

How EFL materials respond to a local curriculum: A study of interest areas

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Abstract

In formal education, the theme contents or interest areas included in EFL syllabuses are decided by the educational authority in accordance with national guidelines. In the Province of Córdoba, Argentina, these areas are named *ámbitos de experiencia e interés*, i.e., topics that relate to the experience and interests of the target learners including, apart from typical everyday situations, themes from the other curricular areas like natural and social science or art. Because some of these topics are controversial, publishers tend to minimise or exclude their presence in EFL materials. Despite their relevance, interest areas have scarcely been researched. Thus, this paper examines their presence in EFL materials used in some local schools and analyses them quantitatively and qualitatively to determine the breadth and depth of coverage of said topics. The study aims to raise awareness of the treatment of interest areas in EFL coursebooks and provide further insights into materials development.

Keywords: syllabus, EFL teaching materials, context sensitivity, interest areas

Resumen

En la educación formal, las autoridades educativas deciden los contenidos temáticos o áreas de interés incluidos en los programas de Inglés Lengua Extranjera (ILE) de acuerdo con directrices nacionales. En la Provincia de Córdoba, Argentina, estas áreas se denominan *ámbitos de experiencia e interés*, es decir, temas que se relacionan con la experiencia y los intereses de los alumnos destinatarios e incluyen, además de situaciones típicas de la vida cotidiana, temas de otras áreas curriculares como ciencias naturales y sociales o arte. Debido a que algunos de estos temas son controvertidos, las editoriales tienden a minimizarlos o excluirlos de los materiales de estudio. A pesar de su importancia, las áreas de interés han sido escasamente investigadas. Por lo tanto, este trabajo examina su presencia en los materiales de estudio utilizados en algunas escuelas locales y los analiza cuantitativa y cualitativamente para determinar la amplitud y profundidad de su cobertura. El estudio tiene como objetivo crear conciencia sobre el tratamiento de las áreas de interés en los libros de texto de ILE y proporcionar más información sobre el desarrollo de materiales.

Palabras clave: plan de estudios, materiales didácticos de inglés lengua extranjera, sensibilidad al contexto, áreas de interés

Introduction

Foreign language proficiency is universally regarded as a key competence, so the inclusion of at least one additional language is a feature of school education worldwide. The study of a foreign language in school is often associated with the misconception that it should pursue adult learner goals like business, travelling or study (Cook, 2013) regardless of age and other conditioning factors. Contrary to this belief, learning a foreign language in school serves purposes specified in a national curriculum, in the case of this contribution, that of Argentina, in which a particular view of citizenship is materialised. This section explores the context of the study and its theoretical underpinnings, and provides an overview of the treatment of theme contents in ELT materials.

Foreign languages in Argentina's education system

Argentina's educational policy is laid out in the National Education Act (Ley de Educación Nacional [LEN], 2006), and in the Province of Córdoba, the case chosen for this study, educational provision is regulated by a specific act, namely the Ley de Educación de la Provincia de Córdoba [LEP] (2010).

Both acts express the envisioned aims of education. Article 8 of LEN states that "Educational provision affords the necessary opportunities to develop and consolidate lifelong comprehensive education and to enable the construction of a life project, based on the values of freedom, peace, solidarity, equality, respect for diversity, justice, responsibility and common good"¹ and Article 11 includes 23 purposes based on the national policy. One of them is "to guarantee comprehensive education that develops all dimensions of the person and enables both social interaction and work performance, as well as access to higher education" (Article 11b). The purposes refer to ideals such as inclusion, respect of otherness, equal access to opportunities, and building of a national identity, thus promoting empowerment through education. Accordingly, the aims stated by the LEP are "to prepare adolescents and young people for the full exercise of citizenship, for work and for access to further education" (Article 27). Consequently, the construction of a life project, the exercise of citizenship and the development of social values are central tenets in educational legislation at both national and provincial levels. Besides, secondary school pupils are expected to use knowledge "as a tool to understand and constructively transform their social, economic, environmental and cultural setting, and to position themselves as active participants in a permanently changing world" (LEN, 2006, Article 30b). This is mirrored by the LEP when it states that education aims at enabling "citizens to use knowledge as a tool to understand and transform contemporary society, to act critically and reflexively in it". (Article 39c). Thus, the central educational policy in Argentina and that of Córdoba province is geared towards criticality, as it "seeks empowerment and social transformation" (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2016, p. 455) in education in general and in foreign language education in particular (Akbari, 2008).

