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How to choose the right English language textbook?

Summary

The book market in Slovakia is overloaded with various language books offered by prestigious publishing houses. The “international” textbooks are rather very general, not paying attention to cultural and language peculiarities which are different for each country and culture. Modern teaching approaches call for cross-curricular relations and the content of teaching might differ in every country. National books have the advantage of including cultural and language specifics of the particular country, connect contents of various schools subjects and take into consideration the needs of “home” language teachers with the aim to improve and develop specifically the sides of language systems and skills that are particularly necessary for students of their country. The paper analyses three English language textbooks for third grade of primary schools. Two textbooks are from major international publishing houses and are the most popular in Slovakia. The third book is written by Slovak authors and is new to the market. The method of document analysis was used to compare contents of linguistic and cultural diversity and supporting development of intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competences of pupils.

Keywords: English language teaching, criteria for textbooks, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity

English language education in Slovakia and recommended textbooks

In 2007 a new concept (767/2007) of the foreign language education was introduced in Slovakia. The compulsory foreign language education has been brought forward to the third year of primary school (age 8–9). The aim was to provide effective foreign language education for very young children, because at early age children begin to form key attitudes towards other languages and cultures and these might remain for the rest of their lives (Konceptcia..., 2007). In 2011 the Slovak parliament passed an amendment to the School Act (245/2008) about English becoming the compulsory first foreign language to be taught at primary schools (Ministerstvo školstva 2011).

Because English language is a compulsory foreign language from the age of eight, there are a great number of English language textbooks on the market. The Ministry of

Education in Slovakia provides a list of approved textbooks which are recommended for English teachers to use. This list includes more than 30 textbooks for third grade of primary schools and there are only 3 textbooks written by Slovak authors (Edicny portal 2015). Schools and teachers can choose any books according to their preferences. However, it is not an easy choice to make. Teacher trainers are taught that textbooks are only teaching aids and that they should not be religiously followed. Nevertheless, it would require a super human teacher to teach without a textbook. A good textbook should be flexible in content, as pupils are not at the same learning level, should provide rounded experiences that must be filled with variety of activities to maximize learning. Good textbooks should provide learners as authentic experiences as possible to make them feel that they are a part of some special “English cultural” environment. Each textbook should also offer enough supplemental materials including games, extra texts, dictionaries, recordings and videos. According to Lepionka (2008), a good textbook teaches, has good content and organization and is expressed in a good voice and style. She claims that some good books failed because they missed their market or were somehow mismanaged and some poor books succeeded because of the publisher’s aggressive sales campaigns.

Criteria for selecting a textbook

As was mentioned earlier, there are many English textbooks to choose from. Major publishers keep teachers aware of new and old “reliable” materials with advertisements, catalogues, conference displays and talks, and seminars. Very often, new textbooks from minor publishers have to provide a lot more to be able to find its place on the market. Nevertheless, teachers have a very difficult position to choose the right textbook. It is recommended for them to follow certain criteria. Weddel (2009) recommends teachers to look at the certain criteria when choosing the right textbooks. According to Daszkiewicz (2015) personal experience is a strong criterion for teachers in choosing a textbook. Often, language teachers prefer textbooks which include many extra materials, especially technology connected, e.g. exercises for an interactive board (Mala 2011; Vesela et al., 2014). The following list includes criteria according to Weddel (2009):

- is in correlation with the national and school curriculum,
- is up to date, contains relevant content,
- takes into account linguistic and cultural diversity of the population,
- promotes intercultural awareness,
- contains learner-centred materials and content,
- contains teacher-friendly instructions and materials,
- integrates all four language skills,
- incorporates life skills,
- respects principles of particular age group and these should be implemented in format, context and design,

- develops receptive skills before productive skills, especially with young learners,
- addresses a variety of learning styles (aural, oral, visual, kinaesthetic),
- contains exercises in which learners share previous experience with prior knowledge of the content,
- incorporates different methodologies and techniques: natural approach, communicative approach, TPR, conversations, drills, role play, information gap, jazz chants, problem solving, etc.
- teaches grammar and vocabulary in context and they should be recycled,
- provides sufficient student practice,
- provides clear, authentic and appropriate voice and sound of audio-visual materials,
- is age appropriate in design and format,
- is affordable and can be reused, etc.

