

Immigrants in ELT Books

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Abstract (English)

The aim of this paper is to provide a brief overview of how immigrants are depicted in modern ELT books and how frequently they appear in them. In order to address this issue we analyzed a random sample of most frequently used ELT books and briefly described immigrant-related content. Immigrants do appear in all books we analyzed, although there are certain differences in how frequently they appear and in the ways in which they are described. The only common feature of these books is that they offer almost identical pictures of modern society and multiculturalism.

Abstract (Italiano)

L'articolo intende analizzare le modalità di rappresentazione della figura del migrante nei libri per le didattiche dell'inglese. A livello metodologico, l'analisi si riferisce a un campione di testi per l'insegnamento dell'inglese più utilizzati e ai temi relativi a questa figura. In tutti i testi presi in esame, emerge la figura del migrante, sebbene vi siano differenze nella frequenza con cui viene presentata e nei modi in cui viene descritta. L'unica caratteristica comune di questi testi è che tutti raffigurano, in maniera quasi identica, la società moderna e il fenomeno del multiculturalismo.

Introduction

Virtually all modern societies are ethnically diverse, and this diversity is growing due to immigration. Although people have always been forced to move, this tendency became more prominent in the 20th century, while in this century the number of immigrants is increasing more than ever. Regardless of whether a particular society is a single community which recognizes cultural diversity or consists of several communities, it is certain that people who come from other countries, i.e. immigrants, play an important role in developed countries, particularly in those where English is spoken as the first language.

Target culture in ELT books

Most ELT books, regardless of whether they are published in English or non-English-speaking countries, contain elements of the target cultures. These target cultures are most often British or American, and they have already proven to be flexible and prone to incorporating other cultures. According to Samovar et al. (2010, 39), cultures “often adopt those outside elements that are comparable with their existing values and beliefs, or that can be modified without causing much disruption.” UK, USA and other English-speaking countries are home to millions of immigrants, and their cultural impact is clearly visible in their societies. Since ELT books usually describe various characters in typical situations, it is no longer acceptable to portray only characters based on continental European stereotypes of a typical white American or British character, whose name is

John or Tom, who enjoys playing baseball or drinking his five o'clock tea, but on common people who live in these countries, regardless of their origin. Immigrants are more or less well-integrated into English-speaking societies, and as Kramsch hypothesizes, Americans do not have the category of outsiders, or as she put it in German, *Ausländer*, “because they expect anyone who lives in this country to ‘belong’ here, to be an insider, irrespective of whether they are actually citizens” (Kramsch 2003, 9). This distinction is important, since most of the US population are immigrants by origin, while the British population consists of immigrants, people whose ancestors were immigrants and are British-born and those who are native inhabitants. Thus, we decided to focus on British ELT books, because they are dominant in Europe and are very popular among teachers and students alike and because the category of outsiders is more easily distinguishable in them.

Regardless of many problems that immigrants face, it is certain that the target cultures are aware of them and have become more diverse and heterogeneous due to their cultural impact. A realistic representation is necessary for the books to successfully convey the multicultural contexts of the target societies. The books we used for the purpose of this paper fulfill this condition.

Who are immigrants?

Who are immigrants? According to Collins English Dictionary, an immigrant is “a person who comes to a country in order to settle there”, although this definition can be found in almost every major dictionary of English (Oxford, Webster, etc.) with no significant differences. However, in order to further explain who immigrants are, it is necessary to use a related concept – the Other. According to Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2004, 23), the Other refers “to any group of people perceived as different – perhaps in terms of so-called ethnicity, religion, political alignment, class or caste, or gender”. If we adhere to this definition, we can deduce that an immigrant is necessarily the Other, but it is not vice versa, since the Other can be a native born of the same ethnicity, religion, race etc., but whose political stance or sexual orientation can be perceived as different by the group he/she belongs to.

However, in many cases it is difficult to identify immigrant characters, because it is not always stated whether a character who appears in the text is simply a foreigner who wants to learn English, who is temporarily in a foreign country (e.g. an expat, tourist, etc.), or someone whose parents or grandparents were immigrants, but he/she is not an immigrant. All these characters bring the textbook closer to the foreign student and/or immigrant who uses it, while immigrant characters demonstrate that the society in question is multicultural and provide examples of how different people can live and function together. For the purpose of this paper, we will classify immigrant characters into three categories: *explicit immigrants*, whose status is clearly stated, *presumed immigrants*, whose status can be assumed, and *immigrants by origin*, whose ancestors were immigrants, but the characters themselves are native born and correspond to the term *second-generation immigrants*.

Immigrants in ELT books – examples

Although this paper is focused on contemporary ELT books which are used all over the world and in English-speaking countries, the reader should bear in mind that many ELT textbooks, or to be more precise, their “ancestors”, were actually written for immigrants. According to Howatt and

Widdowson (2004, 12) “the first textbooks designed solely to teach English as a foreign language do not appear until the late sixteenth century after the arrival of large numbers of French Huguenot refugees”. The most important part of this statement is that these books were designed for foreigners who left their country as refugees, but many of them certainly continued to live in England as immigrants. The authors do not provide much information on whether these materials directly mentioned French refugees and the problems they faced, but it is certain that they were what contemporary marketing experts call “target buyers”. However, the authors inform us that these materials usually comprised texts in two languages, useful everyday phrases, some grammar and vocabulary.

