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Cultural Content in EFL Textbooks

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Abstract

Investigating the content of textbooks is not at all uncommon in the field of EFL research. However, in recent years, analysing the cultural content of textbooks has been of growing interest. This spike in interest could be an effect of the societies of today being increasingly globalised, which also means that intercultural encounters are happening more frequently than ever before. Culture being a part of the EFL curriculum merits concern for students' development of intercultural competence, which is also emphasised by the CEFR (2009) and the Swedish Agency of Education (Skolverket, 2011a). Seeing that Swedish EFL teachers in an investigation (Skolverket, 2006) agreed or partially agreed with the claim of textbooks guiding their teaching too much, the impact of textbooks is relevant to explore. Thus, this literature review aims to examine (1) what cultural content exists, (2) how it is represented and (3) what possible effects the cultural content might have on learners' intercultural competence. This review will begin by providing relevant definitions as well as background information on textbooks and the connection between culture and language. To continue, the literature on cultural content in EFL textbooks will then be examined under the following sections: cultural references and content, types and levels of cultural content and the inclusion of various cultures. Finally, major issues and findings of the studies reviewed will be discussed followed by concluding remarks including possible pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research.

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1 Introduction

With an increasingly globalised world, the number of intercultural encounters between people has never been higher or more intense. With this in mind, it is not a surprise that analysing cultural contents in textbooks is something that has been of growing interest in the last couple of decades. The interest in the exploration of representations in textbooks is naturally connected with the substantial role that textbooks play and have played throughout history in education.

Since culture is a part of the EFL curriculum, recognition in (inter)cultural competence is required. Thus, teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills, tools, and knowledge to be able to critically analyse the cultural content of English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks and at the same time help their language learners develop an intercultural competence. In the Swedish curriculum, it is stated that “Schools must help students to develop an identity that can be related to and encompass not only what is specifically Swedish, but also which is Nordic, European and ultimately global” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 4). Simply put, to develop an identity students have to connect with other people globally and locally. In order to do that they have to develop an intercultural competence. In similarity, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR, 2009) emphasises that developing intercultural competence is a vital part of identity creation and also affects a learner’s personality. Furthermore, the CEFR also stresses that “Knowledge of the shared values and beliefs held by social groups in other countries and regions, such as religious beliefs, taboos, assumed common history, etc., are essential to intercultural communication” (CEFR, 2009, p. 11).

This introduction consists of two sections. The first section discusses the concept of culture and other definitions included that are relevant to the present review. The second section in the introduction is on the connection between culture and language with a focus on culture in EFL textbooks and why this could be important to investigate.

This review sets out to examine (1) the current research on what cultural content in EFL textbooks exists, (2) how the cultural content is represented and (3) what impact or consequences the cultural content might have on students’ intercultural competence and awareness. However, it is important to point out the scarcity of Swedish studies in this field and that most of the studies available are student papers; which is why only one Swedish study is included in this review.

1.1 Definitions

The concept or definition of ‘culture’ is something that is notoriously known for its difficulty in defining and may have a different meaning for various researchers and professionals alike. When discussing the concept of culture, Fred Dervin (2012) claims that “Many scholars have tried, unsatisfactorily, to define it” (p. 182). The explanation given for this claim is that the concept of culture interferes with several issues. According to Dervin (2012), culture is often described as something static and characteristic of all its members, however, his take on culture is that it is something constantly changing.

However, prominent researchers in this area, such as Byram, define the concept of culture as values, beliefs, and behaviours of a social group – any group from a family to a nation (personal communication, November 12, 2016). Similarly, Kramsch (1998) explains culture to be a “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting” (p. 127). Deriving from these standpoints, one could summarise that the dominant definition of culture in general is: a social group having a common outlook on life as well as behaving in accordance to this. For the sake of this review, the term ‘culture’ refers to the definition provided by prominent researchers such as Byram and Kramsch mentioned above.

Furthermore, researchers in the field of culture in EFL textbooks sometimes tend to use the term English as a second language (ESL) also when they refer to English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL refers to learning English as a non-native through explicit instruction in a country where the English language is not generally spoken. ESL generally connotes the majority language spoken in a country where the learner resides. To avoid any potential confusion, this review will solely use the term EFL.

1.2 Culture and language

This paper reviews the literature on cultural content in EFL textbooks and therefore some information on the connection between culture and language learning is needed. One of the aims and objectives in the CEFR (2009) is the following:

[...] the rich heritage of diverse languages and culture in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational

effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding [...] (2009, p. 2)

The quote above demonstrates that the connection between culture and language education is of highest concern and deeply intertwined with each other meaning that one cannot separate one from the other without the loss of significance of either language or cultural sense (Brown, p. 133, 2001). Swedish steering documents also note both the importance and connection between culture- and language learning/teaching. One of the “goals of the school” stated in the Swedish curriculum is that students should be able to “[...] interact with other people based on respect for differences in living conditions, culture, language, religion and history [...]” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 10). Similarly, the aims in the English syllabus express that “[...] students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 1) which further demonstrates how closely culture is associated with language and vice versa.