Horvathova (2014) pointed out importance of choosing a textbook according to learning strategies they address. Successful learning of a foreign language requires the use of learning strategies (a hinge between the learners' resources and what they can do with them). Good textbooks should not contain as many strategies as possible; they should rather develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies, which can help learners to overcome difficulties in language learning and language use.

One of the major movements in schools in Europe is standard based education. If teachers like it or not, the system forces them to reach certain standards with their pupils. Pupils should know and be able to learn what is set in advance. Educational standards are developed by professional organizations and students, teachers, parents, administrators should know what students are expected to learn (Harris, Carr 2009). Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR 2001) provides a basis for the elaboration of language curricula, syllabi and textbooks across Europe. National curriculum in Slovakia is also based on the CEFR and it provides guidelines and requirements for specific levels of language proficiency. Consequently, one of the most important criteria for choosing a textbook is compliance with the predetermined standards of the national curriculum.

Document analysis of chosen textbooks and their appropriateness for Slovak learners

The two textbooks published by major international publishers and one textbook written by Slovak publisher were chosen for the analysis. The international textbooks belong to the most popular in Slovakia. The first book is "Family and Friends" written by Simmons and published by Oxford University Press in 2014. The textbook is on 110 pages, consists of 15 units, starter, revisions after every third unit, plus grammar reference at the end. The second book is "English Adventure" written by Worrall and published by Pearson Longman in 2005. The textbook is on 70 pages, consists of 8 units, starter, reviews after every second unit, plus short units on New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and Our

World. The third is the Slovak book “Cool English School” written by Reid, Kovacikova, Labudova, Mihalikova and Turecekova and published by Taktik in 2015. The textbook is on 103 pages, consists of 8 units, starter, revisions after every second unit, plus short units on Halloween, Christmas and Easter.

Three English language textbooks for the third grade of primary school were analysed. We analysed the textbooks according to chosen criteria of relevance for the Slovak learners. The criteria were chosen from the Weddel’s (2009) list and they are: linguistic and cultural diversity of the population and development of intercultural awareness. The aim of this research study was *to find out how the three chosen textbooks fulfil the criteria concerning the linguistic and cultural diversity and how they develop intercultural awareness of learners.*

The research questions of document analysis are in correspondence with the research aim:

- *How do linguistic features in the chosen textbooks reflect the diversity of the learners’ population?*
- *How do cultural features in the chosen textbooks reflect the diversity of the learners’ population?*
- *How do the chosen textbooks develop intercultural awareness of learners?*

Document analysis was the chosen research method in this study. Documents (in this case, textbooks) have been written by skilled professionals and contain valuable information. The advantage of document analysis is little or no reactivity on the part of the writer, because documents were not written with the intention of being researched. Unobtrusive methods are used for the analysis and the outcomes can provide a new perspective on the field. The method of coding and categorizing is applied for processing the research data. Data are categorized by grouping them around certain phenomena and codes represent the content of each category. All the coding and analysis should be based on constant comparison between materials (Flick, 2009).

In this research three textbooks of English for third grade of primary school were analysed. Linguistic features for the analysis were concerned with pronunciation, because segmental and suprasegmental phonology is quite different in both languages and native pronunciation can strongly interfere in English pronunciation. Therefore, we looked at pronunciation exercises and if they dealt with phonemes or other aspects of pronunciation which are either absent or different in the Slovak language.

Cultural features were analysed according to the categories and codes, which were based on the Reid’s (2014) classification of cultural contents in teaching English.

