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PhD revisited: Questions of culture and context in English language textbooks

A study of textbooks for the teaching of English in Norway

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ABSTRACT This chapter reports a doctoral study (Lund, 2007) that investigated four English textbook series for lower secondary school, published 1997–1999. The 1997 national curriculum introduced new perspectives on the role of cultural questions for teaching and learning English. The chapter describes how textbooks followed up these ideas only to a limited degree. It also describes recent developments related to questions of context and culture in foreign language education, and suggests further research.

KEYWORDS English language textbooks | culture | context | curricular guidelines

1. The chapter presents the overall results of a doctoral study (Lund, 2007) from the University of Bergen. The doctoral thesis can be found here: http://bora.uib.no/bitstream/handle/1956/2421/Dr%20Avh%20Ragnhild%20Lund.pdf?sequence=1

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INTRODUCTION

My doctoral study was inspired by the new perspectives in the 1997 Norwegian national curriculum (L97) on the role of cultural questions in the teaching and learning of English (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [KD], 1999). The curriculum pointed to the fact that successful communication “is not a matter of language skills alone”. Students also need to develop the ability to use the language in different contexts and to “communicate across cultural differences” (KD, 1999, p. 239). The curriculum argued further that foreign language learning provides an opportunity to become acquainted with other cultures. Such insight, it says, “lays the foundations for greater respect and tolerance, contributes to new ways of thinking, and broadens [the students’] understanding of their own cultural roots. This gives them a stronger sense of their own identity” (KD, 1999, p. 237).

Since the 19th century it has been customary to teach cultural topics as part of a foreign language course (Stern, 1983). Focus has most often been on the country’s (or countries’) history, literature and institutions (Hadley, 1993). The topics were often referred to as “background studies” (Risager, 1989), and the objective was to contribute to the students’ general education (Risager, 1987; Nelson, 1995). However, cultural issues can also have other, more central roles to play in foreign language education. Research has shown how a whole range of contextual and cultural factors are in play whenever language is used (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In order to be able to communicate in a foreign language, then, learners should learn to cope with these factors (Kramsch, 1993). Furthermore, since a foreign language is used first and foremost in situations when people from different cultural backgrounds meet, learners need to be prepared for cultural encounters and at least some of the challenges that they may involve. In order for successful communication to happen, learners need to develop cultural awareness and attitudes of curiosity and openness (Byram, 1989; Corbett, 2003).

To me, these new perspectives were reflected in the 1997 English subject curriculum, and in my doctoral study, I was interested to find out how they were interpreted and followed up in the textbooks that were written in accordance with the curriculum. My main research question was:

*How are questions of context and culture dealt with in present-day textbooks for the teaching of English in Norwegian lower secondary education?*
THEORY

Traditionally, learners have worked with the words and the systems of the foreign language without considering the contexts in which the language can be used (Stern, 1983). In the 20th century, however, a new awareness developed of the role that context plays in determining the meaning of language. The anthropologist Malinowski (1923) introduced the terms “context of situation” and “context of culture” and claimed that outsiders need insight into the context of a text or an utterance in order to be able to understand it. The linguists Halliday & Hasan (1985) pointed out how language only makes sense if it is placed within a context, and that texts and contexts are in fact two sides of the same coin. As soon as we hear or read a piece of text, we simultaneously interpret the context in which we encounter it.

For learners of a foreign language, it is obviously beneficial to acquire knowledge about the contexts in which the language can be used. However, while one may be able to identify some relevant situations of language use, it is impossible to prepare learners for all possible contexts. Therefore, it is just as important to help learners become aware of the role that different aspects of context play in any communication situation, and to prepare them to be able to cope with the complexity of it (Kramsch, 1993). English language skills will open for contact with different groups of people, from many different cultures. For users of a foreign language, insight into the interlocutor’s “context of culture” will be useful both in order to understand the references that are being made and to be able to use the language appropriately (Kramsch, 1993). However, “culture” is a complex phenomenon, and different perspectives can be taken when selecting the areas to be dealt with in a foreign language classroom.

Some scholars differentiate between “high culture” and “everyday culture”, or “big C Culture” and “small c culture”. While “big C Culture” refers to visible and often elitist manifestations of culture, such as intellectual and artistic achievements, “small c culture” refers to everyday practices of a specific group of people. “High culture” had precedence in foreign language classrooms up to the 1960s (Hadley, 1993). With the increased focus on the students’ practical language skills in the 1960s and 1970s, however, more topics related to “small c culture” were introduced. The idea was to prepare the learners for communication in everyday situations (Risager, 1987).