Furthermore, it is widely accepted that certain training is required to be able to teach students a linguistic system, but it is also equally important to train teachers to be cultural guides. According to Damen (1986), culture is a contributing factor when it comes to succeeding or failing in learning and acquiring a foreign language. Kramsch (1993) argues that in order to fully understand a foreign culture you must put it in relation to your own, which leads us to textbooks where many students encounter foreign cultures. English textbooks are very commonly used by teachers as an approach to integrate language and culture in language teaching. Therefore, one could claim that it is of great importance to investigate the cultural content of EFL textbooks to see how and if various cultures are being presented in a manner that would fulfil the aims stated by CEFR and set by the Council of Europe. It is also relevant to investigate if authors of EFL textbooks are taking an intercultural approach to aid students with understanding foreign cultures and combat eventual tendencies of stereotyping.

One theoretical view on culture relevant to this review is the one of the visible and the invisible culture. According to Hinkel (2001), the focus of the EFL field has, in general, been on teaching the visible culture. The visible culture (also known as surface culture) entails aspects that are static, apparent and easily explained. In terms of textbooks, visible culture would be elements such as food, geography, and traditions. The surface culture does not

include aspects regarding sociocultural norms, values and beliefs (also known as invisible culture, deep culture). Hence, it could be considered important to have textbooks and teachers include more of the deep cultural knowledge since it more strongly correlates to intercultural development than surface culture. It is also worth noting that some researchers refer to big 'C'/little 'c' which often correspond to visible/invisible culture.

Moreover, 'interculturality' and 'cross-cultural' are other useful concepts which researchers and teachers often mention within the field of EFL textbook analysis. According to Kramersch (1998), these terms refer to the meeting between individuals that have different backgrounds (in this case, cultures and languages) across nations' political borders. In addition, the CEFR (2009) mentions 'intercultural awareness' and defines it as knowledge and understanding of diversities, both regional and social, of the native culture in relation to the target culture. Having students develop an intercultural competence is especially important in today's increasingly globalised society. Individuals are no longer required to travel to encounter different cultures or languages and therefore the development of intercultural communication is a matter of great importance in language learning.

2 Textbooks

One might claim that the use of textbooks in education is on a decline since using Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools in education is more popular than ever. Yet, an investigation consisting of a survey and interviews of Swedish teachers' use of textbooks in the subject of English, conducted by the Swedish Agency of Education, shows results of textbooks being used almost every lesson (Skolverket, 2006). Moreover, the findings also demonstrate that Swedish teachers of English either agree or partially agree with the claim that textbooks often guide their teaching too much. Accordingly, this proposes that textbooks might have a more substantial influence than what you initially believe and indicates that there is a reason to discuss it more thoroughly.

Furthermore, in the same way that some people view certain characteristics of individuals and groups as representative of their culture, foreign language textbooks as a genre are also said to have certain characteristics. Kramersch (1988) states four major features belonging to foreign language textbooks in general; principle-oriented, methodical, authoritative and literal. First, with principle-oriented the textbook provides basic principles of what it identifies to be essential knowledge for the learner in the subject. However, one must know that what is considered to be essential knowledge and what is seen as a foundation

to learn culture through a foreign language varies from book to book. Second, the methodical feature involves the matter that textbooks are methodical in the sense of their organisation and this is best explained by Kramersch herself: “They embody the notion that knowledge is itemizable and classifiable and that learning is sequential and cumulative” (1988, p. 66). Third, the authoritative feature means that the textbook is considered as a work without faults where if everything is learned from cover to cover it provides the essentials to do good both in school and in authentic situations where the language is practised. There is very little space for thoughts of the textbooks having any errors or if its contents are partial or subjective. Fourth, literal entails that textbooks are normally to be taken in a literal meaning, that is to say that everything written is real and based on facts; there is no space for any deeper understanding or subtexts. An important aspect of textbooks which is also involved with the characteristics mentioned above is that some textbooks are explicit about culture and others provide a more implicit picture.

Textbooks having an authoritative and literal feature could lead to the cultural content being taken at face value without being given a critical thought from language learners. Thus, it might lead to some elements of different target cultures being misrepresented and misunderstood which is then imposed on students and teachers. In addition, the characteristics of textbooks mentioned demonstrate the importance of teachers having the necessary knowledge to be able to take a critical approach when evaluating textbooks’ content before deciding to rely on it for different reasons. This is especially important in the Swedish context since the state no longer (since 1974) has the responsibility to review and ensure the quality of textbooks that are or will be used (Calderon, 2015).

