Learning English as a foreign language in Brazilian elementary schools: Textbooks and their lessons about the world and about learning

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Abstract

Textbooks are always value-laden and reflect worldviews particular to certain social groups. They are also effective tools in the reproduction and legitimization of those values and beliefs. An analysis of latent and manifest content of popular English as a foreign language textbooks in Brazilian elementary schools was carried out. Three themes were identified in the analysis of text and images in these materials: representations of a world devoid of problems, representations of a fragmented world, and representations of learning as an individual process. These messages reinforce a conservative trend in the focused context. In addition, they suggest a simplistic and non-critical view of the subject matter, of learning, and of participation in society in general.

Introduction

Regardless of all the controversy involving textbooks, three related issues are widely accepted: (1) textbooks do not exist in a vacuum, and thus reflect particular worldviews; (2) textbook content is likely to orient curriculum in general; and (3) textbooks have a great impact on the learner's understanding of the knowledge associated with the fields represented by these materials.

This study is framed by these assumptions, and follows the view that the examination of textbooks can provide information about the worldviews used in the settings in which these books are adopted, including definitions of knowledge, teaching, learning, and views of social order. Key to this discussion is the argument that, by projecting images of social practices, textbooks imply views considered legitimate within the community of users of such materials. However, these images are always unilateral worldviews peculiar to a certain group (usually the mainstream) and they do not reflect the entire community's ways of seeing the world. Besides conveying this notion of legitimacy, textbooks can also influence the reproduction of dominant values, beliefs, and assumptions about the world and about participation in it. Therefore, their examination can aid the assessment of preferred worldview in a certain context.

This study seeks to address these issues within the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (henceforth, EFL) in elementary schools in Brazil. In other words, the objective of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of popular textbooks in this scenario and to articulate the assumptions about the world and about foreign language learning embedded in them. The following questions guided this investigation:

1. How is the concept of language developed in these materials? What does the content tell us about the text's implied notions of knowledge? What are the underlying assumptions of studying EFL embedded in these materials? What kind of knowledge is a successful learner expected to master through the use of these materials?
2. How is the concept of learning addressed in these materials? What theories of learning do they base themselves upon? What are the most common activities? Do they focus on the individual, or on interaction? Do they treat learning as a purely cognitive function? Do they address the social aspects of learning? Do they focus on content or process?
3. What do these materials tell us about the social world, and implicit and explicit rules and roles in it? What misconceptions and misrepresentations (if any) are present in these materials?

Background

The socioeconomic conditions of the early days of Brazil's history, based on large properties dominated by one single person and on slave labor, have had a

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1 The word critical here follows Fisette's definition: 'an approach to the study of schools and society that has as its main function the revelation of the tacit values that underlie the enterprise'. E. Fisette, 'Curriculum ideologies' in B. Jackson (ed.), Handbook of research on curriculum: a project of the American Educational Research Association (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p. 314.
great impact on the development of social institutions in the country. Another factor has had a major influence in the development of educational traditions in Brazil. Jesuits were in charge of the first attempts to formalize education in the country, and their dominance was felt for about two centuries, from 1549 to 1759. Having the catechization of the natives as their main goal, Jesuits were also given the task of educating the elite. In an effort to spread the spirit of the Counter Reformation, the content of their education was essentially against critical thought. Education had the fundamentally political purpose of reaffirming the power of authority (either the government or the church), and learning was based on accumulation of facts to be memorized.

Conservatism can describe Brazilian pedagogical traditions to this date. Recitation and memorization are still common practices; classroom furniture is usually arranged into rows, facing the teachers’ desk and board; teachers tend to make all decisions regarding what is to be taught (and how it is to be taught) relying extensively on the adopted textbook. As Freire explains, ‘the Brazilian tradition ... has not been to exchange ideas, but to dictate them; not to debate or discuss themes, but to give lectures; not to work with the student, but to work on him, imposing an order to which he has to accommodate’.

Instructional materials have followed these normative patterns since the design of the very first textbooks in the country by the Jesuits: dictionaries of some of the native languages spoken in Brazil and their correspondent words in Portuguese. To this date, textbooks tend to display bodies of information that are believed to have intrinsic value within their disciplines, offering little or no opportunity for learners to reflect on the applicability of that knowledge to their daily lives. At the background of this scenario lie the Brazilian National Parameters for Education, which define the educational objectives in the country framed by complex and dynamic notions of language and learning. This document was issued in 1997, replacing curricular guidelines characterized by an emphasis on skills development and a focus on independent, standardized content of specific disciplines. Its goal is to establish a curricular reference and to support the local organization of curriculum within each state of a country marked by social, geographic and cultural contrast.