In foreign language education, as well as in common discourse, the notion of culture has often been related to specific countries and their populations (Stern, 1983). This understanding has been contested for several reasons. First, any nation state is the home of people from a variety of nationalities and cultural and linguistic back-
grounds, in addition to members of sub-cultures that may identify to varying degrees with the dominant culture (McLaren, 1995). Secondly, there is a movement away from the understanding of culture as something static, with clear boundaries between different cultural groups. Rather, culture has come to be seen as something which changes continually, and which is constantly renegotiated in meetings between people. Bhabha (1994) talks about the enunciation of a hybrid culture in a “third space”. Situations of communication between people from different cultural backgrounds constitute one arena where such a “third culture” can be built (Casmir, 1999).

In other words, there seems to be a movement away from the understanding that culture is something monolithic, linked to nation states. Many people – at least in the western world – will identify themselves with several cultural groups. Therefore, it can be argued that communication can be just as challenging between people from different cultural backgrounds within a nation state as it is between people from different nationalities. Rather than different cultures, one can talk about different discourse systems, and the challenges can be related to interdiscourse rather than intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

However, from the perspective of foreign language education, the difference between intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication is significant (Byram, 1997). In working to develop new language skills, learners will necessarily meet interlocutors, texts and other cultural expressions from backgrounds that differ considerably from their own. Preparing learners for cultural encounters therefore emerges as a crucial ingredient in a foreign language course. Moreover, since different languages and different cultures represent different ways of conceptualizing and understanding the world, foreign language education has come to be seen as a golden opportunity to expose learners to expressions of “otherness” and to increase their awareness of – and openness towards – cultural diversity (Fantini, 1997; Geertz, 1973).

However, in order for learners to become engaged in issues related to cultural encounters, they must be able to recognize the descriptions as realistic, believable and relevant. The presentation of “real” representatives for other cultures is seen as a central ingredient here. In order for learners to become interested, engaged and feel the need for further contact, Risager (1991) suggests that they should meet real people from the foreign country in micro level texts. Her notion of micro level texts refers to texts that present people who come to life as believable human beings with “feelings, attitudes, values and perceived problems” (Risager, 1991, p. 183).
REVIEW

Earlier research has shown that textbooks for the teaching of English have often included information about the two countries that have, traditionally, had the closest links to the language, namely the United Kingdom and the United States. Some textbooks, however, have included countries where English is used as a second language, and some have referred to countries where English is learnt as a foreign language. With reference to the fact that learners will need English language skills to be able to talk about their own experiences, other textbooks have prioritized topics from the learners’ own culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). At the same time, some textbooks have used cultural topics merely as “carrier content” in order to provide foreign language learners with something to relate their language use to (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

While both “high culture” and “everyday culture” topics have been included, textbooks have been criticized for a random selection of topics and for providing only a superficial picture of other cultures (Risager, 1991). Learners are often seen as potential tourists to the country in question, and the destination comes across as conflict-free and glossed-over (Byram, 1989). Research has also shown how many texts seem to take place in a “culturally neutral universe” (Henriksen, 1995, p. 119, my translation), or reflect the learners’ own cultural references more than those of the target language community (Kramsch, 1988).

Therefore, voices have been raised for the need for foreign language textbooks to focus explicitly on cultural issues, so that learners can meet expressions of “otherness” and thereby learn about other cultures as well as about their own (Kramsch, 1993). A parallel argument has been linked to the development of the learners’ language skills. Aspects of context also need to be examined and explored in order for learners to be able to understand how language is used differently in different situations (Vellenga, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on qualitative as well as quantitative methods. I analyzed the English subject curriculum and the textbook materials in terms of perspectives that address different aspects of my research question. The prose texts for reading and listening, which constitute the bulk of the material in the textbooks, were subject to quantification.
RESEARCH DESIGN

As a point of reference, I investigated the 1997 Norwegian national curriculum and the guidelines for work with questions of context and culture that the English subject curriculum provided (KD, 1999). In order to provide some historical background, I also investigated earlier curricula (from 1885, 1911, 1925, 1939, 1957, 1960, 1964, 1974 and 1987). My main material consisted of the four English language textbooks series that were produced in accordance with the 1997 national curriculum for use in Norwegian lower secondary school. These were *Catch 8–10* (Aschehoug), *Flight 8–10* (Cappelen), *New People, New Places 1–3* (NKS-forlaget) and *Search 8–10* (Gyldendal). The books were all approved for use in grades 8 through 10 by Norwegian authorities. I investigated the textbooks, workbooks (*Flight*), Teacher’s Guides, and CDs.