3 Cultural content in EFL Textbooks

As stated in the introduction, this is a review of the literature in the field of cultural content in EFL textbooks. Many studies have both qualitative and quantitative features and therefore they have been sorted into sections depending on the type of cultural content researched. The first section includes studies that predominantly investigate how much cultural content there is (frequency-wise) and how many cultural references there are in the EFL textbooks. The second section contains studies that focus on the types and levels of the cultural content included such as surface vs deep culture and the big ‘C’ and little ‘c’. Lastly, the third section entails studies that emphasise what and/or which cultures are included, such as nations and individuals, source culture, target culture, etc. Most of the studies involve several of these

aspects but they have been sorted into a section according to their predominant focus which often permeates its content.

3.1 Cultural references and content

A study by Aliakbari (2005) examined the cultural references (what range is presented, whose culture is presented and to what extent) of four Iranian English textbooks developed in collaboration with the Iranian Ministry of Education. The major purpose of the study was to investigate if the materials provided enough content for the students to be able to develop a cultural understanding and eventually, prepare them for intercultural communication. The method used for the textbook analysis was a model of text analysis which focused on the frequency and kind (divided into visual vs. written) of presentation that was given to different target language countries and groups. A modification of the method had been done by the author of the paper to include an extension of references with the reasoning being to provide a “relatively comprehensive picture of the state of culture in the textbooks” (Aliakbari, 2005, p. 168).

Additionally, two different coding schemes were used for the procedure of analysing the passages in the chosen textbooks. The first one was formed by Aliakbari (2005) when investigating the sections called ‘New Words’ in the textbooks. He labelled sentences depending on who they are targeting or referring to and then formed four categories. The first category was Culture Specific References (SCSR) which entailed sentences dealing with known groups and that noted something specific about their references. The second category, Cultural General References (SCGR), consisted of sentences with references to people, objects and names that different cultures could use. The third, No Reference, Culture Specific Statements (NRCSS) included sentences referring to something belonging to a specific culture or group but with no explicit indication of said group, nation or culture. Lastly, the fourth category No Reference, Culture Free Statements (NRCFS) entailed sentences with references to expressions that do not belong to any specific culture or that could be used by individuals from any culture or country. The second coding scheme used in this study and developed by the author himself had eight categories where six of them were meant to express reference to culture as “life style [sic], locations, tradition and customs, special events or occasions among different targets” (Aliakbari, 2005, p. 170). The six categories also involved reference to English speaking countries, non-English speaking western countries, eastern countries, Cross-national comparison, Iran and reference to Islam or Islamic traditions. The

two categories that were not included in this instead referred to (1) general texts and (2) to references whose identity had been left out intentionally. Finally, the frequency of the cultural references was recorded, tabulated and then demonstrated with percentages.

The results of the study indicated that all of the textbooks followed a similar tendency with the sentence category NRCFS being the most frequently appearing category in all four textbooks (ranging from 72 to 85%). The frequency of the other categories was as follows: NRCSS ranged from one to nine percent, SCGR roughly 13 percent of three of the textbooks except for the book named 'Four' in the study where it consisted of four percent, SCSR varied from zero to seven percent.

Aliakbari (2005) concluded that the analysis of the textbooks showed that they did not contribute to an improvement of students' intercultural competence. He listed five major findings that more closely explain why this might be the case. First, the study found that the cultural content in the textbooks was very limited and basic. The author argued that the low frequency cannot satisfyingly equip students for intercultural communication. Second, the major focus of the textbooks' contents was on the scientific fields with almost no mention of other fields such as literature and arts. Third, a lack of identifiable sources of reference when it comes to the texts in the reading passages proved negative as they resulted in "senseless, artificial and untraceable texts" (Aliakbari, 2005, p. 175). Fourth, the cultural content was not only limited in the sense of cultural information but also in the scope of cultures depicted. Moreover, this could lead to a very shallow and simplistic representation of cultures in the textbooks which could lead to the view of false stereotypes being bolstered. Fifth, the textbooks, according to Aliakbari, emerged too weak to be useful for the development of learners' cultural understanding. Finally, Aliakbari suggested that changes need to be made to the Iranian EFL textbooks for students to be able to develop the skills needed to participate in a multicultural world of English.

A study by Çakir (2010) investigated the frequency of culture-specific elements in ELT course books used in elementary schools in Kayseri, Turkey. The textbooks were chosen by the Turkish Ministry of Education to be used in elementary education, specifically years six, seven and eight and were all published in 2010. Çakir argued that "This ready-made materials, which unquestionably must be followed by foreign language teachers, do not always fit the needs of the learners and teachers [sic] expectations" (2010, p. 182). The expectations are not met in terms of intercultural competence, which leads to the aims of the study; to examine and analyse the frequency of cultural expressions and elements in the textbooks. In order to collect the data needed for the study, the textbooks were scanned for

culture specific expressions which were then recorded and tabulated. A descriptive content-analysis was used for the sake of presenting the findings.