Table 1. Cultural contents in foreign language teaching (Reid 2014)

Category of cultural contents	Codes of cultural contents
1. Socio-linguistic competence	1. greetings, addressing, introducing, use of exclamations 2. positive politeness, negative politeness, impoliteness 3. admiration, apologizing, dislike, anger 4. appropriate use of: <i>please / thank you</i>
2. Pragmatic competences	5. interaction patterns (turn taking) 6. suggestions, asking for help, offers, requests, invitations, encouragement 7. phrases, idioms
3. Non-verbal competences	8. body language (gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact, body contact, proxemics) 9. extra linguistic speech sounds (for silence, approval, disapproval, disgust, onomatopoeia)
4. Socio-cultural knowledge	10. everyday living (food, drink, meal times, table manners, leisure activities) 11. living conditions (housing, living standards) 12. values, beliefs (religion, humour) 13. people, country (national identity, history, politics, institutions) 14. social conventions (dress code, presents, punctuality) 15. ritual behaviour (festivals, celebrations, traditions, weddings, etc.)

Analysis of the Family and Friends textbook

The Family and Friends textbook has a pronunciation page in every unit. The pronunciation exercises teach phonics – relationship between letters and sounds. They go through the whole alphabet and give a capital letter or combination of letters of a word as the examples. The first letters of the alphabet are usually known to Slovak pupils because most letters in initial places have the same pronunciation as in Slovak. For example, Unit 4 on Page 31 deals with sounds /m, n, o, p/ : /m/ in *mum*, /n/ in *nurse*, /o/ in *orange* and /p/ in *pen* and all these sounds are not any new to Slovak learners. Only sounds such as /æ/ in *apple*, /ʌ/ in *umbrella* and /w/ in *window* are useful for Slovak learners as these sounds are absent in the Slovak language. Combination of letters representing one sound is useful as this is not a feature in Slovak pronunciation. For example letters “sh” are pronounced as /ʃ/ in words *shoes*, *sheep* and *fish*, or letters “ch” are pronounced as /tʃ/ in words *chair*, *teacher* and *chick*. Overall, the pronunciation exercises have very little use for Slovak learners, because from 32 examples of letter / phoneme connection only 9 are relevant: “a” /æ/, “c” /k/, “j” /dʒ/, “u” /ʌ/, “w” /w/, “y” /j/, “sh” /ʃ/, “ch” /tʃ/, “th” /θ/.

All the texts in the textbook were analysed according to the set categories and codes of cultural features. The following table gives examples of cultural contents which were found in the Family and friends textbook.

Table 2. Cultural contents in the Family and friends textbook

Category of cultural contents	Code of cultural contents in the Family and friends textbook	Examples of cultural contents in the Family and friends textbook
1. Socio-linguistic competence	1. greetings , addressing, introducing , use of exclamations	Hello. Bye. How are you? I'm fine, thank you. Good bye (1) Oh, no! (3) This is my... (5) Dear... (in letters) (10) Great! (11) OK! (15)
	2. positive politeness , negative politeness, impoliteness	Can I have..., please? Here you are. Please share my lunch! (9) Nice to meet you! (14)
	3. admiration, apologizing, like , dislike , anger	I like/I don't like
	4. appropriate use of: <i>please / thank you</i>	Ah, thank you! (6)
2. Pragmatic competences	5. interaction patterns (turn taking)	In conversations – questions answers with short and contracted answers: Do you...? Yes, I do. / No, I don't. etc.
	6. suggestions , asking for help, offers , requests, invitations, encouragement	Well done! (8) Let's...(15)
	7. phrases, idioms	–
3. Non-verbal competences	8. body language (gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact, body contact, proxemics)	–
	9. extra linguistic speech sounds (for silence, approval, disapproval, disgust , onomatopoeia)	Ahh (for dislike) (11) Growl (tiger), hiss (snake), squawk (parrot)
4. Socio-cultural knowledge	10. everyday living (food, drink, meal times, table manners, leisure activities)	–
	11. living conditions (housing, living standards)	–
	12. values, beliefs (religion, humour)	–
	13. people, country (national identity, history, politics, institutions)	–
	14. social conventions (dress code, presents, punctuality)	–
	15. ritual behaviour (festivals, celebrations, traditions, weddings, etc.)	–