PERSPECTIVES IN THE ANALYSIS

The materials were analyzed in terms of four perspectives; (1) Culture-specific reference, (2) Countries, cultures and content areas dealt with, (3) Focus on questions of context and culture, and (4) The objectives linked to the material. All four perspectives were used in the analysis of the textbooks, while only perspectives 2, 3 and 4 apply to the analysis of the English subject curriculum (KD, 1999).

1 Culture-specific reference

Textbooks have been criticized for portraying a seemingly “culturally neutral universe” (Henriksen, 1995; Kramsch, 1993), and I wanted to investigate the degree to which this is a trait in the textbooks in my material as well. I coded the prose texts for reading and listening in the textbooks as having culture-specific reference, which means that they refer to a specific and identifiable cultural context, or as texts that refer to an unidentifiable and seemingly culture-neutral context. The texts in the former category refer explicitly or indirectly to a specific geographical area and/or a specific group of people, such as Native Americans.

2 Countries, cultures and content areas dealt with

With reference to the tradition of focusing on “big C Culture” topics from the United Kingdom and the United States (Hadley, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999), I looked for references to specific countries and topics in the English subject cur-

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2. The system of official certification of textbooks was abolished in June, 2000 (Selander & Skjelbred, 2004).
riculum. The textbook texts with culture-specific reference were coded in terms of which countries and content areas they deal with.

3 Focus on questions of context and culture
With reference to Kramsch’s (1993) call for an explicit focus on aspects of context and culture, I looked for specific references to such issues in the goal formulations and the guidelines and requirements in the national curriculum. In the textbooks, the commentaries, introductions, tasks and activities attached to the texts were investigated in terms of the degree to which – and the ways in which – they encouraged the learners to work with questions of context and culture.

4 The objectives linked to the material
As shown in the theory and the review sections, different objectives can be – and have been – related to work with cultural issues in a foreign language course, as English was in the 1997 curriculum. I therefore investigated the objectives related to the cultural material as they are expressed in the goal formulations and the requirements in the English subject curriculum (KD, 1999). In the textbooks, I looked for statements of intention in the prefaces and in the introductory texts in the teacher’s guides. I also investigated the texts, the commentaries to the texts and the activities linked to them in terms of the ways in which learners are encouraged to relate to the textbook materials and the positions they seem to be offered. Here, I built on the notion of the model reader, the reader that the authors had in mind when they put the book together (Eco, 1984).

DATA ANALYSIS
Initially, I identified the guidelines in the 1997 English subject curriculum related to the choice of cultural material. I also identified explicit and implicit references to objectives linked to work with such material.

Next, in order to get an impression of the relative distribution of textbook texts and topics, I counted the lines in the prose texts in each textbook, and coded them as belonging to different categories. First, I coded texts that referred to a specific cultural context in one group and texts that referred to a “culturally neutral universe” in another. Then, I coded the texts with culture-specific reference in terms of which countries and content areas they dealt with. The fictional and the non-fictional texts were coded separately. The length of the lines varied from text to text, and from one textbook to another, so a word count would have given a more precise quantitative rendering. However, for my purposes, the line count provided
a sufficient impression of the content of the texts. Based on the grouping of texts into different categories, my main analysis was a qualitative one. I did not see any reason to quantify the different tasks since it is only natural that the majority of them focused on linguistic issues. Instead, I looked for and identified examples of tasks that addressed questions of context and culture. I also identified the use of open versus closed questions, as this difference could impact on the learners’ positions vis-à-vis the cultural material.

While I wanted to investigate how questions of context and culture were dealt with in the national curriculum and the textbook series, I also wanted to shed light on the rationale behind the choices that had been made. I regarded my empirical material as part of a larger discourse, where the curriculum and the textbooks constituted a manifestation of the discourse at the same time as they contributed to maintaining certain structures of meaning. However, discourse analysis can reveal and counteract such perpetuation (Neumann, 2001). In order to reveal the sometimes-tacit understandings on which choices are being made, I looked for indications of these understandings in the objectives that seemed to be linked to the material.