The findings revealed that in 48 of the textbooks' units, only 13 contained culture specific expressions. In these 13 units, 27 cultural expressions were recorded which, according to Çakir (2010), is not enough to teach culture since less than half of the units in the textbooks included culture specific expressions (ranging from 30% to 16%). Çakir argued that to be able to develop cultural awareness together with linguistic awareness, the content of the textbooks need not only include cultural referents but also culture specific expressions since they contain cultural values and are, in general, more authentic. However, according to Çakir (2010, p. 187), teaching culture does not solely include having sufficient cultural references in textbooks but rather requires the teacher, him or herself, to have a fifth skill in order to provide diversity of cultural awareness among students. The fifth skill involves language awareness in terms of i.e. idioms, proverbs, superstitions and similes that are integrated into daily speech.

Çakir (2010) concluded his study emphasising that textbooks' design should offer different aspects of target language that concerns both linguistics and culture. He also noted that teachers are vital for the culture specific expressions being understood in its authentic use and provides suggestions of other material with approaches that could be used if your textbook is lacking this content.

3.2 Types and levels of cultural content

Lee (2009) conducted a study, a first of its kind at the time, investigating eleven EFL conversation textbooks all used at the high-school level in South Korea. The aim of the study was to investigate how the chosen textbooks treat culture teaching. The method adopted was a content analysis that entailed using a conceptual model used for integrating both learning and teaching of culture and language. Essential parts of the model included that "Two specific aspects of culture learning as the learning goals and outcomes are suggested as necessary to achieve. They are the culture-general aspect of culture learning and the culture-specific aspect of target-culture learning" (Lee, 2009, p. 78). Skills and attitudes that are of the generalisable nature belong to the culture-general aspect. This aspect is claimed to be important due to that it gives learners a central starting point for them to recognise that culture is a part of their being that affects a multitude of features in basic human interaction. Culture-specific aspects entailed "acquiring knowledge, behavioural skills, and attitude as related to a given target

speech society [...]” (Lee, 2009, p. 78). Additionally, culture-specific aspects were specified into two different domains of target-culture learning: the big ‘C’ and the small ‘c’. Further, the model was tweaked by Lee to include more specific topics to achieve a more comprehensive picture of what aspects the big ‘C’ and the little ‘c’ could involve.

The results showed that all the textbooks in the study did not provide enough attention to the teaching of culture-general aspects and the little ‘c’ aspect of culture-specific learning. Most of the textbooks under study displayed a heavy inclination for the big ‘C’ aspects of culture-specific aspects. The pattern for this was that big ‘C’ aspects, e.g. facts and statistics were presented with information on aspects such as history or arts without involving anything pertinent to the little ‘c’ aspects of target culture. Moreover, to a large degree, the content presented of the big ‘C’ domain originated from the US which, according to Lee (2009), revealed a hierarchy in terms of representation amidst English-speaking cultures where the US was the “supreme source” (2009, p. 92). The use of interactive technologies was also very limited among the textbooks. Lee (2009) concluded that the textbooks investigated did not grant learners the opportunity to develop intercultural communicative competence or culture-specific competence.

A research article by Dehbozorgi, Amalsaleh and Kafipour (2014) explored the cultural content of three prominent EFL textbooks in Iran, specifically *American English Files*, *Four Corners* and *Top Notch*. The level of the textbooks chosen for the study was the intermediate level (for young adult learners) since, according to Dehbozorgi et al., the main focus of lower level textbooks is to develop basic language skills more than cultural knowledge and therefore the intermediate level was more appropriate. The methodology used was a quantitative method that analysed the content in each unit of the textbook based on whether the content was of the big “C” type or little “c” type. The big “C” type entailed a total of nine themes: “politics, history, economy, geography, literature/art, social norms, education, architectures and music” (Dehbozorgi et al., 2014, p. 72) and the little “c” type involved seven themes: “food, holiday, lifestyle, customs, values, hobbies and gestures/body languages” (Dehbozorgi et al., 2014, p. 72). Furthermore, categories of culture (source, target, international and free culture) were identified in each aspect. The analysis was done in two phases. Phase one involved determining the general objective of each unit and from that the investigator would make a general conclusion about the content of the unit i.e. that it probably contained one of the categories of culture. Phase two consisted of examining main ideas of the content. The investigator then coded the main ideas using the different categories and types.

