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Research area and introduction:

This paper examines, analyses, and discusses online portal teaching material on New Zealand from Alinea. A national approach, including central key concepts within intercultural learning, is taken in the analysis of the material with the aim of deconstructing it and becoming aware of potential pitfalls when using the given material in an EFL classroom as a teacher. Such pitfalls could be reproducing national stereotypes. Additionally, the paper seeks to qualify the material and suggest additional and alternative elements and approaches to overcome the beforementioned pitfalls and to give a more nuanced and diverse depiction of New Zealand. Further, the intention with such suggestions for further qualification of the material is to contribute to and enhance the students' intercultural learning.

The beforementioned online portal teaching material has the title "Culture – New Zealand", it is from the publishing house Alinea, and it serves as the practice element and the subject of scrutiny in this paper. The author of the material is Signe Holst Hansen, it is indented to be taught in the 5th and the 6th grade, and it is estimated to cover 7,5 lessons (Hansen, 2021)

The choice of material fell on New Zealand, as we found it interesting to focus on the minor target language countries, as there seems to be much more choice in teaching materials, when it comes to larger target language countries, such as The United States of America, Australia, Canada, or United Kingdom. Risager and Svarstad claim that the teaching material on the minor countries such as New Zealand, South Africa, and India tend to be more stereotypical, simplified and tourist oriented, which is not justified as the cultures of those countries are just as diverse and complex. In that sense, there seems to be a hierarchy that portrays a more complex culture, the bigger and more powerful the country is, both politically and economically (2020, p. 89). Due to this imbalance, we found it interesting to assess, analyze and qualify teaching material on a minor country.

In Common Objectives for the subject of English, which defines and determines how English should be taught in the Danish school system, the Danish Ministry of Children and Education write that culture and society is a crucial part of language learning, as a language always should be

regarded as being and taking place in a cultural frame. As a result of that, intercultural competence is needed to maintain successful communication. Further, according to Common Objectives, culture should be tackled as a dynamic concept that constantly changes and develops, rather than a static one. It means, for instance, that culture is being created among people and that a person is not only its culture and does not represent the whole culture. In the context of the teaching material on New Zealand, it is equally important to highlight that culture is not seen as the same as a nation state (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019, p. 79). I seek to adopt this understanding of culture in my analysis and discussion of the teaching material.

In line with the understanding of culture in Common Objectives, I particularly agree with the fact that language cannot be separated from its cultural context, which requires intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness, and by qualifying this material, the aim is to enhance these competences among the students. As Risager states, it is one of the important aspects of being an active and engaged global citizen (2017, p. 148).

As it appears in my outline, the concrete research question that I intend to answer in this paper is formulated as following:

How can Alinea's portal material on New Zealand be qualified by using a national approach to help decode and deconstruct representations? foster students' development of critical cultural awareness?

I consider it necessary to disclaim that the last part "foster students' development of critical cultural awareness?" has by mistake not been deleted before submission, which is why only the first part will be focused on.

Key concepts

A national approach considers the world as separated and divided into nations. One way of organizing it could be the 193 member countries of the United Nations. With this approach, it is important to be aware of, not only which country or countries the focus is on, but just as importantly, what countries are left out, and why. It is also important to be aware of what type of reference, in teaching material for example, there is. Indirect, brief or an actual focus on the country. (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 81-83).

Obviously, it is impossible to work with and study all target language countries, so choices must be made. Risager and Svarstad argue that it is important for the teacher to be aware of own choices and be able to argue for their choice to the students. Further, the students must at least be aware of the other target language countries. (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 85-86).

It is also important for the teacher to be aware that we all have blind spots in our world view, (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 84) but being aware of that can help overcome it to some extent.

The notion of blind spots is one of the reasons as to why we chose to work with New Zealand, as it is a potential blind spot, at least to some extent, for a lot of students and probably also for some teachers.

Another key concept and crucial and fundamental component of intercultural learning, and more concretely, critical cultural awareness, is perspective awareness. The reason it is important to reach an awareness of one's perspective when working with culture is that it is a condition for being able to "decenter" oneself, which is another concept in intercultural learning. Decentering means being able to see the world from another perspective – preferably several different ones. It is important to consider, when working with a given topic, what one's Danish perspective might add to one's understanding of it, and what it is about being Danish that might affect one's interpretation. Would a student from another country interpret the same thing in a different way? Being aware of perspective opens for more critical and complex reflections on culture. (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 34).

