid of being judgemental. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that the idea that teachers are mere performers or technicians has harmed our approach to educational policies, curricula and models. Indeed, I agree with Giroux (2001) when he says that teachers should be transformative intellectuals who act as creators and agents of change. One way for us to challenge the hidden messages of these textbooks is to be more sensitive to the needs of our community by analyzing (Azarnoosh et al., 2016) the relevance of such materials to the purposes of learning and teaching, for example, promoting the right to equality and non-discrimination of every gender or race.

Teachers need to understand themselves and their students differently

The discrepancy between the ideals of policies which only remain on paper and what we do and think as citizens has become widespread. This especially applies to pronouncements that children are subjects with rights, since the situation may be quite different when we are actually teaching them. In general, children are treated as passive subjects in our classrooms, ones who need to be filled with the knowledge dictated by the materials, curricula and policies, with the persistent use of traditional teaching methods in the classroom.

I understand that certain factors, apart from our approach to teaching – like the emotional intelligence of children, pressure from parents and administrators and a limited access to resources - might have an impact on the way we see our students and ourselves as teachers. Nevertheless, the choice of how to address the contents included in textbooks and the knowledge is still mine.

According to Matsuda (2012), the current use of English as an international language requires an approach to English which includes local social and cultural values. Although such textbooks mostly depict children who are dependent, homogeneous and unreal, and are full of colonial discourses, it is important that we stick to our role as the producers of content, and are

strong-willed enough to appreciate and disseminate local discourses and bodies of knowledge which also avoid gender stereotypes (Appleby, 2010); not forgetting to regard our students as citizens capable of making decisions and worth listening to.

Citizenship education might be the path

An unstoppable wave of discrimination, intolerance, aggressiveness and standardization of the way people see the world has recently been spreading around the world, and Colombia has not been the exception, despite local policies acknowledge/recognize/state this county as multicultural. By showing how the textbooks presented a mostly homogenized, heteronormative and monocultural world to students, I confirmed the lack in Colombia of local realities in the discourses taught at our schools. Even the idea that English is the key to the future (Appleby, 2010) which has been implanted in our minds continues to strengthen an inequitable society which neglects a diversity of local values. Now that our country has entered the post-conflict stage (though there are still doubts about the full implementation of the peace agreements), there is more and more of a need for an approach to teaching which rests on more plural and equitable discourses which are also free from gender stereotypes.

Therefore, citizenship education (CE) may be one possibility for giving our educational materials, policies and curricula a more democratic spirit. CE is meant to teach citizens that they have agency and are empowered persons who take actions to defend human rights and democracy (Albanesi, 2018). Some may believe that including CE in our curricula will be difficult or even impossible. I understand that this might be due to the fear of change which constantly justifies maintaining the status quo in education, but if we do not take risks, things will remain as they are. As Albert Einstein once said, “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results”. Well, by educating people to be good citizens, we form reflective and assertive human beings who are able to communicate with each other and construct, despite differences of race, gender, beliefs and economic and social backgrounds. Actually, CE would be an opportunity to open the minds of all the actors in education, since such initiatives require unlearning what has been learnt before. CE proposes ideas and practices that would overcome the current challenges in the classroom and change the old-fashioned models now found in schools (Albanesi, 2018). Finally, CE

may serve to close the gap between knowledge and action (Rios, Flores & Herrera, 2018), a major problem in our society.

The possible implications of these findings

From my study of children as subjects with rights in EFL textbooks, I conclude that:

- Colombian researchers should pay closer attention to the gender focus and materials used in our classes.
- The experience of language teachers as textbooks' authors/writers might enlighten quests/ reflections on the processes, requirements, pedagogical guidelines and gender-based discourses requested by the publishing houses to comprehend the dynamics behind the creation of the contents of those textbooks.
- Citizenship education should be taught in language classes, but from what I have seen of the studies of this subject, more research needs to be done and such courses should include instruction on education for peace and sexual rights.
- To throw more light on the contents of the textbooks pre-service and in-service teachers use, analyses of their discourses in EFL should be made, in order to understand the materials and the agency or subordination of teachers.

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