The results indicated that there was no considerable difference between the books when it came to the frequency of cultural categories. Overall, target culture had the highest frequency (39.5%) in terms of categories of culture, followed by source culture (35.1%), international culture (23.8%) and free culture (1.6%). Dehbozorgi et al. argued that since the textbooks under study contained target culture and source culture “they are basically designed with the aim of enhancing learners’ intercultural competence” (2014, p. 73). According to Dehbozorgi et al., the high frequency of target culture inclusion in the textbooks gives EFL learners a chance to familiarise themselves with a broader spectrum of cultural elements in the target language.

Furthermore, regarding the themes in the textbooks; they all included little “c” and big “C” aspects but with little “c” being given a higher percentage (68.7%) in the study. In addition, the themes with the highest frequency were lifestyle and values (belonging to little “c”) and social norms (belonging to big “C”). Thus, the authors of the study emphasised the importance of the little “c” for the reason that it plays an important role in developing an intercultural competence seeing that the little “c” involves features that are of the deeper level (sociocultural variables, norms and beliefs). Finally, Dehbozorgi et al. (2014) concluded that findings from the study suggested that the textbooks investigated were “[...] to some extent equally appropriate for developing intercultural English speakers as EFL’s” (2014, p. 76).

A research article by Gómez Rodríguez (2015) analysed the cultural content in three communicative EFL textbooks. He aimed to identify which surface or deep cultural topics existed in the textbooks chosen and how they could aid learners in developing intercultural communicative competence. The textbooks chosen for the study were designed by international publishing houses (British and American) and are used all over the world for different EFL contexts. In addition, the textbooks had been used in language programs at universities in Bogotá, Colombia which Gómez Rodríguez deemed important since the textbooks were aimed at helping prepare future teachers. Thus, it was important for the author to analyse how the material aided pre-service teachers to develop intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore, the names of the textbooks were left out by the author, he reasoned that “[...] the idea is not to create prejudicial positions about their reputations but rather to offer EFL teachers some critical bases of analysis for how to more appropriately address culture as it is presented in textbooks” (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015, p. 171). The textbooks corresponded to three levels of English: basic, intermediate and advanced.

Gómez Rodríguez (2015) used a quantitative method and analysed every page and unit of the textbooks to detect content in which culture somehow was incorporated. The topics

were categorised into either surface culture or deep culture. Gómez Rodríguez explained that the criteria for a topic being classified into one of the categories were that it was characterised as being either “static, congratulatory, neutral, and homogeneous.” for surface culture or “transformative, complex, contentious or congratulatory, and heterogeneous” (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015, p. 171) for deep culture.

The findings revealed that topics of surface culture were found in all three textbooks in great proportion in comparison with deep culture which was only found in one textbook (the intermediate level one). With topics of surface culture being predominant in the textbooks, Gómez Rodríguez argued that they often promote a static and received view of culture. Additionally, no room was given to ask learners about their culture, to promote critical thinking and compare their own culture with the target culture. Gómez Rodríguez concluded that the cultural content found in the textbooks does not equip EFL learners with even the most basic of skills to, in his words, “become critical intercultural citizens of the world” (2015, p. 176). He emphasised the disadvantage of this by stressing that the chosen textbooks will be studied by millions of students around the world, especially since the material is published by renowned publishing houses.

3.3 The inclusion of various cultures

A student paper by Veivo (2008) investigated a total of six EFL textbooks used in Sweden for the lower secondary school with the purpose of finding out what portrayal was given to English-speaking cultures. In addition, the paper investigated if the textbooks met the goals stated in the syllabus (students should have knowledge about everyday life, society and cultural traditions in some of the countries where English has a central status, as well as being able to make comparisons with their own cultural experiences). As materials, textbooks used in the English subject of the lower secondary school level (year seven, eight and nine) in Sweden were chosen. The reasoning behind this choice was that there is much more content in the textbooks for these levels and that investigating these three grades would give a more comprehensive picture. Three textbooks belonging to the textbook series called *Wings* were investigated. In the *Wing* series, the textbooks consist of a *Base book* and an *Activity Book* for each year which, for this paper, makes six textbooks in total investigated. Veivo (2008) argued that the activity book had to be investigated since it contains many reading passages that students could choose to work with in collaboration with the base book. In terms of method, a text analysis of the qualitative nature was used but some quantitative features did

appear for the sake of counting how many and what countries the textbooks decided to mention. The qualitative text analysis used had a specific orientation (idea analysis) which focused on the aspect of meaning since the purpose of the paper was to see which ideas of the cultural aspects were deemed important in the textbooks. When it comes to the analysis of the texts the author did not use any set categories, instead he investigated what content there was with the aim of characterising the essential content of the texts, rather than looking for certain content.