In continuation of perspective awareness, Dypedahl introduces the term multiperspectivity, which is a plurivocal approach. To understand the complexity and the diversity of a culture or a social context, it is important to have different voices represented. To get a more nuanced picture, it is sometimes necessary to include conflicting voices. If including different voices is not possible in the teaching material, it is at least possible to discuss different perspectives (Dypedahl, 2020, p. 64-65)

Representation is equally a key concept in this context. The concept belongs to the field of cultural studies and the essence of it is that a representation cannot be neutral. When an artefact is chosen in for example teaching material (images, text, music etc.), something else is necessarily left out. If a given artefact is a photograph, it is important to reflect on when it is taken, its historical context, who has taken it, what is the photographer's intention, the angle, who is the recipient, and what reaction will the recipient give. (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 124)

As already mentioned, some of the teaching material on individual countries, especially when it comes to the minor English-speaking countries, can be rather simplified and fact-based. This type of description can be relevant for contextualization and background knowledge, but if the material does not dig deeper than what is found in touristic brochures, the students will not be presented to the complexity of the culture of the given country (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 89) However, the intention with Landeskunde is to give broad and varied descriptions of countries and different dimensions of their culture, history, and society. Such cultural topics can also be referred to as big C culture (Dypedahl and Lund, 2020, p. 16) When working with Landeskunde, it is important to be aware of what dimensions are chosen, why are they chosen and from what perspective are they described (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 90).

When analyzing teaching material that focuses on an individual country, and thereby describes an entire country and its population, the term national stereotype is often relevant. When such descriptions are made, there is a risk of simplifying and generalizing the traits and characteristics of the population. Sometimes it ends up with representations of popular beliefs far from reality (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 91). Risager and Svarstad claim that the national stereotypes are always just below the surface and kept alive in the media and within politics as part of the discourses, which makes it difficult to overcome them even when a teacher in the classroom tries to draw the students' attention towards cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic differences in a country or

present them to a variety of different perspectives. There is heavy debate on how to avoid and overcome such national stereotypes in language teaching, most efficiently (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 91).

The original people of New Zealand

As a representation of New Zealand, the author has chosen to bring in the “original people”, the Māori people. The teaching plan includes short text pieces on the historical background and the traditional “haka dance” and a video, where two young men of Māori descent show how to perform the dance. In fact, the section about original people covers one out of four chapters, although it is combined with the theme “wildlife”. The fact that it covers a relatively large part of the teaching course indicates that the author has considered the Māori people as an essential part of New Zealand’s culture. The image that covers the front page is equally a Māori, so the author has chosen it to be the symbol to represent New Zealand in this case.

There is a risk that this portrait of the Māori people can contribute to the reproduction of a national stereotype of the culture. The fact that the Māori are given such an importance in the material is rather predictable and expected, as it might be one of the first things that many Danes, and maybe even many Western Europeans associate with New Zealand. It is easily recognizable. It might not give a realistic representation of the role that this part of the culture plays among the population their self-perception. In general, the material seems to promise too much when it comes to representation

The national stereotypes are not necessarily inherently negative, as it is presented as a cultural thing that they are proud of and that they cultivate actively. The challenge rather regards the potential misrepresentation of it: that its depiction might be distorted (and exaggerated) and given too much importance.

The material fails to touch upon the way that Māori culture interacts and co-exists among the other cultures. We are not presented to anything that tells us about how it is to be Māori in today’s New Zealand, for instance, a native that would explain how they identify and perceive themselves. New Zealander, Māori, both, something else? There are two young men of Māori decent showing a haka dance, but is that representative of their own lives and own culture or were they asked to participate in the video because of their decent? Thus, the material seems to treat this topic as rather isolated from other cultures of New Zealand, for example “Kiwi” (another chapter in the course plan), which gives it quite a static view of culture, which is not the intended way to teach according to Common Objectives. It is also referred to as an essentialist view of culture (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 86).

A way to qualify the teaching material would be to apply a more plurivocal approach and include multiperspectivity. It would have improved the quality of the teaching material to a great extend to have brought in different voices to tackle the topic of the Māori. When including different voices (and hopefully different mentalities) and perspectives, it is preferable to have as many as possible (to a reasonable degree) but also to look for variety and diversity in the people behind those voices

to get as nuanced a picture as possible. In this case, it could be relevant to include different people from Māori decent (maybe some that identify a lot with it and others less) with different profession, ages, gender, socioeconomic status, and geography. (Dypedahl, 2020, p. 65).

