

ACADEMIA

Accelerating the world's research.

Analysing culture in learning materials

Karen Risager

Want more papers like this?

[Download a PDF Pack of related papers](#)

[Search Academia's catalog of 22 million free papers](#)

Analysing culture in learning materials

Karen Risager

Professor Emerita, Cultural Encounters/Intercultural Studies, Roskilde University, risager@ruc.dk

Published online in *Sprogforum* 59, 2014.

The learning materials that are specially produced to be used in language teaching have – naturally enough – a linguistic main aim. First and foremost, they are to help the pupils (course participants, students) to develop their oral and written skills. But the materials will also contain certain other dimensions which are traditionally summed up by the word ‘culture’, but which can be many different things, including more or less explicit information about or references to social relations, political relations and historical context, the way of life and identities of various groups, values and norms, and cultural connotations of the words and expressions that appear in the texts, conversations and exercises of the materials.

If one wishes to gain an understanding of the role of learning materials in education and society, one has not only to consider the communicative activities and exercises they contain but also all the ‘culture’ to which they are linked. This is all the more interesting since the cultural content, in many instances, is not the result of systematic subject-based considerations but is of a more non-reflected and thereby ideological nature. Normally speaking, the writers are language people not social scientists or something similar.

Three types of approach

Since the 1970s, and the 1980s in particular, a great number of analyses of culture in learning materials have been carried out internationally for the various language subjects, especially in textbook systems for beginners (see, for example, Andersen & Risager 1977 and Risager & Chapelle 2013). Below, I will present three commonly used types of analytical approach, illustrating each of them by a couple of small examples of actual analyses. The three types of approach are: thematic analysis, intercultural analysis and power and empowerment analysis. Each is based on its own view of culture and cultural learning – views that all co-exist in present-day language subjects:

Thematic analysis typically means that culture is regarded as a large number of *topics*, e.g. in relation to everyday life, society, history, etc. For this reason, cultural learning is mainly regarded as the acquisition of factual, ‘objective’ knowledge as a necessary supplement to communicative competence. Intercultural analysis typically means that culture is regarded as a diversity of the various *perspectives* of individuals and groups, their various types of knowledge about the world by virtue of their different life stories. Cultural learning is therefore mainly seen as developing the awareness of the learner about various socio-cultural perspectives and identities and their implication for (intercultural) communication, empathy, cooperation and conflict resolution. Power and empowerment analysis typically means that culture is regarded as an arena for *conflicts and ideologies*, and cultural learning is therefore mainly seen as developing the learner’s capacity to reflect on the major political and social issues of society, and cultural learning is thereby a contribution to his or her development as a critical and involved citizen and world citizen.

All three views of culture and cultural learning can be relevant and useful, and to a certain extent they overlap each other. Many analyses include several of them in one way or other, e.g. Eide 2014 (this number), which contains all three (see below). But it is important to be aware of how one weighs up the various analytical approaches in relation to each other: Is it (a lack of relevant) factual knowledge that is mostly centre stage in the analysis? Or is it the diversity of perspectives on and challenges to intercultural communication? Or is it the critique of power and ideology?

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is the commonest and also the oldest form of cultural analysis of teaching materials. The aim here is to create an overview of the image a textbook, or a quite large number of textbooks, provides of the target-language country (or countries), taking special account of the information provided about the countries. Cultural learning is focused on as the acquisition of knowledge, first and foremost knowledge about the target-language countries. Typically, one will examine what subjects or themes the textbooks contain – in relation to geography, history, political structure, education, media, everyday life, etc.

We find an example of thematic analysis in Eide's article (see this number). It is an analysis of cultural representations of Latin America in textbooks on Spanish for use in Norwegian schools. Eide divides the texts of these books into factual texts, i.e. texts that deal with Latin American countries and/or cultural phenomena, and situational texts, where we meet the textbook characters in various situations. Among other things, she finds out that the dominant themes in the factual texts are encyclopaedic information (population figures, currency, flag, outline of the country) or information about certain cultural phenomena such as typical dishes and 'the day of the dead' (Mexico), football and tango (Argentina), or music and dancing (Latin America in general), while the focus in the situational texts is either on young European tourists in Latin America or on young people in Latin America with everyday lives and interests that are similar to those of young Scandinavians.