Since the publication of the National Parameters for Education, an agency of the Brazilian Ministry of Education has been involved in annual analyses of a number of textbooks in all required subject areas at the elementary levels in the country – namely, Portuguese, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science. No investigation has yet been carried out on foreign language materials since this discipline is not compulsory at the elementary level in Brazilian schools. The results of these evaluations indicate that, although there has been some improvement in the quality of the analyzed textbooks in the past years, most available materials do not emphasize the social uses of knowledge, that is, the significant and contextualized application of a certain body of information in their respective disciplines.

These considerations lead us to another important notion, namely the role of the English language in the Brazilian society. According to Kachru, Brazil is part of the expanding circle regarding the spread of English, that is, it is a country where English is not a mother tongue (the inner circle), and its use has never been institutionalized as a second language (the outer circle). This model highlights the different uses of English around the world and challenges the neutrality and standardization usually associated with its spread calling for situated articulations of the role of English in each context of use.

In this respect, it is worth noting that, for the last five decades, Brazil has experienced the enormous influence of American culture. Not only has the Portuguese language incorporated English features, but also there has been a significant import of American values. Learning English nowadays is a prerequisite to having access to better jobs and to cultural media, which in turn builds an implicit belief that this language is a prerequisite to power, popularity, and success.

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3 Ibid, p. 38.
4 The Brazilian National Parameters for Education (Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais) define language following the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, and propose a Vygotskian approach to learning.

But the influence of the English language reaches various levels of Brazilian society. Following a typically Brazilian tendency to assume the attitude of the 'colonized', some people believe that, by using the English language, they will be achieving a higher level of social status and prestige. English names are given to babies, businesses, and products; English words are often displayed on clothes and advertisements. Middle and upper class citizens often attend private English institutes and yet, due to enormous social contrasts in the Brazilian society, it is only a minority of the population which actually develops proficiency in the language.

Finally, it is important to highlight that EFL is not specifically tied to the boundaries of the National Parameters for Education. The teaching of a modern foreign language is mandatory in the country as of the beginning of secondary school (around age 11), for seven years, but English is by far the most widely taught foreign language (followed by Spanish, and French). However, there are a number of schools that offer EFL instruction as early as preschool level. Adopted textbooks tend to be written by Brazilians and published by local publishers, due to their lower prices (compared to imported textbooks) and to their easier distribution in remote areas of the country.

Method
The teacher's versions of the three best-selling series sold and developed in Brazil were gathered (see Appendix). In this study these series will be referred to as Series A, B, and C. Each of these three series included four books, designed for the four years of the elementary level of schooling in Brazil (aiming at an audience ranging on average from 7 to 10 years of age). Ancillary materials such as audiotapes, videotapes, flashcards, posters, and readers were not systematically analysed. Content analysis focused on the themes reinforced in these twelve textbooks, on their latent messages, suggested by the visual aids, as well as on the pedagogical orientations suggested in activities and/or directions provided in the teacher's manuals. In order to do so, each textbook was examined five times, and each of these readings had different objectives.

The first reading aimed at achieving a general idea of the overall structure of the student's edition of these materials, observing the organization of content, and the main themes regarding notions of knowledge and language use. Following this first reading the books were examined again, this time with special attention to their illustrations, the assumptions they made, what they took for granted, in an attempt to identify recurrent themes and potentially problematic misinterpretations. This second reading required a more systematic analysis of teachers' and students' roles as portrayed in the illustrations. Formal counts were taken of the portrayals of students' interactions (with whom they interacted and what they did during these interactions) and teachers' actions. For the purpose of this analysis, students were identified in Series B and C through the use of uniforms (at schools or on their way to or from school these children were always wearing uniforms) or through the association of school-related activities (e.g., doing homework or studying for a test). The students illustrated in Series A did not wear uniforms; therefore, their identification was done through the association of these individuals with school scenarios (the whole school, classrooms, school playgrounds, or field trips) or tasks (worksheets, homework, and tests). As to teachers, they had one or more symbolic features in their representation in all the illustrations in the twelve analyzed books: pointers, glasses, and uniforms were the features associated with teachers in the sample.