Such voices could be introduced through authentic materials such as novels, newspaper articles, songs, but also online material has great potential. For example, YouTube has a lot of material suited for cultural and language learning. Dypedahl argues that if such material is used in culture-specific learning, it is helpful for decentering as it can bring them in a new communication situation. (2020, p. 65).

Further, it requires critical cultural awareness from the teacher, and it is important as a teacher to bring in questions for the students that make them reflect, challenge and make them aware of their perspective, and to be critical towards the material. In the material on New Zealand there are none or few questions for reflection, but only questions to check understanding.

Risager and Svarstad also claim that the teacher is active and conscious of one's language use. If used in the right way, it can potentially contribute to avoiding some cultural generalizations. For instance, the students could be given chunks such as "some New Zealanders think..." and "They are just as different as us Danes". (2020, p. 91-92). So it is about making the students aware of the way we express ourselves about culture and make them used to it.

New Zealand for tourists

The fourth chapter of the course plan is called "Tourism in New Zealand", and it provides facts, numbers, historical descriptions and images about the major cities, the nature, some cultural sites, such as Hobbiton and the sport, rugby. Unfortunately, this is an example of Landeskunde being reduced to facts that could be found in a tourist brochure or in a reference work like Wikipedia (Risager & Svarstad, 2020, p. 89).

The information and beautiful images are to some extent captivating and interesting, and it can make you want to learn more about and even visit New Zealand, but because it stands alone without any questions for reflections or any tasks giving opportunity for interaction with the culture, it remains rather superficial and insufficient. It does not foster any deeper involvement in the culture.

Perspective awareness is again an important competence to assess how the culture is portrayed. In the case of this teaching material, we are left with the impression that the cultural elements that are included are selected by a foreigner or an outsider (the Danish author) and that they are targeted other foreigners or tourists. It is questionable how representative the highlighted representations of New Zealand's culture(s) are.

To qualify this part of the material, it could also be relevant to include multiperspectivity, even though this is more focusing on big C culture, as opposed to the Māori, which was more of a small C culture topic. The multiperspectivity could be included by focusing on one or more of the representations, such as the city of Wellington, and regard it from the perspective of different

natives that live there. Once again, it is important to bring in a diversity of voices (Dypedahl, 2020, p. 64).

General qualifications and supplementary

For more general qualifications of the material as such, it could be beneficial to make use of the pedagogical tool, the cycle model of intercultural learning, which can not only be used for analyzing and qualifying available teaching material but also for planning one's own teaching plan. In particular, the material lacks activities or tasks that belong in phase 3 (analysis of images and texts, decentering, contextualize etc.) and phase 4 (discussion, multimodal production, interaction etc.) (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 38). The only activity that has a degree of interaction is writing a postcard with minimal scaffolding (three chunks). There is foundation for bringing in activities that allow the students to engage deeper in the culture. For further student involvement and engagement, the teacher could bring in more current affairs (e.g. political debates that captivate the students) and work with the perspectives from New Zealand.

Furthermore, it could have been interesting to bring in more transnational elements and more references to other countries, especially Denmark. There are a few factual comparisons (like size of the country and the population) but the isolated focus on one country can make sense when focusing on more fact-based information which is country-specific, but less meaningful when talking about cultural aspects, as it can make us blind to those aspects that cross borders. Thus, it would be interesting to work with New Zealand as part of the region or in relation to other target language countries (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 93)

However, such direct cultural comparisons, especially when it comes to behavior, should be handled with caution, as there is a risk of simplifying, generalizing, and reproducing national stereotypes (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 91).

Conclusion

The part of the teaching material on the original people of New Zealand tends to reproduce some national stereotypes, however not negative. It risks giving a slightly distorted depiction of the Māori culture and giving it too much importance. This chapter would benefit from more multiperspectivity, preferably through authentic material. Furthermore, it would benefit from being supported by questions that encourage reflection and raise perspective awareness.

The chapter on tourism gives an interesting depiction of New Zealand, but it does not manage to dig deep into the culture, as it remains rather superficial and like a tourist brochure. The students would benefit from being required to interact or reflect on elements in this chapter. Once again, this chapter would benefit from bringing in different perspectives and voices to add more nuance to the perception of the cultures of New Zealand.

More generally, the cycle model of intercultural learning would be a useful pedagogical tool to ensure more reflection, perspective awareness, interaction and discussion in the work with the teaching material.

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