Another example of thematic analysis is a quantitative analysis on a major scale, carried out by Dechert and Kastner (1989) in USA in the 1980s. This has to do with cultural topics in 10 textbooks of German as a foreign language in the American high school (upper secondary), covering the first two years of teaching. To begin with, the writers, on the basis of the subject-related discussion among German people in USA, compile a list of 99 subjects, e.g. church and religion, the lifestyles of ethnic groups, Austria-Hungary, biographies of German-speaking artists and composers. Obviously, the actual organising of such a catalogue of subjects will be related to time and place and contemporary discourses, and also to the fact that here we are dealing with precisely German and not other languages.

The textbooks are now examined, and all references to cultural aspects are noted. After this, the authors count how many words have been used in relation to each of the subjects. Finally, they also make a statistical analysis of all 10 textbooks taken together, in order to find out which of them resemble each other most when it comes to choice of subjects.

Other thematic analyses of textbooks have been interested in contributing to making the picture of society in the textbooks more 'true' or balanced, based on the assumption that the picture of society present in the textbooks is skewed in a statistical, demographic sense. Quite a large number of

analyses of gender roles in textbooks, for example, have been carried out, in which one has also counted just how many women/girls are represented in the text (and in the illustrations) in relation to men/boys, and what social activities they take part in. In this way, one has been able to show gender stereotypes in many textbooks.

Many of these investigations have an important quantitative dimension: How many different subjects have been included, how much space has been given to each subject? It is possible, for example, to count things that are manifest in the text: words, sentences, chapters, headings, and possibly also illustrations. One does not perhaps adopt a conscious interpretative stance to the messages of the textbook, but moves (or attempts to move) over the surface of the text, so to speak. This form of quantitative analysis is of course well-suited to computer-based analysis, where one finds and counts units in a delimited corpus and processes the result statistically. But no matter what emphasis one places on the quantitative dimension, there is always a qualitative one, since one's choices are always based on some conception or other of what is interesting in the material: Is one interested in the distribution of gender roles? In national stereotypes? In the norms and values of the 'indigenous' people? In the everyday lives and interests of the pupils? In the pupil's activities as citizens? In cultural and linguistic diversity and the North-South issue (cf. Eide 2014)? In the overall picture of society (cf. e.g. the model in Risager 1991: 182f)?

Intercultural analysis

The aim of an intercultural analysis is to clarify the various socio-cultural perspectives and identities there can be in the texts of the learning material, including assignments, etc. The main focus has typically been on (national-)cultural perspectives related to the target language with regard to the pupils' own language on the basis of a fundamental assumption that particular languages are bound up with particular cultures. But it is also possible to conceive analyses that problematise the traditional national paradigms of language subjects (the idea that the national language is inseparable from the national culture) and attempt to draw attention to the ethno-cultural diversity of the society and such transnational themes as, for example, the identity problem area of migrants and refugees (Risager 2003, Risager 2007). An intercultural analysis can also deal with other perspectives: social, religious, age-related, lifestyle-related, etc. There are many different methods here, including ones that look at who is given a voice in the text or the fabricated conversation: Is it the author? Is it the pupil talking in the target language? Is it a person who speaks the target language as his or her native language?

Eide's analysis (Eide 2014, this number) also includes an analysis of the voices in the textbooks. In the factual texts she finds that it is the anonymous and authoritative voice of the author speaking, whereas in the situational texts she finds that it is the constructed textbook characters who speak, since they appear as authentic. It can be young people who are European or Latin American, but when the Latin American voices are allowed to speak, it is often on European premises, e.g. by appearing in interviews where it is a European who asks the questions.

An example of a large-scale intercultural analysis is Auger (2007). She analyses 42 French books from 13 different European countries (including four from Denmark: *On y va tous 3*, *Tricolore 3*, *Passe-partout formule F plus*, *Franskbogen*), all produced outside France. These are textbooks for beginners/false beginners and advanced students.

Auger chooses a particular form of intercultural analysis, enunciation analysis (inspired by French research in *énonciation*). She looks at how cultural representations emerge in the discourse (the running text or dialogue), i.e. what linguistic means the writer uses, and here she distinguishes between cultural representations of 'the other' (*l'autre*): the target language, the target-language culture and the target-language speaking persons (French and France), as opposed to 'the same' (*le même*): the pupils' language and culture, e.g. Danish and Denmark. What makes the analysis an enunciation analysis is that there is special focus on the relation between author and pupil in time and place. This means that at all points in the discourse the analyser asks: What type of presence does the author have here? What does the pupil possibly imagine the author's intentions and identity position are here?