Education acts provide the foundation of the curriculum, a blueprint defined by Richards and Schmidt (2010) as the "overall plan for a course or programme" (p. 150), including aims, contents, methodology and assessment. Curricula are designed by the educational authority and enacted by teachers with the support of educational materials. As a subject of the school curriculum, EFL must fulfil both the general aims of education and those of the specific school stage as stated in the national and local legislation. According

¹ All translations from Argentinean education legislation sources are mine.

to the LEN, foreign language education is to be offered in primary and secondary education, but in primary school its provision is different nationwide in terms of years and hours of instruction. Both state and private education exist in Argentina, so there is much diversity regarding these two factors. A usual scenario in mainstream schools EFL is that of a minimum of six years of instruction at a rate of three-weekly 40-minute lessons. This paper focuses on the upper-secondary school stage that comprises Years 4, 5 and 6, catering to older adolescents, usually between the ages of 15 and 17.

Interest areas: types, selection, grading and scope

While the curriculum was characterised as the course plan drawn up in accordance with a particular view of education, the course syllabus specifies the actual subject matter and its organization (Brown, 1995). The syllabus includes the objectives, contents and their sequencing so that learners progress along the units of work, i.e. the instructional segments (Richards, 2017) that provide the learning opportunities. The EFL syllabus, comprising the morphosyntactic, lexical, and pragmatic contents, is generally based on inventories such as *The Threshold Level* (van Ek, 1975), widely used in the design of teaching materials. The selected language items are graded considering complexity (for example, marked [goes] vs. unmarked [go] forms), frequency of use, or their relevance for learners to express personal interests (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 251). The non-language contents of the syllabus, namely the themes (Council of Europe, 2001), ideas (Nation & McAllister, 2010) or interest areas (Estaire & Zanón, 1994), such as family, jobs, etc., are not amenable to grading according to the criteria mentioned above and their diversity makes it difficult for developers of curricula and materials to select and grade them. Moreover, establishing their scope, “the breadth and depth of coverage of items in the course” (Richards, 2017, p. 212), makes an alignment between the language and the non-language contents necessary in view of the concreteness or abstractness of the ideas encountered in the language input or needed to express ideas orally and in writing. So, like in the distribution of language contents, a spiral approach can be adopted to the treatment of the interest areas, as explained by Canh (2018): “All themes and topics are expanded throughout grades (10–12) but dealt with from different perspectives and at different levels of cognitive complexities to cater for the students’ intellectual and cognitive development.” (p. 119). For example, a topic such as “family” can first involve simple statements about family members and, at a later stage, learners can be prompted to express views related to diverse family relationships requiring the use of modality, discourse markers, passive constructions, and so on, to verbalise more complex ideas.

In the secondary school EFL syllabus of Córdoba province (Ministerio de Educación de la Provincia de Córdoba [MEPC], 2018), interest areas are called *ámbitos de experiencia e interés*. These are topics that relate to the experience and interests of the target learners and include both everyday situations such as holidays and cross-curricular topics such as the characteristics of a social group, environmental issues, or artistic expressions, as well as those mandated by legislation such as comprehensive sexuality education (Ley de Educación Sexual Integral, 2008).

In this paper, a threefold classification of interest areas will be used. The term “topic” indicates the selected fields of knowledge and experience as general categories, some of which are further subdivided into “subtopics”. Within each topic and subtopic, the syllabus lists several themes around which the language areas are to be developed. Figure 1 shows this hierarchy in relation to a Year 4 interest area.