RESULTS

The results showed that the curriculum’s requirements for each grade level and the textbooks only followed up the intentions expressed in the introduction to the English subject curriculum to a limited degree. While the introduction describes objectives linked to the learners’ cultural awareness and ability to communicate cross-culturally, the requirements and the textbook materials focus primarily on the development of the learners’ knowledge about “big C Culture” topics.

THE 1997 ENGLISH SUBJECT CURRICULUM (L97)

The introduction to the 1997 curriculum describes English, first and foremost, as a language for international communication, and it argues that learners need English language skills in a variety of different domains and settings.

Countries, cultures and content areas dealt with

In the curriculum requirements for each grade level, however, the scope is limited to “the English-speaking world”, with a particular emphasis on the United Kingdom and the United States. Learners are to work with central texts from these
countries’ literary canon, and 36 specific literary texts are mentioned (or, in some cases, non-specified texts by specific authors). Only *Gulliver’s Travels* by the Irish author Jonathan Swift is mentioned from a country other than the UK or the US. When it comes to cultural topics, students are expected to learn about “historical and current developments in English-speaking countries” (KD, 1999, p. 244). The requirements for grade 8 mention “schools and education, current affairs and art”, while grade 9 should provide knowledge about “geographical conditions, important events and people, and music, films, and graphic art” (KD, 1999, p. 245). These topics can be said to reflect the tradition of “background studies” (Risager, 1989), with an emphasis on the presentation of the countries’ “high culture”.

**Focus on questions of context and culture**

L97 provides specific requirements when it comes to the literary texts and the cultural topics that students should acquaint themselves with. In addition, the introduction to the curriculum makes explicit references to the objectives linked to the students’ work with questions of context and culture.

**The objectives linked to the material**

The goals presented in the introduction to L97 are, as already mentioned, linked to the development of the students’ ability to “communicate across cultural differences” (KD, 1999, p. 239). Encounters with other cultures are expected to broaden the students’ understanding of their own cultural roots and lay “the foundations for greater respect and tolerance” for those of others (KD, 1999, p. 237). The requirements for each grade level, however, seem to signal that the objectives have to do with the development of the students’ general knowledge. The requirements do not refer to the goals presented in the introduction, nor do they indicate the relevance of the texts and the topics in relation to these goals. It therefore remains unclear how students should proceed in order to develop their intercultural communication skills and attitudes of cultural understanding. It is stressed, however, that learners should be allowed to “meet”, “discover” and “explore” texts and other cultural expressions. These references, along with repeated reminders of the need for learners to talk about their own experiences and express their own views, can be said to open for learners’ personal engagement with the cultural material.
THE TEXTBOOK SERIES

The textbooks provide a wealth of texts and topics about the English-speaking world. The main intention seems to be to balance central information about the different countries with topics that the learners will find interesting and motivating.

Culture-specific references

When deciding whether a text refers to a specific cultural context or not, I looked for the use of place names, names of well-known people and culture-specific terminology such as “A-levels” (UK) and “the great Irish famine” (Ireland). Introductions that inform readers about the author of a piece of fiction and illustrations also helped place a text in a culture-specific context. The coding of the prose texts for reading and listening shows that all four textbook series have relatively few texts without culture-specific references. Flight has the highest proportion of such texts, 29 per cent, while the figures for Search and Catch are 14 and 16 per cent, respectively. Only 12 per cent of the texts in New People, New Places (NPNP) cannot be placed in a specific cultural context. However, the culture-specific reference was often quite vague and difficult to detect. One reason for this lies with the books’ obvious desire to appeal to the learners and their interests. Many texts deal with topics such as leisure activities, friends and relationships. The characters portrayed have dogs as pets, they enjoy listening to American popular music and going to the movies, and they have parents who embarrass them. Despite the use of English names, many of these texts may come across as reflecting most Norwegian learners’ own cultural background.

Many texts present people with experiences, interests and concerns that the learners will recognize from their own everyday life. This goes for example for texts that describe relationships between children and parents and between men and women. No mention is made of the fact that some of the situations would be rather unlikely in many parts of the world and that the language used may not be equally inappropriate in any context. Since most of the commentaries and activities linked to such texts do little to point out the culture-specific traits, many opportunities for learning about questions of context and culture would probably be lost.