A third examination focused on specifically pedagogical issues, particularly general tendencies regarding the expectations of students and teachers whilst using these textbooks. Directions in the teacher's manuals were relevant sources of data.

The fourth reading added more numerical data to the investigation following Applebee's method of considering each activity as a unit of analyses. According to Applebee, an activity is 'a question, suggestion, or directive that might be separately assigned by the teacher or chosen by the student.' Each activity was categorized on three levels.

Authenticity was categorized as either authentic (allowing different responses) or recitation (when there is only one 'correct' answer). Content was categorized according to the emphasis of each activity, namely vocabulary, structures (or a


combination of these two), functions, or song. Finally, connectivity refers to the extent to which an activity bears some kind of relationship with another activity. It can be unrelated to other activities, part of a set (requiring a similar task, but not building on another activity), or cumulative (building on one or more previous activities).

A final reading focused on the authors’ messages to the prospective users of their textbooks (including both teachers and students), and on what the designers of these materials claimed to be doing.

In this study a person’s first language will be referred to as L1; an additional language, developed after L1 acquisition, will be indicated as L2. A ‘foreign language’ is defined here as a ‘non-native language taught in school that has no status as a routine medium of communication in that country’.9

Results

This analysis revealed three major themes in the sample: 1. Representations of a world devoid of problems; 2. Representations of a fragmented world; and 3. Representations of learning as an individual process. Evidence of these themes was found during all the readings of the materials, being present in all the twelve textbooks analyzed. Each of these themes, in turn, was characterized by different patterns, as discussed below.

1. Representations of a world devoid of problems

According to the examined textbooks, the world is a perfect place. This absence of conflicts is revealed through the representation of four main notions: schools as harmonious places, standardization among elements of the same group, L1 and L2 as identical systems, and meanings as stable and unproblematic notions.

Schools as harmonious places.

The three analyzed EFL series portray schools as tidy, spacious, and clean environments in which teachers and students engage in harmonious relationships. As depicted in their illustrations, classroom furniture is always orderly arranged in rows, students’ backpacks and lunch boxes often lay tidily on the floor next to a desk, and school objects (pens, pencils, rulers, erasers, etc.) tend to be regularly arranged on tables and desks. The following excerpt, taken from a text entitled ‘My School’, found in Series B, is typical of its unproblematic representation of schooling:

I study in a big school. The name of my school is Sunshine. It has many classes, a large playground, a secretary and a good bar.10 I study in the morning. I study English, Portuguese, Mathematics, History, Geography and Drawing. The teachers are very good. I am very happy to study here.

In this idealized description, words such as ‘big’, ‘many’, ‘large’, ‘good’, and ‘happy’ emphasize positive characteristics of the described setting, as well as the satisfaction found by students who have the chance to attend such a perfect school. The illustrations that accompany this text reinforce this idea of happiness. The students who are about to enter school greet each other with a smile on their faces, parents outside school also talk enthusiastically, and even the rising sun is smiling at the background of this scene. In the classroom with furniture arranged in rows, four students (wearing uniforms) also smile and look to the front of the class; on the playground two of these children play happily, but this time they are not wearing uniforms. In the school office, the secretary types with a smile on her face, and her desk is clean and tidy. The images and discourse emphasized here imply the presence of harmonious relationships and absence of conflicts in school settings. This unproblematic representation of schools highlights dominant values regarding the association of schooling with other notions such as a life of success, abundant benefits, and happiness. In such an ideal scenario, everybody is glad (including the sun in its personified representation), and apparently there are no major problems.

Standardization among elements of the same group.

Another feature of this perfect world is that the elements of a same group tend to be standardized, as also suggested by the illustrations that accompany the text ‘My school.’ In the classroom, represented as the domain of studying, students (elements of the

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10 The words ‘secretary’ and ‘bar’ seem to be mistranslated in the text, reflecting a non-correspondence between similar words in the two languages: in Portuguese, the word ‘secretaria’ points to notions such as the school’s office, or reception; the word ‘bar’, in a school-related context, conveys the idea of a canteen.
A major set of 'learners') wear uniforms and engage in the same activity. On school playgrounds, however, the same students do not reveal the same uniformity: they wear different clothes, and do different things, as if while playing these children did not belong to the same set of identical elements anymore. This suggests that a more formal learning environment presupposes some standardization and is likely to have an impact on a number of pedagogical practices, from choice of content to measures of assessment, also involving methodological issues.