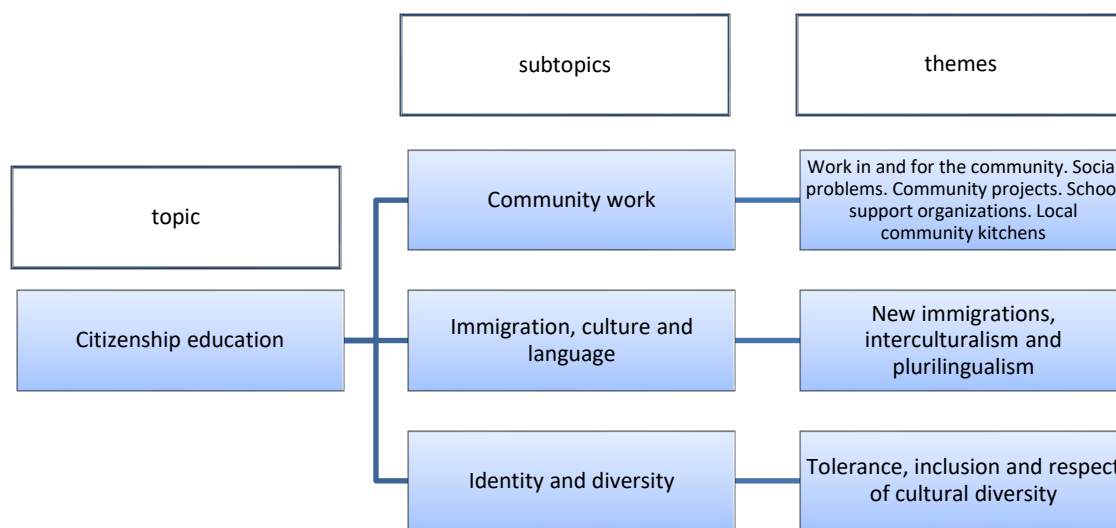


Figure 1. Organisation of the interest area

Some of these interest areas are controversial, as world views are challenged, so they tend to be notoriously underrepresented or absent in commercial EFL materials, as was found in several studies referred to by Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) in terms of their acceptability (p. 36). Since there are no schoolbook approval procedures in Argentina, publishers of EFL materials tend to select the interest areas that are less controversial and more traditional such as those listed under “Communication themes” in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), for example, daily life, travel or education. This tension between curriculum demands and the publishers’ need to make the coursebook a safe product, in the sense that it is acceptable to most of the potential users, and marketable, often results in the exclusion of topics indicated by the target syllabus such as gender or human rights issues.

Thus, teaching materials for formal education need to be context-sensitive, i.e., they must account for the characteristics of teaching and learning in a specific regional setting. Of the four aspects that characterise context-sensitivity, namely contextualization, linguistic contrasts, intercultural reflection, and facilitation of learning (López-Barrios & Villanueva de Debat, 2014, p. 45), the first one is particularly relevant when considering the inclusion of interest areas in the materials.

Despite their relevance, “the discussion of the actual [non-language] contents in the teaching of English as a foreign language has never been a central one in the professional literature” (López-Barrios, 2008: 41), and over a decade later, this observation still holds true, as will be shown in the next section.

Interest areas in foreign language coursebooks

Harwood (2014) states that foreign language teaching and learning materials can be studied under three perspectives: content, consumption, and production. As expressed above, this paper addresses the treatment of contents, understood as interest areas, “to determine and evaluate the subject matter which is included – and omitted” (Harwood, 2014, p. 2). But it does not analyse the range of cultural representations, as does the comprehensive research by Risager (2018), which studies the discourses that convey the representations, something that is not within the scope of this paper. This section reviews selected

research on the treatment of sociocultural contents, culturally sensitive topics, moral values, variety of topics and appeal to the target learners in foreign language teaching materials.

Sociocultural contents like everyday life, traditions, cultural manifestations, and other topics related to the target societies have been the object of much research (Risager, 2018). Risager (2021) states that, at present, a global and critical perspective is adopted for the representation of aspects of societies in terms of what is included and how, and what is silenced. In the paper, Risager studied the representation of the world, key problems, social identities, world history and transnational links in a set of foreign-language school coursebooks for 13–16-year-olds used in Denmark and found that not all the themes were tackled by each book and that their treatment was different in every case. On the other hand, the representation of local culture has been more sparsely studied. Toledo-Sandoval (2020) studied the treatment of the local culture in a selection of Chilean EFL coursebooks for upper primary school learners (Years 5 and 6) and found references to national geography (places), and to stereotypes and national identity (proper names, historical icons, festivities, food), but an underrepresentation of the aboriginal population and culture. This absence may convey a vision of a monocultural, homogeneous society and undermine the identity of learners with an aboriginal background.

The treatment of sensitive topics like those subsumed under the acronym PARSNIP (Gray, 2002) in reference to politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, “isms” (as in feminism) and pork, have also received some attention in the analysis of coursebooks. In his study of LGBT representation, Gray (2013) found an almost complete absence of non-heteronormative characters or relations in global coursebooks, whereas the topic was found to be treated in local materials designed “for migrants to the UK or the USA” (p. 54). Apart from the PARSNIPs, Lehmonen & Keturi (2011) added the taboo topics smoking, violence, abortion, cursing and suicide and searched for their presence in four Finnish EFL coursebook series for different target users. All PARSNIPs and the other topics were found in both the upper-secondary school and the adult coursebooks, whilst a smaller presence of many of them was registered in the lower-secondary and primary school coursebooks. As said, questions of marketability may account for the restriction or inclusion of sensitive topics.

Other studies have focused on the treatment of moral values, the variety of contents included and their interest to the target learners. Canh (2018) disclosed the moral values in a Vietnam-produced set of EFL textbooks for high school students. Five topics (e.g., environmental issues) from the curriculum were selected and the corresponding text-related tasks, i.e. the input texts and the associated activities, were analysed to find out how they get learners to construct the moral meaning embedded. Values like gender equality or empathy with the disadvantaged, among others, emerged from the texts, albeit in a limited number, and the activities were found to focus on lower-level thinking skills, so that opportunities for critical thinking were scarce. López-Barrios (2008) studied the variety of themes present in a selection of secondary EFL coursebooks used in Argentina. Two elementary-level and two intermediate level coursebooks were analysed in terms of the interest areas using Ur’s categories (1996, as cited in López-Barrios, 2008). Although many of the categories were found in the elementary (67%) and the intermediate (89%) coursebooks, only four of the nine categories (44,5%) were found in all coursebooks: zero or trivial content, target culture, world or general knowledge and the learners themselves, thus revealing a somewhat restricted variety of topics.