When it comes to the findings, they showed that the image provided of countries and their cultures in the textbooks is, in general, a shallow depiction. For instance, when countries were introduced they were presented by showing geographical information and pictures with a short text underneath that concentrated on giving pure factual information. There were almost no expressions of culture in the textbooks and the few that existed were very simplified or stereotypical. Besides, the textbooks did not leave any room for discussion or problematization of the information given on people and countries mentioned. Furthermore, the content in the textbooks did not display how individuals of different cultures live their everyday lives or provided an insight of their traditions further than simply mentioning them. Veivo (2008) concluded his paper by stating that the textbooks investigated did not meet the aims of the syllabus and that teachers should have a critical approach towards textbooks and be able to review their contents considering that they did not satisfy the aims stated both by syllabus and curriculum.

In a study by Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010), a content analysis was conducted on a number of EFL textbooks to examine if they involved any intercultural- and cross-cultural elements from different cultures around the world. Five textbooks were selected, all published between the years 1998-2006 by well-known publishing houses (Oxford, Longman, Express Publishing). These were then investigated to see if cross-cultural elements/topics were involved in the aforementioned books and also how frequently they appeared. Cultural elements belonging to England and the USA were excluded from the investigation as they were deemed as main target culture.

Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010) concluded the study by explaining that cross-cultural elements and topics were generally presented in reading passages with the aim of raising awareness of students' 'familiarity' with foreign cultures. The study did not discuss what 'familiarity' entailed since to be familiar with something does not necessarily mean that you automatically develop an intercultural understanding or awareness for it. Furthermore, the authors discussed the issue of stereotyping that arose when important locations, favourite

sports and tourist attractions were mentioned rather than the characteristics of the people when it came to non-English-speaking countries making their appearance in the textbooks. Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010) suggested that authors of textbooks may want to change these imagined stereotypes by giving information on the characteristics of the people in the non-English-speaking countries mentioned.

Yuen (2011) conducted an investigation where he, in this case study, analysed the representation of foreign cultures, focusing on the frequency of appearance, in two EFL textbooks used by secondary schools in Hong Kong. The methodology used was a quantitative method where the frequency of cultural references as well as their origins were recorded. Three categorizations were created for the origins; African countries, Asian countries and Western countries (subdivided into English-speaking countries and non-English speaking countries). The references to foreign cultures in the study were defined as “when there is a mention or depiction of products, practices, perspectives or persons of a place that is foreign and its connection with the origin is obvious” (Yuen, 2011, p. 461).

The findings of this study by Yeun (2011) revealed that products and, in some aspects, practices were the most frequently appearing cultural reference whereas perspectives were the least frequent ones. In addition, a lack of balance existed when it came to the representation of different foreign cultures with the English-speaking countries being referred to more frequently than any other in the study. In comparison, the Asian and African countries were referred to the least in the investigation.

Moreover, Yeun thoroughly addressed the imbalance of “lack of cultural depth in the material” (2011, p. 464) by emphasising the role of teachers who, in many cases, choose which textbooks to buy for their respective schools and students. He explained that teachers share the responsibility together with textbook authors and publishers when it comes to choosing what to include in the books since ultimately teachers are the ones making the decision of what textbooks to purchase. He also called for the education of teachers in making them more aware of their role as a critical viewer of textbooks and to take an active role in giving publishers feedback when being invited to seminars and workshops.

In a research article by Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2015) the representation of culture (what cultural elements are presented and how) was investigated. The research was conducted utilising one localised and one international textbook used in Iran. Types of culture represented in terms of source, target, international and culture-neutral as well as aspects such as aesthetic and/or sociological were also of interest for the investigation.

Since instruction materials for the elementary level are more focused on basic language knowledge and do not usually contain cultural content, two EFL textbooks of the intermediate level were selected. The localised textbook selected was *The ILI English Series: Intermediate* composed by Iranian experts, published in 2004. The international textbook chosen was *Top Notch: English for Today's World*, published in 2006. The focus of the analysis was on the input given through reading passages and dialogues.

To be able to analyse and identify cultural aspects, two frameworks were used in the method. The first framework distinguished different types of ELT material with regard to their cultural content. Tajeddin and Teimournerzhad (2015) modified this framework which consisted of three categories to include an additional one resulting in the following four categories: source culture materials, target culture materials, international culture materials and culture-neutral materials. The second framework categorised cultural aspects in textbooks based on different areas of meaning in terms of culture. Two aspects of the framework were focused on: the aesthetic and the sociological meaning because of their closer connection to culture in comparison with the other two (semantic and pragmatic senses).

Regarding the results, they showed that reference to the learners' source culture was non-existent in both of the textbooks under study. Tajeddin and Teimournerzhad (2015) argued that including source culture is favourable since it could lead to increasing learners' motivation. Therefore, it could be viewed as a flaw for textbooks not to include it at all, especially for the localised textbooks. Additionally, the authors discussed that it might have been more understandable for the international textbooks to not include source culture since they did not target a specific language community or nation. However, the localised textbooks not having included source-cultural content suggested that they are not a part of the cultural agenda in this case, according to the authors of the study.