It is important to emphasize that this notion of standardization among elements of the same group tends to occur in the representation of other groups as well. For example, in the same scene or activity (and often throughout the unit), the animals that belong to the same category are often identical, that is, all lions look the same, all birds look the same, all monkeys look the same, etc. This simplification occurs repeatedly in Series A, B, and C.

The same standardization occurs in the representation of school objects in the analyzed series. These objects are frequently identical within the same group (that is, in the same scene or activity, the pens tend to be identical, the books tend to be identical, etc.). Such homogeneity tends to occur in the illustrations of other groups throughout the twelve textbooks, such as balls, dolls, kites (and other toys), or pears, apples, bananas (and other fruits). Analyses of all the instances in the sample during which prospective users of these books were asked to identify the number of elements in a certain group revealed an emphasis on identical representations as shown in Figure 1.

**L1 and L2 as identical systems**

Another aspect of the idealized world portrayed in the sample is the unproblematic correspondence between students' L1 (Portuguese) and the target language (English). In the analyzed textbooks, L1 and L2 tend to be treated as identical systems at various levels. The four volumes of Series A include a dictionary that contains the English words used together with the translation in Portuguese of their meanings, implying there is a one to one correspondence among these words at all times. Series B projects this oversimplified view of two different languages in its directions at the beginning of each unit, 'Let's learn how to say this and that in English today'. The fact that 'this' or 'that' may be differently conceptualized in the two languages (not to mention the fact that there will be variations in these conceptions among speakers of the same language) is never considered. Series C also implies an equivalence between the two languages that resides at purely lexical and structural levels. In all the volumes, after introducing the focused vocabulary of each lesson, there is a section called 'Vamos conversar?' ('Let's talk'). According to the proposed activities, this talk is composed of teacher-student exchanges during which the former asks...
questions in Portuguese, for example: ‘Hoje é o aniversário de Tom. Como ele falou isso? Como perguntamos a idade de uma pessoa?’ (‘Today is Tom’s birthday. How did he say that? How do we ask someone’s age?’). The students are supposed to answer questions in English, demonstrating the incorporation of the new code that can be used in the same straightforward, simplistic, world.

Of special interest are instances when differences between the two languages are unavoidable. How do these materials deal with these problems? Since the three series do not give attention to differences in broader conceptualizations between the two languages, this discussion can only consider the structural level of the text. All the teacher’s manuals in the analyzed volumes encourage teachers to emphasize structural differences between the two languages (for example, position of adjectives in relation to nouns; presence or absence of adjectival agreement; presence or absence of gender in nouns) by ‘explaining’ these variations. On these occasions, ‘explaining’ means making it clear that one language follows a pattern and that the other follows a different one. Variations within the same language are never highlighted (for example, ‘the blue bird’ versus ‘color the bird blue’). Students are led to assume that, by knowing about the special conventions of the new code, they are also mastering all the information they need.

This unproblematic correspondence between L1 and L2 has another dimension relevant to this study. Throughout the analyzed textbooks, it is never made clear what the English language is, where it is spoken, by whom, or why the users of these materials are studying it. This omission is likely to create some unarticulated problems. For example, in the text ‘My school’ mentioned earlier, the text is in English, there is the American flag in front of the illustrated school, and yet the students are wearing typically Brazilian uniforms, they go to school ‘in the morning’ (a clear reference to the Brazilian educational system, according to which students attend school either in the morning or in the afternoon), and they even have Portuguese (the language spoken in Brazil) as a school subject.

Apart from a brief note in the teacher’s manual in Series B, suggesting that teachers should call students’ attention to the fact that many languages are spoken around the world, and that English ‘is one of the most important languages in the world nowadays’, there is never a concern to turn EFL into a topic of conversation during classes. This omission is paralleled by the fact that other social structures and practices in the analyzed volumes are typically Brazilian in their representation (for example, birthday parties, houses and furniture, months and what they represent), leaving the impression that learning a foreign language is actually the use of new code for the same (perfect) world.