Regarding the appeal of the theme contents to the target learners, Cilia et al. (2004) analysed the treatment of reading comprehension in two coursebooks popularly used in Year 9 schools in Mar del Plata, Argentina. They found that the predominant contents in both books were personal life, food, nature and crime. The themes were presented through short texts with a clear intention to teach language forms and treated in a superficial and

stereotyped way. Brining (2017) reviewed two coursebooks, one for older children and one for adolescents, and found an abundance of trivial contents and no treatment of inclusion, diversity and real-world problems which may demotivate learners as, “such topics may be what many of them tweet, chat and Facebook about in their free-time.” (p. 103).

I would like to conclude this review with a reference to a report by a school inspector regarding the relevance of local contents in foreign language education, in accordance with an appeal for stronger involvement of Argentinean contents in formal education during Perón’s first presidency (1946-1952). In the report, Madueño (1948) offered some guidelines for the implementation of local contents related to the different interest areas in the syllabus, stressing that these were expressly mentioned in statements such as “The city where we live. Its activities” and that approved textbooks— a practice that existed in those days —included excerpts of literary texts by Argentinean authors related to the different themes for translation activities. This reference is interesting as evidence of an early concern with the non-language contents of foreign language education in Argentina.

Given the paucity of studies looking into the inclusion and treatment of non-language contents of EFL coursebooks, this paper seeks to expand insights into the presence of interest areas in EFL materials. To this end, the upper-secondary school syllabus of the Province of Córdoba, Argentina, and a selection of EFL coursebooks will be focused on to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the breadth of coverage of the syllabus interest areas (*ámbitos de experiencia e interés*) in the coursebooks?
2. What is the depth of coverage of the interest areas?

Materials and methods

Four EFL coursebook series, three global (*Solutions pre-intermediate* [Falla & Davis, 2017], *Impact* 1 [Koustaff, 2017a] and 2 [Stannett, 2017] and *Achievers* B1 [Kedde & Hobbs, 2015] and B1+ [Hobbs et al., 2016]) and a localised one, *On the Pulse* 3 (McBeth, Crawford & Tiberio, 2019), currently used in the upper cycle of a selection of Córdoba city schools were selected for this study, based on the information provided by teachers. According to the proficiency levels described by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), the series range from a lower A2 to a lower B1 level. Although each series comprise a wide variety of components, only the student’s books were analysed as they build the core of the course.

Excepting the *Achievers* series, all others describe the interest areas covered. *Solutions* contains “engaging topics and texts” (de la Mare et al., 2017, p. 3), *Impact* states that “The series integrates real-world content, the work and stories of National Geographic Explorers, a wide variety of cross-curricular concepts and engaging projects into a unified course of English language instruction.” (Koustaff, 2017b, p. 19), and *On the Pulse* mentions that “Topics and tasks have been carefully selected to reflect [adolescents’] interests and guarantee participation.” (Casuscelli et al., 2016, p. 5).

Simensen’s (1987) distinction among authentic, pedagogic and adapted texts was used to determine the source of the texts. All series rely on pedagogic texts, i.e., those specially written by the course authors, whereas *Solutions* and *On the Pulse* acknowledge the adaptation of some copyrighted material from British newspapers, websites, graded readers, and the book *The Winter of Our Disconnect* by Susan Maushart. The *Impact* series feature authentic videos and content by explorers commissioned by National Geographic. *Achievers* B1 and B1+ do not acknowledge the use of texts from other sources. Within pedagogic texts, general interest magazine articles and screenshots from websites appear as the most widespread genres across the coursebooks analysed.

To carry out this study, interest areas were first identified in the upper secondary school EFL syllabus (MEPC, 2018) and regrouped into seven categories and several subcategories as shown below.

1. Personal and social life
2. The environment
3. Leisure
4. Cultural heritage
5. Citizenship education
 - 5.1. Community work
 - 5.2. Immigration, culture and language
 - 5.3. Identity and diversity
6. Mass media and information technology
 - 6.1. Impact of mass media on daily life
 - 6.2. Social networks
7. Work and education
 - 7.1. Vocational and occupational plans
 - 7.2. The world of work
 - 7.3. Education in Argentina and in English-speaking countries

The Year 5 syllabus includes an interest area named “Literary discourse and other forms of artistic expressions” that was not considered as a category in this study. Rather, literary texts, songs, films and other artistic expressions are input sources that can be allotted to a particular interest area.