If, for example, it says in the textbook: 'Nous, Français, nous aimons nos cheveux et notre liberté' ('We French love our hair and our liberty'), it can at first glance be read as a statement from the Frenchman, but it can also be read as a statement from the author who is placing his or her view of Frenchmen in the mouth of a Frenchman. The question in the enunciation analysis is then to work out what the author in his/her (indirect and hidden) dialogue with the pupil comes to represent: Danish identity (since the author in one way or other implies that he/she is adopting a Danish perspective on the French), French identity (since the author implies that he/she is adopting a French perspective on the French), or in certain instances a European identity (since the author by the use of 'we' is referring to something that can cover both the Danish and the French at the same time).

In her investigation, Auger notes all occurrences of words that refer to what is French: France, Français (Frenchman), français (the language), francophone, francophonie, français (adj.), francs (the currency). She also notes eventual occurrences of words that refer to the pupils' own nationality. In each case she can then make a closer analysis of the surrounding discourse of the words in question and work out how a picture of France is built up. In this part of the analysis many examples are found of how the discourse creates and models national stereotypes. She also notes all occurrences of 'je', 'tu', 'vous', 'nous', and their discursive context is analysed. In that way, Auger can examine who, for example, the I is in individual instances, and what identity position it is the expression of: The author who indirectly steps forward? The pupil who speaks in a fabricated dialogue? A native-speaker who speaks in a fabricated dialogue? The pupil solving a task?

This analysis, which however does not include a particular explicit problematising of the national paradigm, sheds light on the interplay between many different perspectives, angles, attitudes and identities in relation to the world and the societies involved. We may be dealing with perspectives that clash with each other or complement each other or are in a dialogue with each other. The analysis can possibly show if the author of the textbook is attempting to demonstrate possibilities of illuminating and clarifying the perspectives of various groups and persons and of mediating between them.

Power and empowerment analysis

The aim of power and empowerment analysis is to analyse the power relations that the learning material is part of and an expression of: The analysis can, for example, be interested in the limitations that typically derive from the capitalistic production conditions and market considerations of the learning materials industry (e.g. subjects such as religion, sex and war can be

avoided in textbooks that also are to be sold on the American market), or it can be interested in how certain teaching material contributes, or does not contribute, to a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for social and racial inequality.

One of the very common approaches to power and empowerment analysis is critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1997). The aim of critical discourse analysis is to analyse existing power relations by favouring those dominating rather than those being dominated. There is a focus on if or how the textbook deals with conflicts and inequalities in society and in the world. It may be possible to show that the textbook is characterised by, for example, colonial discourses (the colonising powers or the former colonising powers are favoured, as if this was something natural), urban discourses (the town is favoured rather than the country, as if this was something natural), patriarchal discourses (men are favoured, as if this was something natural), and there are many more besides: social class discourses, consumerist discourses, economic discourses, etc. An important point in these analyses is that the world picture in the publisher-produced textbooks must be seen in the light of the market conditions and the demands and expectations of the consumers (Gray 2013).

Eide 2014 (this number) also includes such power-critical reflections, since she problematises a number of recurrent discursive features: Mention of Latin America only takes place via mention of the individual countries, i.e. the national paradigm predominates (national discourse). Mention of the countries is characterised by a harmony-seeking approach, where inequality between North and South is undercommunicated, and the overall perspective is European or Eurocentric (colonial discourse).

As an example of a slightly more developed critical discourse analysis one could mention Ilieva (2000). She analyses extracts from a textbook in English for adult immigrants in Canada, designed for course participants just past the beginner stage. The basis is three text extracts from a section on shopping centres as seen in Canada (*department stores*), and the point of departure for the analysis is the questions: What is considered to be cultural knowledge in the texts? Whose view of culture is presented in the texts? Do these texts allow the students to examine and negotiate their own cultural experiences in the new Canadian context?

Ilieva mentions that the texts describe the history of commerce in Canada without including that of the Indians or Inuits (colonial discourse) and presents *department stores* as the climax of the history of commerce, understood as the result of a natural development, not of a capitalist development, where the possibilities for investment and profit govern the course of events (capitalistic discourse): The texts also deal with *department stores* as if everyone in Canada uses them irrespective of income (class discourse that favours the middle class).