Countries, cultures and content areas dealt with

Most of the non-fictional texts with culture-specific references deal with issues in the United Kingdom and the United States. An obvious explanation for this lies in the close ties between these countries and Norway and in the countries’ central posi-
tion in the English-speaking world. Since the learners already know quite a bit about these countries, it is natural to think that it will be motivating for them to learn more.

Many other English-speaking countries are presented as well, with a main emphasis on Australia, India, Ireland and South Africa. The intention here seemed to be to show how English is used in a variety of countries around the world. It is worth noticing, however, that issues related to differences in language and language use are not given priority. Only *New People, New Places* makes a point of preparing learners to talk about Norway and typical traits of Norwegian culture. In a series of “Norwegian pages”, the learners are provided with illustrations and vocabulary that can be used as the starting point for oral and written activities.

The content areas fall into three categories, namely History and cultural heritage, Contemporary issues and general information, and Presentation of individual people. The great majority of texts fall into the first category, and many of these texts present information about the authors of fictional texts. The textbooks apparently aimed to contribute to the learners’ general education in providing information about famous authors, such as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Ernest Hemingway. Learners can also read about historical people and events such as Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement (*Search 10*). There are many anecdotal stories about famous people, and there are also historically oriented texts about phenomena such as Levi’s jeans (*Flight 8*) and Coca-Cola (*Search 10*).

A considerable number of the texts that deal with contemporary issues and general information are written from a tourist’s perspective. This goes for typical destinations in the UK and the US, but famous sights in Australia and India also receive due coverage (*Catch 9, NPNP 1, Search 8, Search 9*). The intention seemed to be to provide the learners with varied and motivating glimpses of different places in the English-speaking world. *Search* is the textbook series that emphasizes cultural information to support the development of the learners’ communication skills. Here, learners are helped to distinguish between the terms *British* and *English*, for example, and they are told about the significance that 4th of July and Thanksgiving have for speakers of American English. The textbook series provide few opportunities for learners to meet non-fictional presentations of individual people from other countries. Dialogues, interviews and even monologues are often designed to provide factual information or exemplify vocabulary and structures rather than to provide encounters with “real people”.

Approximately 40% of the fictional texts are excerpts from well-known literary works. Canonical texts from the UK and the US are well represented, but the textbooks go beyond the suggestions from the English subject curriculum (KD, 1999) and include many literary texts from other parts of the English-speaking world as well. The
fictional texts present many “believable” representatives from other cultures. More than half of these texts are excerpts from children’s or young adults’ fiction, and deal with issues that seem to link up with the learners’ interests and concerns. In this way, they provide good opportunities for the learners to relate to and possibly become personally involved with the characters portrayed. At the same time, many of the texts have only vague references to other cultures. Rather than opening the students’ eyes to cultural diversity and helping them develop the respect and tolerance that the English subject curriculum asks for, then, these texts may convey the understanding that young people’s experiences are essentially the same wherever they live.

Other fictional texts are presented in connection with information-focused ones. Here, learners are informed about an issue such as immigration to the United States, the conflict in Northern Ireland or the history of Native Americans. Then, a fictional text provides them with insight into the same issue from a personal perspective. In appealing to the learners’ emotional involvement, the latter texts can probably add much to the learners’ understanding.

Only *New People, New Places* has a section which explains the phenomenon “literary classic” and dwells a little on ways in which canonical texts often make their way into other domains, such as the film industry. One chapter in *Search* focuses on what good literary texts can offer in terms of inspiration and models for the students’ own writing. Other than this, little emphasis is given to providing learners with insight into the literary quality of the texts. There is also a lack of information about the texts’ and the authors’ significance in the society in question. The textbooks also include a small portion of crime and mystery stories, fairy tales, legends and myths. These seem to be chosen in order to fit in with the topic of the chapter, to add an element of entertainment, and to provide examples of different types of literary texts. The myths and legends are typically linked to information about indigenous peoples such as the Aborigines in Australia and the Native Americans in the United States. Poetry and songs are spread out throughout the textbooks. They fit in with the chapter topic, but they also provide encounters with the different countries’ cultural heritage. In a chapter about animals, for example, learners can read “To a Squirrel” by W.B. Yeats, and “Little Lamb” by William Blake (*Search* 9). In a chapter about love and friendship, they can read “My love is like a red, red rose” by Robert Burns (*Catch* 10).