Secondly, the interest areas were searched in the coursebooks by manually inspecting the table of contents and the relevant texts and activities. The coursebooks were digitalised to facilitate search. Selected texts and activities were analysed according to five of the evaluation criteria offered by Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008) shown in the table below, together with indicators of their presence.

Criteria	Indicators
To what extent is the exposure to English in use likely to be meaningful to the target learners?	Degree of personalization allowed by the activity
To what extent are the texts likely to interest the learners?	Variety of genres and texts
To what extent are the activities likely to engage the learners affectively?	Appeal of topics, texts, visuals and activities
To what extent are the activities likely to engage the target learners cognitively?	Reflection and discussion prompted by the activities
To what extent do the activities provide opportunities for meaningful use of English?	Expression of ideas and feelings rather than mere target-language practice

Table 1. Analysis questions

Results

This section presents the findings related to the scope of the interest areas according to their breadth and depth of coverage by the coursebooks. The breadth of coverage stands for the number of syllabus topics, subtopics and themes included in the coursebooks under

analysis, whereas the depth of coverage refers to the characteristics of the texts and activities that develop the themes according to the five criteria mentioned above.

To judge the extent of deployment of the interest areas, the coverage of the topics and subtopics and their related themes was labelled as ample, partial, insufficient or null, depending on the degree of their presence in each coursebook. Ample coverage means that most of the themes within a topic or subtopic are present in the three coursebooks, whereas partial coverage implies that a theme is included in at least two coursebooks. Insufficient coverage indicates that only one coursebook includes the theme or that only one of the aspects mentioned in a theme is covered, as in “Radio and TV programmes; cinema and theatre”, where only a text related to radio programmes is included in one coursebook. Null coverage means the absence of the topics and themes in the three coursebooks.

Once the interest areas and their related topics, subtopics and themes were determined, their presence was identified and quantified in the coursebook corpus so as to determine their breadth of coverage. School years will be indicated as follows: Y4 (Year 4), Y5 (Year 5) and Y6 (Year 6).

Breadth of coverage of the interest areas in the coursebooks

This section describes the frequency of appearance of the themes under the topics and subtopics in each coursebook. The syllabus lists an average of 12 themes per year: 12 (Y4), 14 (Y5) and 11 (Y6), whose coverage in the materials analysed is different according to the school year. For example, for the topic “Personal and social life” coursebooks have ample coverage of the Year 6 themes but null coverage of those of Year 4. Figure 2 below shows a description of the general trends.