From four categories (socio-linguistic, pragmatic, non-verbal competences and socio-cultural knowledge) three categories (all competences) were addressed in the textbook. And out of 15 codes 7 codes were included in the textbook. From socio-linguistic competences all codes: greetings, exclamations, addressing, politeness, expressing like and dislike, please and thank you were included in the book. From pragmatic phrases: some interaction patterns, suggestions and encouragement were taught in the book. Phrases and idioms were not used. From non-verbal competences some extra-linguistic speech sounds for dislike and onomatopoeia were used. Body language was not mentioned. None of the socio-cultural knowledge was included in the textbook.

Analysis of the English Adventure textbook

Concerning linguistic features in the English Adventure textbook, it was found that there were not present any exercises dealing with pronunciation.

Concerning cultural features, all the texts in the textbook were analysed according to the set categories and codes. The following table gives examples of cultural contents which were found in the English Adventure textbook.

Table 3. Cultural contents in the English Adventure textbook

Category of cultural contents	Code of cultural contents in the English Adventure textbook	Examples of cultural contents in the English Adventure textbook
1. Socio-linguistic competence	1. greetings , addressing, introducing, use of exclamations	Hello! (1) Oh no! Wow! (2)
	2. positive politeness , negative politeness, impoliteness	Here you are. (6)
	3. admiration, apologizing, like, dislike , anger	I'm sorry. I like / I don't like (1) No, sorry. (6)
	4. appropriate use of: <i>please / thank you</i>	..., please. (1) Thank you. (2)
2. Pragmatic competences	5. interaction patterns (turn taking)	In conversations – Do you /Does he like...? Yes/No.
	6. suggestions , asking for help, offers , requests, invitations, encouragement	Do you want...? Be careful! (2) It's OK. (4) Let's... (8)
	7. phrases, idioms	–
3. Non-verbal competences	8. body language (gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact, body contact, proxemics)	–
	9. extra linguistic speech sounds (for silence, approval, disapproval , disgust, onomatopoeia)	Grrr! (for disapproval) (7)

Table 3. cont.

Category of cultural contents	Code of cultural contents in the English Adventure textbook	Examples of cultural contents in the English Adventure textbook
4. Socio-cultural knowledge	10. everyday living (food, drink, meal times, table manners, leisure activities)	–
	11. living conditions (housing, living standards)	–
	12. values, beliefs (religion, humour)	–
	13. people, country (national identity, history, politics, institutions)	Native Americans Earth – Japan, England Britain and weather London and places
	14. social conventions (dress code, presents, punctuality)	–
	15. ritual behaviour (festivals, celebrations, traditions, weddings, etc.)	–

All four categories (socio-linguistic, pragmatic, non-verbal competences and socio-cultural knowledge) were addressed in the textbook. Out of 15 codes 8 codes were included in the textbook. From socio-linguistic competences, all codes concerning greetings, exclamations, likes, dislikes, apologizing, please and thank you were included. From pragmatic competences some of interaction patterns, offers, suggestions, encouragement were included in the textbook, but there were no phrases or idioms. From non-verbal competences only extra-linguistic speech sound for disapproval was used. From socio-linguistic knowledge information on national identity, people and country were included.

Analysis of the Cool English School textbook

Cool English School textbook has a pronunciation exercises in every unit. Each unit includes exercises focusing on two distinct but for learners similar and possibly misleading phonemes. Words from that particular or previous unit were used as examples. Examples are usually done in minimal pair words, but in this case with beginners many words would be unknown to the learners. The authors wanted to use already learnt words, so pupils could understand the importance of pronunciation. Also tongue twisters practicing the example phonemes were given.