On the other hand, many modern ELT books are written for everyone, i.e. for people who want to learn English, regardless of whether they want to stay in their country or want to live in an English-speaking one. In short, contemporary ELT books are written to cater to as many people as possible and do not focus on immigrants as a group, although they provide some material that helps them integrate into the new culture.

In order to provide a general overview of how immigrants are represented in ELT books, we decided to analyze a random sample of frequently used ELT books. The books we analyzed are the following:

- Comyns Carr, J. and J. Parsons. 2007. *Success Upper-Intermediate*. Pearson Longman.
- Goldstein, B., G. Holley and R. Metcalf. 2008. *Framework*, Level 5. Richmond Publishing.
- Harmer, J. 2011. *Just Right*, Intermediate, Marshall Cavendish.
- Healan, A. and K. Gormley. 2013. *Close Up*, C1. Cengage Learning EMEA.
- Jeffery, P., M. Lloyd and B. Goldstein. 2009. *New Framework*, Upper-Intermediate 4. Richmond Publishing.
- Latam-Koenig, K. C. Oxenden and P. Seligson. 2012. *English File, Third edition*, Elementary. Oxford University Press.
- Norris, R. 2008. *Ready for FCE*, Macmillan.
- Puchta, H. et. al. 2005. *English in Mind* 3. Cambridge University Press.
- Soars, J. and L. Soars. 2012. *New Headway*, Pre-Intermediate. Oxford University Press.
- Soars, L. and J. Soars. 2009. *Headway Intermediate*, Fourth Edition. Oxford University Press.

After analyzing these books, it turned out that every one of them featured immigrants in one way or another in at least one unit. However, immigrants are seldom in the focus of the lesson, although they do appear in reading, listening, vocabulary or grammar activities or in photographs. There is an exception in *Just Right*, where there is a text about Vedran Smailović, a cellist from Bosnia, who left his war-ravaged country and is now living in Manchester. It is stated that he worked with Yo-Yo Ma, a French-born American cellist of Chinese descent; although Mr. Smailović's story makes it clear that he is an immigrant, whereas Yo-Yo Ma is simply described as a successful musician, and his immigrant background is not elaborated upon as is Mr. Smailović's.

Ready for FCE contains a reading comprehension activity with a not very typical story about a British family who lives in France and raises their multilingual children in Brittany. Technically

speaking, this family could be classified as emigrants from the British perspective, although they are immigrants in France.

New Headway Pre-Intermediate Fourth edition features immigrants in several lessons and activities. To begin with, there is a Ukrainian lady living in Ireland who remembers the Chernobyl disaster. In Unit 6 there is a lesson about multiculturalism in London which describes how different people live and work together in the same street and is followed by interviews with several immigrants, i.e. a Turkish florist, a Chinese doctor, a Colombian restaurant-owner and an Indian dentist born in Kenya. The next unit contains a text about a woman from Germany who moved to the UK when she was a child and became a famous archaeologist. Apart from these characters, whose status is unquestionable, there are also some minor characters whose names, origin and/or ethnicity are explicitly stated, but we do not know whether they are just international characters or immigrants.

Close Up C1 does not contain texts about immigrants or with immigrant characters. However, some immigrants can be recognized from the photos, although they can be described as presumed immigrants, or immigrants by origin, and there is a listening activity in which explicit immigrants are mentioned. This listening activity is included as extra material, which means that it is not always likely they will be mentioned during the course.

Headway Intermediate, Fourth Edition, explicitly mentions immigrants in a listening activity (a Spanish mother, Bolivian father and their bilingual children who live in England), and they appear in just one photograph.

Framework, Level 5, contains a text about two immigrant girls who live in France and are trying to reconcile their religious beliefs with the new law which bans wearing religious symbols in public schools. In this case, the immigrants do not live in an English-speaking country, although they live in a Western country.

New Framework Upper-intermediate 4 provides an activity focusing on a poor refugee from Afghanistan, who had to cross several countries to find a safe environment. The entire activity is focused on the plight of refugees and on what happens to them until they are granted asylum. Of course, in this case, the character has two statuses – first, he is a refugee, and later he becomes an immigrant. The same book contains other immigrant characters in a speaking/listening activity. Their names, physical appearance and the suggested discussion about multiculturalism are very likely to address various aspects of Western democratic values.

Success Upper-Intermediate also features immigrants. However, in this case, there are several activities that focus on Westerners immigrating to other countries in the past and on family histories of people who are of immigrant origin (Unit 1). However, this section is focused on Europeans who left their countries and on how other continents were populated by Europeans.