**Focus on questions of context and culture**

The table of contents and the chapter headings in the textbooks signal that knowledge about the English-speaking world is a central ingredient in the course. Each
textbook in each series contains one or more headings, such as “Cool Britannia” (NPNP 1), “The Land Down Under” (Search 8) and “Going Places – USA” (Catch 9). However, the Teachers’ Guides and the prefaces to three of the series do not dwell on the reasons why the students should work with these topics. Rather, the inclusion of cultural material seems to be regarded as such an obvious part of learning English that it needs no further justification. Only the Search Teacher’s Guide refers to the new perspectives in the 1997 curriculum and explains what the formulations there about language, context and culture imply.

Relatively few of the introductions and the commentaries to the textbook texts help draw the learners’ attention to issues of language use in different contexts or to the cultural content of the texts. Rather, a common strategy is to appeal to the students’ curiosity, or to establish a link with their own experiences. Before a text about the Tower of London, for example, learners get these questions: “Do you believe in ghosts? Would you like to meet one?” (Flight 10, p. 32). Before a text about King Henry VIII, they are asked to consider royal scandals that they have read about (Search 9).

Most of the introductions that do address cultural content provide extra information. In connection with fictional texts, students often get to know about the author or, if the text is an excerpt, about the rest of the work in question. Sometimes, the introduction helps place a text in a specific cultural context, for example when it provides background information about the people involved. Other introductions provide information that gives the learners a head start when it comes to understanding the text that follows. In this way, these introductions also help underline the importance of the cultural content of the texts.

Some information-focused texts are followed by comprehension questions. Although most of them ask for detailed pieces of information that can be “lifted” directly from the text, they do provide an opportunity for learners to go through what they have just read and to reinforce learning. On other occasions, questions and tasks focus on the learners’ own experience at the expense of the cultural information provided in the text. After a text about a South African girl’s experiences in school, for example, students are asked to talk and write only about their own school experiences (Search 10).

**The objectives linked to the material**

The textbooks signal that a main objective with the cultural material is to contribute to the learners’ general education. They expose the learners to influential works of fiction from the English-speaking world, and they provide information about some well-known people and central historical events.
Search, however, signals that the students are also expected to develop into knowledgeable and engaged citizens of the world. This is signaled in the textbook topics and, most of all, in the number of open questions, which is higher than in the other series. The learners are encouraged to express their own understandings and interpretations of a range of different issues, and they are asked to present their own opinions and to discuss their own concerns. In this way, Search provides many opportunities for the learners to develop their own voice as users of English.

This can be seen as an attempt to meet the curriculum’s call for students to acquire “new ways of thinking” and to provide them with “a stronger sense of their own identity” (KD, 1999). Students’ opportunities to reflect independently and critically on a number of different issues can also contribute to “the foundations for greater respect and tolerance” mentioned in the curriculum (KD, 1999, p. 237). It remains unclear even in Search, however, how students are expected to develop the ability to “communicate across cultural differences” (KD, 1999, p. 239).

DISCUSSION: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ENGLISH DIDACTICS FIELD

The doctoral study presented here points to the ways in which one generation of English language textbooks deal with questions of context and culture. It also indicates how these issues could be handled differently in textbooks in the future. In the following, I present empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions of my study, in addition to implications for teaching English, and future research.

EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

One empirical contribution of my work is to show that the objectives related to the cultural material can be seen in the model reader (Eco, 1984) that the textbook authors seem to have had in mind, or the positions that are made available for the learners. It comes as no surprise that students are, first and foremost, addressed as learners of the English language. This is seen in the great majority of exercise material that follows up linguistic aspects of the textbook texts, encouraging various forms of language practice. However, the relatively large number of information-focused texts and excerpts from canonical literature signal that the learners are also expected to develop into knowledgeable and well-educated youngsters. Another obvious position for the students is that of a potential tourist. Many of the presentations of famous sights and attractive destinations are clearly written in order to motivate the students and arouse their desire to travel.
My investigation shows that the textbooks provide considerable amounts of information and encounters with a variety of fictional texts. Most of them have to do with the United Kingdom and the United States, but many other parts of the English-speaking world are represented as well. While the intention must be to provide students with knowledge about the texts and topics presented, the importance of this knowledge is undermined by the fact that commentaries and tasks rarely follow up the cultural material. As a result, one gets the impression that it is not very important whether the learners remember much of the material presented or not. The juxtaposition of significant and rather insignificant issues also seems to reduce the importance of the information provided. Central texts and topics are often presented next to “fun facts” and inconsequential stories, seemingly in order to motivate the students and to provide an element of entertainment.