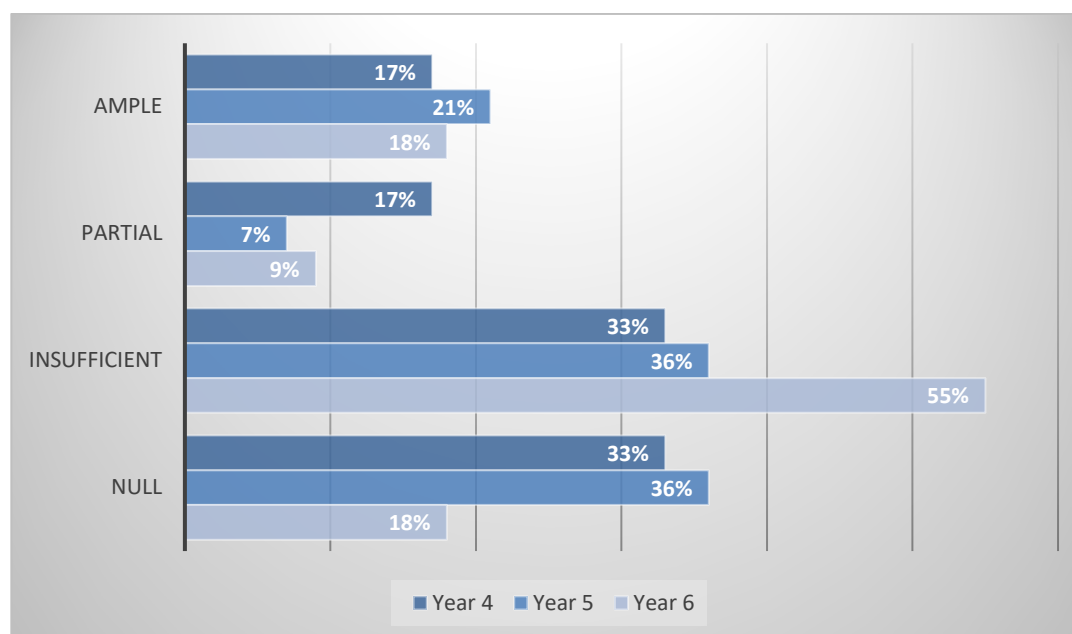


Figure 2. Frequency of coverage of interest areas in coursebooks

On average, 19% of the themes are given ample coverage. These include descriptions of urban and rural areas involving their physical environment, climate, flora and fauna, as well as the traditions, languages and customs of people from different regions and countries (Y4). The topic “Mass media and information technology” is commonly found in relation to the evolution of technology and the use people make of it (Y5, Y6). Regarding personal and social life and leisure time, the topics of expectations and emotions (Y6) as well as mind and video games (Y5) feature prominently in the coursebooks. Lastly, themes around employment search (Y5) are well represented. Only an average of 11% of the themes

receive partial coverage. These include themes such as health and body care (Y5) and sports (Y4), as well as issues related to the evolution of communication and information technology (Y4) and the exploration of employment possibilities (Y6). Many themes (41%) are given insufficient coverage. As an example, for the subtopic “Identity and diversity” (Y4), including the themes “Tolerance, inclusion and respect of cultural diversity”, only a text about a blind adolescent was found, indicating marginal treatment. Themes with null coverage amount to 29% and comprise physical appearance, immigration, and education and citizenship construction (Y4), stress and eating disorders, consumption of addictive substances, bullying, responsible use of social media, creation of needs and acquisition of disruptive habits (Y5) and dealing with change and conflict with the family and peers (Y6).

Following is an analysis per school year to enable a clearer understanding of the trends found. Year 4 coursebooks cover 67% of themes and exclude 33% of them. Of those covered, 34% are amply (17%) or partially treated (17%) and 33% are insufficiently covered. Year 5 themes have 64% of coverage in the coursebooks, and excluded themes total 36%. Ample (21%) or partial (7%) coverage is given to 28% of the themes, whilst 36% of them are insufficiently deployed. Year 6 coursebooks cover 82% of the themes and exclude 18% of them. Nevertheless, over half of the themes (55%) are insufficiently treated whereas only 18% of the themes are amply and 9% partially covered. On balance, ample and partial coverage of interest areas is unsatisfactory in the coursebook sample analysed, with a low of 27% in Year 6 and a top of 43% in Year 5, and 34% in Year 4. Insufficient coverage ranges between 33% in Year 4 and 55% in Year 6 and 36% in Year 5, indicating an unsatisfactory coverage of syllabus themes in the coursebook sample.

Depth of coverage of the interest areas in the coursebooks

The following sections investigate the depth of the coverage of the interest areas by focusing on the characteristics of the texts and activities in some samples from the coursebooks. First, interest areas amply, partially, and insufficiently covered are analysed according to school year, and then the exclusions are tackled. The following acronyms will be used to refer to the coursebooks: SPI (*Solutions Pre-Intermediate*), I1 (*Impact 1*), I2 (*Impact 2*), AB1 (*Achievers B1*), AB1+ (*Achievers B1+*), OTP3 (*On the Pulse 3*).

Inclusions

Year 4

Ample coverage is given to the theme “Encountering people from different regions and countries, their customs, languages, traditions” within the topic “Cultural heritage”, where most contents refer to the English-speaking world, as in the reading texts “How foreigners see the British” (SPI, p. 108) and “Thanksgiving” (AB1, p.91). The first invites learners to discuss stereotypes based on the reading and an audio file with people from other countries giving their views about the British. The second is a model description of a festival, presented as a general interest magazine article for learners to extract information and use it as a basis to write a similar text. The videos in AB1 about Scotland (p. 39) and England (p. 71) prompt learners to activate their prior knowledge about these countries and the follow-up activities engage them in cultural comparison. Inputs that expose learners to other cultures are not restricted to the English-speaking world. Examples include a reading text about life in the dark in northern Norway in I1 (p. 44-45), as well as one about Borneo in AB1 (p. 38). In both, learners are offered opportunities to reflect on how they could relate to these different lifestyles.

The theme “Communication and information technology” within the subtopic “Impact of mass media on daily life”, is given partial coverage, as it is included in two coursebooks.

A reading text about code breakers, with mention of Alan Turing, and an audio text with the biography of Ada Lovelace (SPI, p, 116) familiarise learners with these pioneers of computing. A reading text and activity 5 in AB1 (p. 64-65) deal with the development of computer technology, but these miss the opportunity to personalise by getting learners to relate to the technologies shown in the activity.