Generally speaking, Ilieva believes the content of the textbook constitutes semantic possibilities that teachers and students can interact with in different ways – they can submit to them, agree with them, negotiate with them, oppose them, etc. But she does not believe that the texts she has analysed provide sufficient possibilities for the experiences and reflections of the students as immigrants in Canada can come forward. She also seeks evidence of a more self-reflective position on the part of writers of textbooks. When producing textbooks, they ought to have a high level of awareness concerning where they themselves stand, socially, culturally and politically speaking, and think about what their attitude is towards the dynamics and conflicts of society. Do such attitudes find expression in the material, and if so – how?

All types of material can be the subject of cultural analysis

It is especially actual textbooks that cultural analyses are made of, and in particular of texts and images where the textbook author himself or herself presents the target-language countries, or of already existing literary texts that the textbook author has selected in order to give an impression of relations in the target country. It is in such texts that views of society and culture most often directly and cohesively find expression.

But in principle all types of material can be the subject of cultural analysis. Even examples and exercises that are extremely linguistically oriented, e.g. exercises on the use of the negative in the target language, can always be interpreted into some cultural context or other. One textbook will perhaps – in connection with a section of negations – contain an example like ‘Tivoli is *not* open yet’ (Tivoli being an amusement park in Copenhagen). Why choose Tivoli to refer to precisely here? Here we are dealing with a subject area one perhaps could refer to as (tourist) knowledge about Copenhagen, and are there perhaps other references to knowledge about Copenhagen or Denmark in the material? An obvious topic for a thematic analysis that focuses on areas of knowledge. Another textbook will perhaps prefer examples that emphasise various identities, e.g. ‘I do *not* eat meat’ Here we are dealing with a vegetarian identity, one of many socio-cultural identity constructions one can imagine, and perhaps there are more of the same time in the material. This could be an obvious topic for an intercultural analysis that focuses on relations between individuals and between groups. Or a third textbook will perhaps prefer an example as ‘Diana is entitled to vote, but José is *not*.’ Here we are looking rather at a formulation of power and inequality, and it may well be that the exercises in the textbook contain other material with direct or indirect references to social and political issues? This would be an obvious subject for a power and empowerment analysis.

All contribute to the construction of culture

Finally, it must be emphasised that even if it is obvious to have as one’s point of departure the possible view of the author on culture, society and the world, it is just as important to consider how the individual reader – the teacher and learners and others – construct images of culture, society and the world on the basis of what the author has written. One cannot say that the learning material expresses one particular picture of the world. The author provides a *presentation*, a semantic potential that readers work on and react to, or react against, on the basis of their own knowledge and life-experience. One of the potential readers is precisely the analyst, who studies the learning material with his or her particular background and particular theoretical and methodological glasses, as well as particular view of what cultural learning is and ought to be.

Literature

- Andersen, Helga & Karen Risager (1977). Samfunds- og kulturformidling. In: Esther Glahn et al. (eds), *Fremmedsprogpædagogik*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 27-55.
- Auger, Natalie (2007). *Constructions de l’interculturel dans les manuels de langue*. Cortil-Wodon, Belgium, E.M.E.

- Dechert, Christiane & Peter Kastner (1989). Undergraduate student interests and the cultural content of textbooks for German. *The Modern Language Journal* 73, 178-191.
- Eide, Liv (2014). *Latin America* in textbooks for Spanish. What is mediated and what voices are heard? *Sprogforum* 59 (this number).
- Fairclough, Norman (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gray, John (ed.) (2013). *Critical Perspectives on Language Teaching Materials*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ilieva, Roumiana (2000). Exploring culture in texts designed for use in adult ESL classrooms. *TESL Canadian Journal* 17(2), 50-63.
- Risager, Karen (1991). Cultural references in European foreign language teaching textbooks: An evaluation of recent tendencies. In Dieter Buttjes & Michael Byram (eds), *Mediating Languages and Cultures*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, ss. 181-192.
- Risager, Karen (2003). Det nationale dilemma i sprog- og kulturpædagogikken. Et studie i forholdet mellem sprog og kultur. [The National Dilemma in Language and Culture Pedagogy. A Study in the Relationship between Language and Culture]. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.
- Risager, Karen (2007). *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Risager, Karen & Carol A. Chapelle (2013). Culture in textbook analysis and evaluation. In: Carol A. Chapelle (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. 5 sider, on-line. Wiley/Blackwell.
- Van Dijk, Teun (1997). The study of discourse. In Teun van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Structure and Process*, 1-34. London etc.: Sage Publications.