Meanings as stable and unproblematic notions
In the world represented in the analyzed textbooks, instability of meanings or misunderstandings is not likely to occur. It is assumed that hearers and readers will decode the messages in the exact way intended by speakers and writers. This certainty neglects potential problems in the accomplishment of some proposed activities in these volumes. For example, in Series B, students are often invited to write adjectives to describe some scenes. According to answers indicated as correct in the teacher’s manual, it is mistakenly assumed that the word ‘bad’ can only convey a negative connotation and that the words ‘new’ and ‘old’ are to be associated with ‘in perfect condition’ and ‘broken’, respectively.

A rather intriguing representation of meanings as unproblematic notions is found in Series C, in an activity through which students are expected to practice their knowledge of numbers in English: a number of pictures is displayed and learners are asked to highlight the word (‘one’, ‘two’, ‘three’, ‘four’, or ‘five’) that matches each picture. In one of the pictures, the façade of a school is illustrated: it is composed of a roof, four identical windows, a plaque containing the word ‘school’, and a door which in turn has two glass windows and two handles. At the front of the school one can see two steps, a pathway, two walls and two trees. It is surprising to notice that as early as in their second year of schooling children are supposed to perceive ‘school’ as the main (and only) visual cue in the picture and mark ‘one’ as the right answer, as the teacher’s manual suggests. The fact that there are other possible answers (for example, four or two, referring to windows and trees, respectively) is not even mentioned, probably having been neglected not only by the author of the book but also by all the reviewers and editors of the series, reinforcing the fact that enculturation to school conventions has long-term consequences. This particular example is remarkable in its illustration of the notion of stability of meaning; it also points to the assumption that correctness and truth reside in schools.
2. Representations of a fragmented world

The second theme involves the portrayal of a world marked by fragmentation at various levels. While the absence of problems is a message clearly displayed in the sample, this second message is never explicitly formulated. However, its existence (together with the inattention to it) seems to be operative in the building of the notion of the perfect world. Fragmentation is revealed in the analyzed materials through the representation of four notions: schools as disconnected social institutions, isolated disciplines as the embodiment of knowledge, EFL as a collection of independent items, and learning as a sequence of distinct stages.

Schools as disconnected social institutions

In the three examined series, schools are portrayed as independent settings not connected with other environments children are likely to take part in. According to an activity proposed in Series B, a school is the ‘place where boys and girls study every day, except on the weekends, where many teachers work, giving explanations about many subjects’, in striking opposition to more informal environments such as parks, defined as follows: ‘The place reserved for leisure, where there are many trees and birds, and where boys and girls like to play: they take their toys there, they exercise, play ball, fly kites, ride their bikes, talk, rest, etc.’

In the three series, teachers (as representative of schools) are usually portrayed within the domains of these institutional settings, and are not likely to be present in other contexts. In other words, schools are the places where ‘explanations’ can be found, in spite of the fact that the need for, or the appropriateness of, these explanations is never discussed. At parks, boys and girls may play and talk, but are not likely to find answers to their questions there. At schools, on the other hand, they will find the knowledge (transmitted by teachers) whose value and suitability has been established a priori.

Long ago Dewey pointed out that a school should be a place where a living person could interact with a living environment, and engage in living rather than mere studying. However, the analyzed textbooks portray a world in which studying and living tend to be dissociated.

Moreover, studying is represented as a set of rules of behavior that is to be learned by students as well, a phenomenon that Heath describes as ‘to learn school, meaning its rules and expectations’. To learn, school involves learning to accept fragmentation and disconnection as natural characteristics of the world. This message is not always so explicit as it is in an activity in Series C that clearly invites students, ‘Vamos brincar de escolinhas? (let’s play school!’). In that activity, ‘play school’ means to write isolated words and label pictures that characterize school life (such as ‘pencil’, ‘pen’, ‘book’, ‘desk’, ‘teacher’, and ‘student’, among others). In the illustration, the objects are orderly arranged on the desk, the smiling teacher is pointing to the word ‘school’ on the board, and the happy student seems to be clearly thankful for the opportunity of having access to that worthy world of knowledge.

Isolated disciplines as the embodiment of knowledge.

The view of knowledge represented in the analyzed materials reveals implicit assumptions of schools as the locus of knowledge, as noted earlier. Yet knowledge is in turn divided into independent disciplines (the various school subjects), all of which represent the canon within their own domain.