Exercises either focused on non-existent phonemes in the Slovak language. For example, neither of the phonemes /ɜ:/ in *girl* and /ə/ in *father* is a known sound to Slovak learners. Very common English phoneme /æ/ in *cat*, but non-existent in Slovak was put in contrast with /e/ *pen*, which is often substituted by Slovak learners. The phoneme /ŋ/ in *sleeping* does not exist in Slovak and was put into contrast with /n/ in *kitchen*. The phoneme /w/ in *swim* also does not exist in Slovak and the phoneme /v/ in *village* is used

instead. Also the length of vowel phonemes was addressed, as it is quite common for Slovak learners to prolong short vowel sounds. Consequently short and long vowel phonemes were given into contrast to practice /u:/ in *food* vs. /ʊ/ in *foot*. Also the connection between letters and sounds was addressed “sh” for /ʃ/ in *fish* and “ch” for /tʃ/ in *children*. Final consonants sounds were also referred to, as it is common in the Slovak language to assimilate voiced final consonants to voiceless. However, if it is done in English, the words change meanings or make no sense. Final /d/ in *bread* vs. /t/ in *feet* and /k/ in *book* vs. /g/ in *bag* were given. Exercises did not address all problematic issues concerning phonemes, but it could be concluded that all the exercises were relevant and addressed problematic pronunciation issues of Slovak learners.

The Cool English School textbook was also analysed according to the set categories and codes of cultural features. The following table gives examples of cultural contents which were found in the mentioned textbook.

Table 4. Cultural contents in the Cool English School textbook

Category of cultural contents	Code of cultural contents in the Cool English School textbook	Examples of cultural contents in the Cool English School textbook
1. Socio-linguistic competence	1. greetings , addressing, introducing, use of exclamations	Hello! Good morning! Wow! She is cool! Bye! Good bye! See you tomorrow! How are you? I'm fine (1) Oh, thank you! (2) Great! (7)
	2. positive politeness , negative politeness, impoliteness	Here you are. (Starter) Good job! (6)
	3. admiration, apologizing, like, dislike, anger	I like / I don't like (4) Oh no! (7) OK, I'm happy! (7)
	4. appropriate use of: <i>please / thank you</i>	..., please. (4) Thank you. (2)
2. Pragmatic competences	5. interaction patterns (turn taking)	Your turn now! (3) In conversations – Have you got...? Yes, I do. No, I don't. (3). Do you like...? Yes, I do/No, I don't. (4) What are you/is he doing? I'm... He is... (6)
	6. suggestions, asking for help, offers, requests, invitations, encouragement	Next please. (4) Watch out! (1)
	7. phrases, idioms	Touch wood. Fingers crossed. (3) It's cold. I'm cold. I have cold. (8)
3. Non-verbal competences	8. body language (gestures , facial expressions, posture, eye contact, body contact, proxemics)	Touch wood. Fingers crossed. (3)
	9. extra linguistic speech sounds (for silence, approval, disapproval, disgust, onomatopoeia)	Oi! Shush! (2) Yummy! Yuck! (4) Woof, woof! Croak, croak! (5)

Table 4. cont.

4. Socio-cultural knowledge	10. everyday living (food , drink, meal times, table manners, leisure activities)	Christmas food
	11. living conditions (housing, living standards)	–
	12. values, beliefs (religion, humour)	–
	13. people, country (national identity, history, politics, institutions)	water taps in Britain (6)
	14. social conventions (dress code , presents, punctuality)	school uniforms (7), time of school start (7)
	15. ritual behaviour (festivals , celebrations, traditions , weddings, etc.)	Halloween, Christmas traditions, cards, food, Easter traditions

All four categories (socio-linguistic, pragmatic, non-verbal competences and socio-cultural knowledge) were addressed in the textbook. Out of 15 codes 13 codes were included in the textbook. From socio-linguistic competences, all codes including greetings, use of exclamations, like, dislike, positive politeness, anger, please and thank you were present. From pragmatic competences all codes including some interaction patterns, invitations, encouragement, phrases and idioms were found. From non-verbal competences some gestures and extra-linguistic speech sounds for silence, approval, disgust and animal sounds were taught in the book. From socio-cultural knowledge three of five codes including food, information on country, dress code, punctuality, festivals and traditions were introduced to the pupils.