The authors concluded that the localised textbook might not be useful to augment learners' intercultural understanding since the frequency of references to cultural elements was low. Tajeddin and Teimournerzhad (2015) suggested that teachers and producers of local materials need to more closely observe the representations of cultures in EFL teaching materials in terms of all senses of culture (but with an emphasis on cultural comparisons) being included to aid learners' intercultural and linguistic development. In addition, teachers' awareness and intercultural competence need to be raised through teacher education to prepare future teachers in helping students with their own intercultural understanding.

A recent study conducted by Abassian and Biria (2017) looked at English language textbooks used in EFL education in Iran and set out to explore if said textbooks improve

learners' familiarity of national, international and target culture. Three textbooks of three different levels were chosen as materials (for grade seven, eight and nine) and had recently been used, as mentioned above, in high schools in Iran. A content analysis served as the method where a checklist was used for the procedure of revealing the extension in which the textbooks chosen incorporated cultural content. The checklist items, which the authors (Abassian & Biria, 2017) of the study used to analyse and classify the cultural content of the textbooks, regarded: Stereotypes and national identity, social identity and social group, social interaction, belief and behaviour, national geography, national history, social and political institutions and socialisation and the life cycle. From this checklist, the researchers designed a coding scheme that corresponded to the various items. They then counted the data and calculated the frequency.

The findings showed that the textbooks are aligned towards the national culture considering that it made up 92.2% of the total, where the largest parts had to do with socialization and life cycle. This left international cultural content with a frequency around 7 percent and target culture with less than 1 percent. Hence, Abassian and Biria (2017) argued that the chosen textbooks' knowledge of international cultural aspect is very poor and the knowledge of target culture is close to non-existent.

Abassian and Biria (2017) concluded that based on the evidence provided in the study, the textbooks were designed to make learners knowledgeable about their local culture to be able to convey this to individuals who are not part of that local culture. However, considering that not much thought was given to items such as national identity, history, social and political institution, etc. learners do not receive a comprehensible understanding of the totality of their cultural background. Therefore, the textbooks resulted ineffective in terms of teaching cultural understanding and communication in regard to the local, international and target culture. Finally, Abassian and Biria (2017) stressed the importance of syllabus designers integrating the different contexts (target, international and national) for the sake of learners' cultural understanding to be able to communicate effectively.

4 Discussion and concluding remarks

This review has explored studies in the area of cultural content in EFL textbooks and how the content could affect students' intercultural competence. Firstly, information on the concept of culture was given since it, to this very day, remains a difficult term to define. However, a definition formed by prominent researchers (Byram 2016; Kramsch 1998) was accepted and

used for the present review. A common denominator among the studies and papers included is that all of them investigated cultural content (or references) in textbooks. However, the majority of the studies in this review involved more than solely investigating how much cultural content exists in the textbooks. Instead, the question was often divided into more investigative questions of research, broadening the studies to include aspects such as: *How much content is there?* (frequency and types), *On what level is the cultural content presented?* (surface/visible culture vs deep/invisible culture, the big and little ‘c’, etc.) and *What and/or which cultures are included?* (different countries and people, source culture, target culture, etc.).

The literature included in this review demonstrates that when it comes to EFL textbooks’ design in terms of how much cultural content is included (Aliakbari, 2005; Çakir, 2010), one can clearly see a major issue mentioned in the studies, namely the amount of cultural content in the EFL textbooks is highly inadequate for the purpose of interculturality. When considering if the EFL textbooks contribute to the development of learners’ intercultural competence and understanding, it would appear exceedingly difficult to achieve precisely that since the amount of cultural content within the textbooks that the studies investigated, is very limited. Out of all the studies in this review, only one study (Dehbozorgi et al., 2014) concludes that the textbooks investigated were somewhat appropriate for the aim of developing EFL learners’ intercultural skills. Despite this, the authors do not explicitly state that it *should* lead to a development of intercultural competence, but rather that the textbooks give learners the opportunity that *could* lead to an augmentation of their intercultural skills by having certain amounts of cultural content.

Nonetheless, questions that naturally follow are: what is considered as “enough” cultural content and is that all to be achieved in order to design a textbook which aids in the development of learners’ intercultural competence? Most of the studies with this aspect in mind do not discuss the matter any further than simply stating that there is a lack of cultural content in the textbooks and that it does not offer learners any opportunity to progress in intercultural competence. However, some explanations and suggestions are given. For instance, Çakir (2010) emphasises that having sufficient cultural content is not enough to teach culture and its entailments since teachers are vital for the learners to understand the cultural content, such as cultural expressions, correctly. This suggests that teachers cannot solely base their teaching of culture and interculturality on EFL textbooks, even if there is “sufficient” cultural content.