Both Series A and Series B reinforce this view of the canon as independent bodies of knowledge from various disciplines through the pictorial representation of school subjects as fragmented and isolated worlds symbolized by their textbooks. In these illustrations Portuguese (the students’ native language) as a discipline is represented by disconnected letters, emphasizing the role of written literacy as the most valuable representation of knowledge. The English language is represented by the flags of the United States and the United Kingdom, and although there is an indication that the foreign language is likely to open doors to a new world (as implied by the flags), there is no clue regarding the connection between the learner and the knowledge. Mismatches also occur in the representation of mathematics (viewed as isolated numbers or as too complex calculations) for the prospective users of the focused material involving

11 In the original text this excerpt was written in Portuguese, with the italicized words already in English.


the square root of a given number) and science (viewed as independent snapshots of tubes, body organs, or even an atom), illustrating Dewey's view that 'only in education, never in the life of the farmer, sailor, merchant, physician, or laboratory experimenter, does knowledge mean primarily a source of information aloof from doing'.

EFL as a collection of independent items

In terms of organization, the sample revealed a tendency to treat knowledge of the English language as a collection of independent bodies of information. In all the volumes, content is organized around pre-defined vocabulary items, situations, grammar categories, structures or functions of the language (that is, 'information aloof from doing', using Dewey's terms), with no internal consistency within the same series, and no apparent connection among topics. In general, the analysis of the sequences of content in these three series demonstrated that the chosen topics could be easily reordered or removed, indicating that the parts chosen to represent the universe of 1.2 are nothing but arbitrary choices of lexical and structural items, ignoring students' actual needs outside the classroom or their experience regarding EFL.

As Applebee explains, 'curriculum development reinforces this emphasis on characteristics of, rather than participation in, a tradition of discourse. The typical approach to curriculum requires first a thorough parsing of what students should know, and second the organization of those parts into elaborate scope and sequence charts that specify the order in which that content should be taught'. This statement brings to the surface two further aspects: the definition of the topics that orient instruction and the reasons behind the choices involving progression of content. The authors of Series A claim to move from the more familiar topics ('from toys, from family, from school') to the more unfamiliar ones ('nature, notions of space and time, etc.'), and the author of Series C argues that the proposed themes 'explore children's interests and experiences during different stages of their lives'.

The first volumes of these two series are typical in their lack of integration among topics around which instruction is oriented. Series A focuses on the following topics, in this order: toys, family/colors, school/numbers, places to go/sports; nature/numbers/colors, animals/colors, food/colors/numbers, human body/numbers. Series C is organized around these topics, in this order: greetings, school, animals, colors, numbers, fruit, family, toys, nature, and objects used during meals. These topics and these sequences indicate that the notion of familiarity or the discussion with what coincides with the interest and the experience of children cannot be generalized to all the users of these materials. The author of Series B does not justify her choice of topics in any way, but the organization of content in the first volume of this series is also characterized by fragmentation. The table of contents lists these topics, in this order: Greetings (good morning, good afternoon, good bye); school/boy/girl; house/red/green; teacher/book/pencil; ball/yellow/blue; sentences in the structure: The ... is ..., cat/dog/bird/black; tree/fruit; monkey/orange/banana; apple/pear/mango; flower/white/brown; numbers: one, two, three; numbers: one, two, three, four, five, six.

From these three sequences it is clear that content is primarily organized around disconnected vocabulary in all the analyzed series. Analyses of the content of the activities proposed in the textbooks established an emphasis on vocabulary or structure (Figure 2).

It is important to point out that all the activities proposed in the analyzed textbooks focused on EFL as products, only; vocabulary is introduced and reinforced as words to be added to the students' lexical repertoire, structures are shown and practiced as formulas to be retained, and functions are treated as scripts to be memorized. By emphasizing ready-made products at the expense of ongoing processes, the activities in the three series never attempt to link the focused content with a broader discussion of the relevance of such information, or of the practices implemented during the learning process. This orientation 'encourages a narrowing focus from learning to what must be learned' and neglects the fact that definitions of knowledge must involve not only what it is to be known, but also how knowledge

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is acquired and what knowers are supposed to do with what they know, not to mention the discussions on sources, need, and applicability of these bodies of information.