What is special about this textbook is the comparison of British and Slovak features. Every unit has a “cultural corner” at the end, where an aspect of English culture, whether one of the competences or knowledge were put into contrast with the Slovak cultural aspects. Here are some examples – greetings upon arrival and departure: Hi/Hello – Bye/ Good bye vs. Ahoj, Čau; extra linguistic speech sounds for shouting at somebody: Oi! vs. Hej!; for silence: Shush! vs. Psst!; for expressing likeness for food Yummy! vs. Mňam! and disgust: Yuck! vs. Fuj!; onomatopoeia for animal sounds: Woof, woof! vs. Hav, hav! and Croak, croak! vs. Kvak, kvak! Socio-cultural knowledge was addressed in terms of – water taps – that there are often two taps (one for cold and one for hot water) on English sinks while there is only one mixing water tap in Slovakia; school uniforms in Britain in comparison with Slovak clothes for school and starting time – at 9 a.m. in Britain and 8 a.m. in Slovakia. Phrases were introduced with Slovak equivalents like: It’s cold. I’m cold. I have a cold. They could be difficult to understand because of the use of the word “cold” in three different contexts. Christmas in Britain and Slovakia were compared concerning typical food, day and time of celebration, tradition of sending cards, etc. Also Halloween vocabulary and Easter traditions were introduced.

Conclusion of the research analysis

This content analysis was comparing three English language textbooks for third grade primary school. The aim was to find out how the three chosen textbooks meet the criteria concerning the linguistic and cultural diversity and how they develop intercultural awareness of learners. The three research questions were stated, for which we give here answers:

- How do linguistic features in the chosen textbooks reflect the diversity of the learners' population?

The three textbooks were analysed concerning the pronunciation features that would be learners' specific. The Family and Friends textbook included pronunciation exercises in every unit, concentrated on phonics (relationship of letters and phonemes), but only a few were suitable for Slovak learners. The English Adventure textbook had no exercises dealing with pronunciation. The Cool English School textbook had pronunciation exercises in every unit and all of them were tailor made for the needs of Slovak learners. As a conclusion, the Cool English School textbook was the most suitable as it reflected linguistic diversity of Slovak learners.

- How do cultural features in the chosen textbooks reflect the diversity of the learners' population?

All three textbooks to certain extent included cultural features developing socio-cultural, pragmatic, non-verbal competences and socio-cultural knowledge. The Family and Friends included 7 out of 15 codes and taught quite a lot of useful phrases, but did not address socio-cultural knowledge. The English Adventure textbook addressed 8 out of 15 codes within all categories, but was sparse in the number of useful phrases. The Cool English School textbook addressed 13 out of 15 coded within all categories. However, only the Cool English School textbook explicitly addressed cultural diversity of the learners' population in contrast with the target culture.

- How do the chosen textbooks develop intercultural awareness of learners?

Intercultural awareness can be best developed by the teacher. A good teacher can make pupils interculturally aware with all three books. However, explicitly the English Adventure book introduced Native Americans, Earth (Japan, England), Britain and weather, London and places, which were done in a way for pupils to become interculturally aware. The Cool English School book in the "cultural corners" dealt with aspects contrasting Slovak and British cultural features, which explicitly was making pupils interculturally aware.

As a conclusion only two textbooks (Family and Friends; Cool English School) dealt with linguistic diversity of learners, but Cool English School had all exercises suitable for Slovak learners. All three textbooks reflected cultural diversity of Slovak learners (Family and Friends 7 out of 15, English Adventure 8 out of 15 and Cool English School 13 out of 15), so the last mentioned one met the needs of Slovak learners the best. Developing intercultural awareness of pupils was explicitly included in the English Adventure and Cool

English School textbooks. Overall, the Cool English School textbook is the most suitable concerning cultural and linguistic diversity of Slovak pupils.

The paper includes research results gained as a part of the project APVV-15-0368 Prax v centre odborovej didaktiky, odborová didaktika v Centre praktickej prípravy.

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