The studies mainly concerning types and levels of cultural content (Lee, 2009; Dehbozorgi et al., 2014; Gómez Rodríguez, 2015), all emphasise the importance of including little 'c' or deep culture aspects in EFL textbooks. Dehbozorgi et al. (2014) argued that the little 'c' type aspects play a significant part in developing intercultural competence which correlates with the claim of Gómez Rodríguez (2015) that without the features of deep culture, learners instead receive a more static image of culture. With this in mind, two (Lee, 2009; Gómez Rodríguez, 2015) out of the three mentioned studies found that the amount of content of the little 'c' and deep culture type was vastly disproportionate in comparison with the amount of content belonging to the big 'C' and surface culture type. Therefore, you could argue that regardless of the amount of culture included in an EFL textbook, it is vital to involve deep culture and little 'c' aspects since they more often lead to learners ascertaining intercultural awareness and understanding.

As mentioned before, there is more to culture teaching than simply reaching a certain amount of content. However, considering the investigation conducted by the Swedish Agency of Education (Skolverket, 2006) which shows that Swedish teachers of EFL agree with the claim that textbooks guide their teaching too much, it is both relevant and significant to discuss the EFL textbooks' potential impact and consequences. One such consequence could be that you run the risk of stereotyping if you use EFL textbooks with a cultural content that gives a shallow depiction of people, countries and cultures in general.

The issue of stereotyping is one that more strongly arises in several of the studies (Hamiloğlu & Mendi, 2010; Yuen, 2011; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015; Abassian & Biria, 2017) and student paper (Veivo, 2008) regarding the inclusion of various cultures. Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010) mention that stereotyping could be an issue since their investigation showed that tourist attractions and important locations were mentioned instead of the characteristics of people from non-English speaking countries. Similarly, Veivo (2008) concludes that the depiction of cultures was generally shallow and often consisted of information on geographical sites. Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010) address the stereotyping issue by suggesting that textbook designers should provide information on characteristics of people from the non-English speaking countries. However, they do not develop a discussion about the complexity in their suggestion seeing that authors of textbooks could resort to simply adding shallow and stereotypical characteristics of the people from non-English speaking countries. Keeping in mind the features of textbooks according to Kramsch (1988), relying on textbooks could be dangerous, especially considering the issue of stereotyping

since the natural agenda of textbooks are to be normative. To this day, Kramersch's ideas still seem relevant.

In terms of combating stereotypes, bridging the gaps between people is needed. For students, this means developing an intercultural competence which, according to Kramersch (1993), can be done by putting other cultures in relation with one's own. However, the studies of Abassian and Biria (2017), Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2015) and Yuen (2011) all show an imbalance of cultural representation of some sort. On one hand, in the study of Abassian and Biria (2017), there is an imbalance in the EFL textbooks that favours the source culture at the expense of target and international culture. On the other hand, the textbooks investigated by Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2015) shows a high frequency of target and international culture but reference to source culture is non-existent. All of the studies mentioned above conclude that the textbooks investigated in their studies are not equipped to help provide an intercultural understanding or competence which supports Kramersch's (1993) explanation of knowledge of both source culture and target culture being needed to develop intercultural competence and thus combat stereotypes. If students are only provided with cultural input from EFL textbooks such as the ones mentioned above, their cultural knowledge will be very limited and their knowledge will be very similar to the notion of shallow stereotyping rather than actual intercultural knowledge.

Regarding possible pedagogical implications, the most significant one, which is also mentioned by several studies, is to raise teachers' awareness about the lacking content of EFL textbooks and thus promote critical thinking about EFL textbooks. The implications are not so much about what can be done with EFL textbooks in terms of culture, but rather that teachers and students should not rely on them too much. Teachers should not base their teaching of culture solely on using EFL textbooks. Instead, research shows that teachers are equally important for students' learning process of culture since they could facilitate comprehension of cultural content and provide a broader context. The prevention of possible stereotyping also applies here, where teachers can function as the ones bridging the gap and making students aware of the connections and relations between their own culture and others. Thus, it is vital for teachers to remain critical towards EFL textbooks, be able to review its content and be selective about what cultural content to use.

Conclusively, all of the studies except one use a quantitative method to investigate the content of the textbooks. Considering the complexity of finding a key amount of cultural content for the purpose of teaching culture, investigating EFL textbooks solely in quantitative terms might not be an appropriate approach. While this kind of method might give a good

overview of the frequency of cultural content there might be other approaches to this kind of research that could provide other perspectives. Therefore, it would be interesting to see further research take a different approach than using a quantitative method that measures frequency. Finally, the research field when it comes to the Swedish context remains unexplored. A few student papers were found but no peer-reviewed research dealing with EFL textbooks in Sweden surfaced. For that reason, further research concerning cultural content of EFL textbooks in Sweden is needed to be able to advance the knowledge about its possible effects on intercultural competence.

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