The tendency to ignore interconnectedness and relationship among parts that characterize a certain whole is also perceived in the lack of connections among activities suggested in the sample. Analyses of connectivity among the activities proposed in the sample were carried out. These activities were categorized as unrelated (when there was no relationship among them), part of a set (when they required similar tasks, but did not build on one another), or cumulative (when they built on previous activities). As Figure 3 indicates, there is an overwhelming emphasis on unrelated activities in the sample, which reinforces the notion that what counts as knowing EFL is students’ ability to show that they have stored the knowledge they have been introduced to, and that they can reproduce such knowledge when and as required. The ability to actively construct knowledge, to come to one’s own conclusions, to develop a more holistic understanding of the subject matter does not seem to be a concern.

**Learning as a sequence of distinct stages**

In the three series, the disconnected topics and activities described above tend to be implemented through also disconnected practices, suggesting that learning is a progression of distinct stages. In general the learning of a foreign language is seen as the assimilation of isolated words, then phrases, then longer sentences. Concerning L2 structures, the affirmative form is always introduced before the interrogative and the negative (in this order). These patterns show that there is a failure to acknowledge the learning of a foreign language as a complex, dynamic, integral, process; instead, what is emphasized is a developmental sequence that needs to meet some requirements before the next step is taken. The fact that prospective users of these materials already possess oral and written literacy in their own L1 is disregarded.

Such neglect offers an indication that the development of oral skills is always a prerequisite to the development of written ones. The three series are built on this assumption, and as the author of Series B explains, ‘each unit can be studied in two distinct phases: oral and written. In the oral phase, students have been encouraged to develop observation, memorization, and conversation; in the written phase, they have the chance to read the exercises and solve them, thus consolidating their learning.’ (my translation). In other words, there is a prevailing effort in the three series to provide extensive and continual input (first orally, then,
written) so that students can assimilate the content. By implying an equivalence in both L1 and L2 development, this assumption overlooks major constraints that characterize foreign language instruction that takes place in the classroom, such as little time of exposure to the language, or too large a number of students in the classroom. As a consequence, speaking receives rather problematic definitions and treatment in the three series.

In Series A, for example, the authors argue that ‘an efficient oral practice makes students more comfortable to speak a foreign language’ (my translation). However, the oral practice the series suggests is built upon mechanical drills (involving repetition, substitution, and transformation of sentences) that emphasize training and memorization of independent sequences of words. Series B also focuses on oral input of independent items (mainly, isolated words), introducing each unit through a ‘conversa dirigida’ (‘guided conversation’) that, according to the script provided in the teacher’s manual, is actually a practice oriented by behaviorist notions characterized by stimulus-response. An also problematic trend occurs in Series C: throughout the four volumes, a section entitled ‘Vamos conversar?’ (‘Let’s talk’) provides questions through which teachers can check students’ assimilation of the valuable knowledge (often represented by vocabulary items) previously introduced.

Thus, according to the three best selling EFL textbook series for the Brazilian elementary school, speaking a foreign language is a matter of word memorization, recognition, and reproduction. When more complex structures are introduced, they are not necessarily the expression (let alone the mediation) of more complex ideas. They are treated as fragmented and isolated content, introduced by means of bottom-up practices and reinforced through mechanical activities.

3. Representations of learning as an individual process

The analyzed volumes suggest that learning is a primarily individual enterprise. This theme is revealed through the emphasis of individualism in the representation of two notions: hierarchies of individual expertise and classroom practices as non-interactive routines.

Hierarchies of individual expertise

Analyses of content and teaching suggestions in the sample indicated that teachers’ major role is to initiate students into the world of valuable knowledge by providing linguistic input, asking known-answer questions, and privileging the quantity of students’ output at the expense of its quality. Precise directions in the teacher’s manuals that accompany all the volumes seem to guarantee the accomplishment of these roles very easily, leaving the impression that anybody who follows such prescribed (one size fits all) script will necessarily fulfill all the objectives.

Distinct hierarchies of individual expertise are revealed, thus: first, there are the most knowledgeable of all, the authors of these textbooks, who apparently know what information students are expected to know, and who provide teachers with scripts to be followed and with the correct answers to
be given by students. These scripts rarely encourage teachers’ or students’ self-expression or critical thought. Rarely do they foresee the possibility of becoming in practice something different from the one outlined in the manual: on one extreme, there is a brief note given by the author of Series C, who says that the suggestions in the teacher’s manual ‘should be used according to each teacher’s interests and adapted to specific audiences’ (my translation); on another, there is the script provided in Series B, which even foresees the answers that will be given by students during the class, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the teacher’s manual, which provides directions on how to practice the words ‘red’ and ‘ball’. My translations are given in brackets.