Insufficient coverage is given to the theme “Tolerance, inclusion and respect of cultural diversity”, corresponding to the subtopic “Identity and diversity”. For this very broad topic, only one reading text about blind persons who rely on echolocation to ride a bicycle (AB1, p. 12) was found. The activities centre on reading comprehension only and do not prompt learners to reflect on their experiences with disability.

Year 5

The themes “Employment search, writing a CV, job interviews” under the subtopic “The world of work” have ample coverage. These include directions on how to write an application letter, with more emphasis on the product in SPI (p. 61) and a process approach to writing in AB1 (p. 101), and an audio of a captain interviewed about working on a cruise ship (11, p. 31), followed by an activity requiring learners to formulate further questions.

Two coursebooks feature some aspects of the themes “Adolescents and health. Body care, preventing illness” under the topic “Personal and social life”, so its coverage is partial. Unit 5 of I1 is about clothing and focuses on issues such as the evolution of garments, and the characteristics of clothes for certain jobs like workers in the desert or in medical professions, or sportswear. Activities around general interest articles, videos and audio files get learners to complete gapped texts or list hair care practices of women in ancient Egypt to compare with today’s habits. Unit 5 of AB1 features an advice website, information leaflets, a radio show on the London marathon, a model opinion essay encouraging students to have a healthy lifestyle, and a questionnaire about habits.

The themes “English as a language for international communication, linguistic varieties of English, Spanish and other languages” under the subtopic “Immigration, culture and language” are insufficiently covered. For example, only some of the varieties of English are treated in the coursebooks, as in the videos about Scotland and Jamaica in AB1. Specifically, the follow-up questions to the Jamaica video get learners to discuss the accents they can recognise in English, which ones they like best and about local varieties in their own language. The Culture 4 section of SPI includes reading and listening texts about the development of English, so that awareness is raised about the role of English and its influence on other languages.

Year 6

The theme “New technology and its influence on society” within the topic “Mass media and information technology” is given ample coverage. Unit 1 of OTP3 focuses on these themes by providing vocabulary, texts such as quizzes, general interest magazine articles about gadgets, apps and their use, and reviews as well as production activities like WebQuests and a gadget review. Unit 2 of I2 deploys many facets of the theme and develops them through quotations, general interest magazine articles, infographics, dialogues, and videos, and promotes active L2 use by engaging learners in discussion questions, and projects. Unit 3 of AB1+ includes a general interest magazine article on the advantages and disadvantages of the internet, as an example of a discussion essay and a follow-up oral discussion on the same topic.

Two coursebooks include the theme “Employment search; work possibilities in one’s place of residence and beyond” in the subtopic “The world of work”, so its coverage is partial. Unit 4 of OTP3 features job adverts, message board posts, infographics, radio programmes, magazine articles and WebQuests as well as production activities related to

these themes. Unit 6 of AB1+ includes inputs such as magazine articles, job adverts and an interview for an apprenticeship post as well as production activities like writing a job advert and discussion opportunities about a self-employed lorry driver girl.

The theme “Cultural identity in English-speaking countries” is insufficiently covered, as learners are not given opportunities to gain insights that avoid stereotyped views of the target cultures. Most of the images in OTP3 are not clearly identifiable with a particular cultural setting and explicit references to people, places, institutions and other cultural references are scant. Activities under the rubric “Comparing cultures” prompt reflection, albeit by isolating both cultures instead of making learners relate the impressions and base them on a variety of evidence. This is the case in the review of the book “The Winter of our Disconnect”, about a family that gave up the use of communication technology for a time. Learners could be asked to do research into the use of technology in different geographical contexts to gain a wider perspective on this issue. More references to the target cultures are included in AB1+ in inputs such as reviews of books by famous writers (Unit 1) and the mention of iconic writers in a video about Ireland. Two other videos focus on aspects such as multiculturalism in Malta and apartheid in South Africa’s past. Because of the global approach to culture in I2, no specific focus on English-speaking societies is made, but it makes provision for learners to reflect on their own and other cultures. In brief, the treatment of the cultural identity of the target cultures is either absent, restricted to certain cultural icons, or uncritical.

Exclusions

Exclusions preclude the possibility of dealing with topics that have a significant impact on older adolescents such as “Physical appearance” (Y4), “Environmental illnesses: stress and eating disorders; addictions” (Y5), or “The generation gap; change and conflict” (Y6), all related to the topic “Personal and social life”. Similarly, several subtopics and themes belonging to the topic “Mass media and information technology” related to the influence of media on the creation of needs, “Responsible use of social networks” (both Y5) or “Influence of social networks on the construction of personal and social identity” (Y6) are conspicuously absent in the coursebooks analysed. Lastly, many subtopics and themes around the topic of “Citizenship education” like “Tolerance, inclusion and respect of cultural diversity” (Y4), “Bullying and cyberbullying” (Y5) and “Gender Issues; majorities, minorities and ghettos; human rights” (Y6) are fully absent in the two first cases, whilst the two last ones are insufficiently covered.