The textbooks contain many dialogues that exemplify language which can be used in different situations, for example at a dinner table or when buying tickets for a show. These dialogues present useful vocabulary and structures, and the intention is clearly to provide learners with “core” language that they can use in similar situations. At the same time, many of them show different conventions of language use, for example related to polite ways of addressing someone or showing gratitude. However, the commentaries and exercises to these dialogues rarely follow up these aspects of language use. The same thing can be said about the questions and tasks related to the fictional texts, which hardly ever draw the students’ attention to the many, varied examples of language use that these texts provide.

It may only seem natural that the great majority of tasks focus on linguistic aspects of the texts, since the primary objective of the textbooks is to contribute to the development of the learners’ language skills. Still, it seems strange that the textbooks contain so much information about other countries and provide so many encounters with people from other cultural backgrounds when so little is done to help learners remember and reflect on the material. Even texts that represent other countries’ literary canons are, most often, followed up exclusively for linguistic purposes. After having read about Jonathan Swift and Gulliver’s Travels, for example, students are asked to practice the genitive s on the basis of sentences like these: “Gulliver’s Travels is read all over the world. It’s Swift’s most famous book” (Flight 8 Workbook, p. 179).

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Previous research has investigated textbooks’ selection of countries and content areas, the occurrence of culture-neutral texts and the (lack of) focus on questions
of context and culture (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Henriksen, 1995; Kramsch, 1988). Research has also investigated the model readers of educational texts (Aamotsbakken, 2006). My doctoral study brought these perspectives together and applied them to an analysis not only of the texts, but also of the introductions, commentaries, questions and tasks in the textbooks.

**METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION**

In using quantitative as well as qualitative methods, the study indicates which texts, topics and objectives are given priority in the textbooks, linking this insight with a more nuanced discussion of the material. The study illustrates how explicit and implicit requirements in curricular documents can be a point of reference in the analysis of textbooks and other teaching materials. It also shows that in order to get a full picture of teaching resources’ affordances, they need to be analyzed from different perspectives.

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

The investigation was conducted more than ten years ago. Since then, a new English subject curriculum has been launched (UDIR, 2006) and accordingly new textbooks have been written. While the curricular objectives and guidelines related to questions of context and culture remain quite similar, the new generation of textbooks has undergone considerable development.

My own investigation of English language textbooks produced in accordance with the 2006 curriculum shows that the new textbooks for grades 8 through 10 all included more substantial information about other countries and cultures than the textbooks from 1997–1999 did. The choice of texts and topics signaled a will to contribute to the development of the students’ cultural insight and understanding, and many questions and tasks encouraged the learners to take a stand when it comes to controversial issues and global challenges (Lund, 2012).

Other investigations show that the cultural content still often consists of superficial facts about the target country. Vatja (2012), for example, found that French language textbooks in Sweden provide a stereotypical and unrealistic picture of France. When investigating textbooks for the teaching of Spanish in Norway, Eide (2013) found that they, too, provide overly harmonious renderings of the target country, and that the learners are placed, first and foremost, in a position as observers or potential tourists. In their investigation of images in English language textbooks for Norwegian lower secondary school, Brown and Habegger-Conti
(2017) found significant differences in the ways white people and people from indigenous cultures were portrayed. They conclude that the visual representation of indigenous peoples contradicts the curricular aims related to cultural issues as they may promote rather than challenge myths and stereotypes.

When it comes to the relationship between language use and questions of context and culture, my investigation showed that the textbooks written in accordance with the 2006 Norwegian curriculum concerned themselves with this only to a limited degree (Lund, 2012). Nguyen (2011) found the same tendency in English language textbooks in Vietnam. She shows that the textbooks fail to provide learners with realistic models for language use and that they also lack sufficient explanations of the pragmatics at work in situations where people from different cultures communicate. According to her, textbook authors need to inform themselves about the growing body of literature on cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics and to make use of this insight in their future work.