English in Mind 3 provides a variety of texts and activities which focus on immigrants and multiculturalism. Unit 1 provides a very short listening activity which mentions various foreigners who live in the UK, which seems to be an indirect warm-up for a text about cultural influences, in which it is stated that “Britain has a long history of influence from other cultures”, starting with Romans 2000 years ago, and then moving on to modern immigrants and providing basic information about artists of immigrant descent. The next unit contains a text about two deaf children of Latin American descent who live in California, while one of them is described as an explicit immigrant, who

had moved to the US with his parents. There is also a short grammar exercise based on a text about a British teacher who works abroad. There are also two short similar exercises in other units that feature immigrants, i.e. a vocabulary activity about a Spanish girl living in London (unit 16), and a listening activity followed by a short text about the singer and songwriter Dido (same unit). Furthermore, the same unit contains a text about happiness based on an interview with a famous American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is an example of a successful immigrant. His immigrant origin is more or less obvious from the text, since he mentions his own experience as a child during World War 2. Although he does not mention his country of origin, as he is living in the U.S, the reader with some background knowledge in history can easily conclude that he spent his childhood in Europe. His professional biography, which is not available in the book, proves that this is correct. Finally, *English in Mind 3* features a recurrent character from Hong Kong, who appears as a character in several texts and is depicted as someone who has British friends and seems to be fully integrated.

Although designed for elementary students, *English File* also has a number of activities that involve immigrants. However, their status is not always clear from the context, since some activities involve people from other countries without stating whether they still live there or not, while some activities briefly mention world-famous immigrants, for example Yehudi Menuhin, without providing further information about their immigrant status.

Discussion

After analyzing these books, it is possible to draw some general conclusions about them, while taking into account the particularities that each book offers. First of all, what all these books have in common is multiculturalism, which is part of English-speaking societies and is addressed by every author, both directly and indirectly. As an important part of Western societies, multiculturalism is today nearly always present in descriptions of these societies in ELT books and is often utilized, both explicitly, i.e. by including texts which inform the reader about its values, or implicitly, which means that it can be perceived from the values incorporated in the text, photographs, activities and other types of content. A realistic representation of society is important, both because of its didactic value and because of the target group, which includes foreigners, some of whom are immigrants.

Concerning the representation of immigrants, it can be concluded that every book we analyzed deals with immigrants in one way or another, although immigrant characters usually play minor roles, with the exception of *English in Mind 3*, in which the immigrant character appears in several texts and is represented together with British-born characters.

Close Up C1 and *Headway Intermediate* Fourth edition seems to have the least immigrant-related content, and *Success Upper-Intermediate* is focused on Westerners living abroad, while immigrants who live in an English-speaking country are under-represented.

There are two kinds of setting in which immigrants live: they can be foreigners who came to live in an English-speaking country or nationals of an English-speaking country living abroad. On the one hand, foreigners who live in an English-speaking country are often described as people who had to escape a war-ravaged or poverty-stricken country or those who simply wanted to have a better life and decided to leave their home-countries seeking a better future somewhere else. On the other

hand, characters from English-speaking countries are usually professionals, but the reasons why they left their country are either vague or are based on their decision to experience something new and see other countries. We might say that there is some bias here, although we cannot deny that there are many people in English-speaking countries who would have been able to stay at home and to find decent jobs.

Stereotypes are usually avoided, although some emerge inconspicuously (e.g. a refugee from Afghanistan in *Framework 5* or a Ukrainian lady associated with the Chernobyl disaster described in *New Headway Pre-Intermediate*). But we cannot say that they are negative or that they are not based on what really happened to many people from the group in question. In fact, we can conclude that some of them simply have stock roles. Furthermore, immigrant characters do not have negative roles, but positive (e.g. in *English in Mind 3*) or neutral ones, which means they are simply described as people doing their jobs without any further data about their personalities. We can also add that immigrant characters often act as bridges between nations and cultures and their attitude toward their new country is always positive.

Concerning the representation of society in which immigrants live, we can describe this as a reflection of an almost ideal society. To be more precise, immigrant characters in these texts do not face the many problems they can actually encounter in real-life situations, such as rejection by the members of the local community or even discrimination. Many Western countries do their best to maintain the functionality of their societies and to promote multiculturalism, and authors of ELT books seem to be following that practice. Most of them tend to see the world through rose-colored glasses and simply avoid mentioning problems immigrants might face. In fact, this statement is very similar to some critiques of multiculturalism, and particularly to an argument that “multiculturalism refuses to acknowledge social problems connected with immigrants” (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010, 9).

Finally, there is a question which is very difficult to answer – are immigrants sufficiently represented in modern ELT books? It is our opinion that they deserve more space in some of the books we analyzed for a number of reasons. First of all, many immigrants are the primary users of these books, since English is for them a second or a foreign language and they might find it easier to identify themselves with the characters and/or content of the books. Other users of ELT books, who are learning a foreign language, might also find it useful to see how the target culture works, what it involves and how multiculturalism is incorporated in the whole picture of a particular society.

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