Exclusions also affect less personal, but significant themes because of their local impact (e.g., “Rational use of natural resources”, “Problems related to energy use in Argentina”), social engagement potential (e.g., “Community projects; school support organizations, local community kitchens”, “New immigrations, interculturalism and plurilingualism”, or “Education and citizenship construction”) and aesthetic value (“Handicrafts, music”, “Art: Painting and sculpture”).

Discussion

The first research question, “What is the breadth of coverage of the syllabus interest areas in the coursebooks?” aimed to determine the degree of presence of the interest areas in the materials. Results indicate that most of them are either absent or insufficiently covered (70%) compared to those amply or partially covered (30%), implying the need for a considerable degree of adaptation by teachers to comply with the syllabus demands.

Themes currently debated in Argentinean upper-secondary schools that are underrepresented in commercial EFL materials include urban pollution and waste management, rational use of natural resources and energy, social engagement in community

projects, gender issues and human rights. Other insufficiently covered themes are different forms of artistic expressions, life plans, career choice, higher education, as well as topics more specifically related to English-speaking societies, such as issues of cultural identity and characteristics of the educational systems. Finally, the themes of linguistic variation in the student's L1 and other languages are not treated by the materials. Following Risager's (2021) classification, the coursebooks analysed reveal limited representation of countries and continents (e.g., "Adolescents in other cultures", "Encountering people from different countries"), the treatment of key world problems (e.g., "Pollution in cities", "New immigrations"), social identities (e.g., "Majorities, minorities and ghettos"), world history (e.g., "Respect of cultural diversity") or transnational relationships (e.g., "Environmental organizations"). The home culture is underrepresented too, in coincidence with Toledo Sandoval's (2020) findings. Although its treatment should be expected in local materials, context-sensitive global textbooks for school learners should make provision for teachers to adapt them to suit local needs. Topics like LGBT representation and other PARSNIPs are expectably absent, as noted by Gray (2013) regarding global materials, but also the local coursebook analysed excludes them, unlike the findings of Lehmonen and Keturi (2011) concerning Finnish materials. Overall, the breadth of coverage quite coincides with López-Barrios' (2008) findings and further corroborates those by Brining (2017) that uncontroversial topics are predominant and that those that interest teenagers are notoriously absent.

The second research question, "What is the depth of coverage of the interest areas?" aimed to establish the characteristics of both the source texts that convey the contents and the activities that make learners reflect on and or express themselves in relation to the themes, including their degree of interest, engagement and cognitive challenge. Most texts are pedagogic, including general interest magazine articles, websites, radio shows, model essays and letters of application among the most frequent ones. The sample activities analysed involve different kinds of operations such as reading, listening or watching to extract information, discuss, compare, express opinions, and write texts like reviews and job applications. Still, as observed by Tomlinson et al. (2001) in a study of adult courses, texts often feel like mere carriers of language features and the activities do not generate high levels of intellectual and affective engagement. These limitations were also acknowledged by Cilia et al. (2004) who found that the texts in the adolescent courses analysed revealed limited variety of genres, lack of authenticity and superficial or very general treatment of the themes. In relation to the activities, the analysed samples coincide with Canh's (2018) observation that most focus on the factual information of the text and seldom prompt critical reflection and or a response from learners.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at studying the depth and breadth of coverage of the interest areas indicated by the upper-secondary EFL syllabus of Córdoba's schools in a sample of coursebooks to evaluate their suitability as course materials. In formal education, foreign languages are a component of the study programme and as such, must contribute to the overall education of pupils according to the values, ideals and aims of citizenship expressed in educational legislation. Results of this study reveal insufficient coverage of the interest areas in the coursebooks, both quantitatively and qualitatively, indicating that addition, one technique of materials adaptation (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018), is necessary. A case in point is comprehensive sexuality education, a topic that is largely ignored in ELT materials but required by Argentinean educational legislation, so that in teacher education settings,

raising awareness of the treatment of interest areas in coursebooks and the need for adaptation could prompt teachers “to assume agency in course design, materials development, and assessment” (Banegas & Evripidou, 2021, p. 131).

One limitation of this study is that it provides a static picture of interest topics in the materials that overlooks the mediating force of teachers implementing the curriculum. Thus, a study of how teachers deal with the absent themes, or their limited coverage would be a needed follow-up. Furthermore, this study focused on the variety of written, oral and audio-visual inputs provided by the materials. Given the relevance of different forms of graphic and pictorial information in the representation of ideas, a possible follow-up could consist in using social semiotics to analyse graphic devices (Tyrer, 2012).

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