The formulations in the 1997 and 2006 Norwegian national curricula echo an increased awareness internationally of the relationship between language, context and culture. Since the turn of the century, much work has been done to describe the role that questions of context and culture can have in foreign language education. Focus has been on what to teach as well as the ways in which such issues can be worked with in the classroom.

Summing up the situation in Europe, Byram (2014) holds that policy documents have adopted the view that cultural and intercultural perspectives have an important role to play. He also refers to the substantial work that has been done when it comes to the development of pedagogical principles and practical teaching and learning materials. However, he claims that most teachers still lack an understanding of the significance of intercultural issues and of the relationship between intercultural competence and linguistic competence, and that the issue of assessment is still insufficiently developed.

Intercultural communicative competence has been a buzzword in foreign language education for decades, and Byram’s model of five “saviors” has been particularly influential. Byram posits “the intercultural speaker” as the goal for foreign language instruction, and claims that this involves “curiosity and openness” towards other cultures and a “readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (Byram, 1997, p. 57). The Norwegian scholar Hild Elisabeth Hoff (2014) is among those who have criticized Byram’s (1997) model for being not only unrealistically harmonious; it may also be counterproductive in the way that it glosses over the possible challenges involved in cultural encounters. Risager (2007) brings Byram’s views a step further in linking intercultural
competence to a sense of global responsibility. The interculturally competent person, she argues, looks at him- or herself as a citizen of the world, with knowledge about the challenges in the world and a willingness to do something about them (Risager, 2007).

Other scholars have discussed the implications that postmodernist views of culture have on work with intercultural issues and on the tradition of “culture studies”. Dervin (2015), for example, warns against focusing on cultural differences, as this may perpetuate rather than counteract stereotypes. Instead, work with cultural issues in education should involve a continuous questioning of appearances and understandings. Kramsch (2013) links culture directly to language use, and claims that culture can only be seen in “the meaning that members of a social group give to the discursive practices they share in a given space and time and over the historical life of the group” (Kramsch, 2013, p. 69). Modern forms of communication, not least digitally, contribute to this understanding of culture. Still, she argues, the teaching of culture will always be marked by a need to “identify, explain, classify and categorize people”. This, however, needs to be balanced with necessary space provided for the changing understandings and positions of the users of the language (Kramsch, 2013, pp. 71–72).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

Byram’s (2014) claim that policy documents have adopted the view that cultural and intercultural perspectives have an important role to play in foreign language education certainly holds for the 2006 Norwegian national curriculum (LK06). The English curriculum here underlines the need for learners to learn how the language is used in different contexts and to be able to “take cultural norms and conventions into consideration” (UDIR, 2006, p. 1). It also stresses the role that the subject has when it comes to promoting “greater interaction, understanding and respect between persons with different cultural backgrounds” (UDIR, 2006, p. 1) and the development of “knowledge about, understanding of and respect for the lives and cultures of other people” (p. 2).

However, as recent research shows, adequate teaching and learning materials related to questions of context and culture in English and foreign language education have yet not been developed. There also seem to be deficiencies in the training of language teachers related to such issues and, consequently, in the teachers’ awareness and skills when it comes to implementing work with them in the foreign language classroom (Byram, 2014). The call for increased efforts in order to meet today’s curricular requirements must therefore be addressed to all actors in
the field: teacher educators, authors and producers of textbooks and other educational media, as well as teachers of English and foreign languages, and students.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As the previous discussion shows, the possibilities for further research are many. One area relates to textbooks and other educational media. What kinds of cultural material do they contain? Which understanding of “culture” do the materials convey? How are learners expected to work with the material, and what are the objectives linked to this work? This research could be based on content analysis of existing materials. Another area focuses on teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the role that questions of context and culture can have in foreign language education. Here, it would be natural to use interviews as well as observation, and the notion of teacher cognition (Borg, 2006) can be a central point of reference. Yet another area relates to classroom work. How do teachers and learners work with questions of context and culture as part of foreign language education? Which texts, topics, perspectives and activities are given emphasis? This research could be based on surveys, interviews and/or observation. It can also be linked to intervention studies, where different materials and approaches can be tried out and examined.

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TEXTBOOKS AND NATIONAL CURRICULA


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