- O que você pintou aqui, José? (What have you colored here, José?)
- Pintei uma red ball. (I’ve colored a red ball.)
- Parabéns, Patricia, pelo seu desenho. O que mostra essa figura? (Congratulations on your drawing, Patricia. What does the picture show?)
- Ela mostra uma red ball. (It shows a red ball.)
- Os meninos estão usando o que no seu jogo de futebol? (What are the boys using in their soccer game?)

- Eles estão usando uma red ball. (They’re using a red ball.)

In both extremes, though, there is the suggestion that the authors are providing teachers with the necessary skills to use their materials appropriately, and this fact unfolds a second level of expertise: the teachers themselves who will be, to their students, the embodiment of valuable knowledge and truth. The view of teachers as experts, whose task is to initiate students into the world of knowers, is also supported by the portrayal of teachers in the illustrations found in the sample. Figure 4 presents more details about the actions carried out by the illustrated teachers in the examined textbooks and it reveals a tendency in the sample to represent these professionals displaying their expertise in various ways, for example, by reinforcing (pointing or calling attention to) the valuable knowledge that is displayed on the board or on the task to be carried out. Other manifestations of teachers’ expertise occur through the portrayal of teachers’ lecturing, dictating, modeling, asking or answering known-answer questions, saying ‘I’m a teacher,’ or providing specific directions to students regarding how and when they are supposed to use their knowledge.
Figure 5. Expected responses, per series.

Of special interest are the words ‘I’m a teacher’ said by the instructors portrayed in Series A several times, reinforcing the notion that teachers are the authoritative representation of knowledge and that they will lead students to the valuable world of wisdom. Only once, among all the illustrations present in the twelve analyzed volumes, does a teacher actually listen to her student. Another recurring pattern is the portrayal of teachers, in the three series, as recipients of some kind of homage coming from their students. This representation reinforces this notion of hierarchies of individual expertise, and a new level can be discussed at this point: in the analyzed textbooks, the students are experts only when they can reproduce the same knowledge transmitted by their teacher - and they have to be thankful for that opportunity.

Classroom practices as non-interactive routines
The focus on individualism in schools is also revealed through the analyses of the activities and illustrations present in the materials. The emphasis on individual performances of teachers and students, at the expense of more complex social interactions, has a very problematic dimension: In general, it is assumed that the whole class should achieve the same learning outcomes as revealed in an overwhelming emphasis on recitation activities, as shown in Figure 5. Authentic activities are defined here as those which allow different responses; recitation activities are the ones which expect only one ‘correct’ answer.

It has been argued that current paradigms in L2 instruction define learning as a message transfer mechanism, focusing on input and output, and treating teachers and students as individual participants who do not actually engage in joint construction of meaning. This is also the view reinforced in the analyzed materials, in which learning is seen as the result of purely cognitive processing. In the teacher’s manuals that accompany the analyzed volumes, verbs such as ‘explain’, ‘present’, ‘reinforce’, ‘repeat’, and ‘train’, are common ones. Within the books, the illustrated teachers often say, ‘Pay attention!’, ‘Look!’, or ‘Remember!’, reinforcing roles marked by individualism in the teaching/learning process: if students and teachers carry out their roles appropriately, learning will occur. If there is failure in this process, such problem can be attributed to either teachers (who have not provided adequate input, or asked the suitable questions, or given enough reinforcement of content) or to students (who have not paid enough attention to, or looked at, or remembered, the valuable knowledge transmitted by their teachers).

In short, these textbooks do not foster relevant interactions among students, or between teachers and students. They value the knowledge supposedly held by individual experts, whose task is to transmit this same knowledge to others. Language is used (by teachers as well as students) as a mechanical resource, not aiming at communication or self-regulation, but clearly communicating the message, ‘I have grasped the valuable knowledge you have given to me and I am happy and grateful’.

Conclusion
This study aims to articulate explicit and implicit messages embedded in popular English as a foreign language textbooks in Brazilian elementary schools. Textbooks, as representatives of educational discourse, can provide significant information about
expected roles and rules in their context of use. They also unveil shared understandings among members of a certain social group, including their definitions of knowledge, schooling, learning, language use, and participation in society in broader terms. In other words, the messages given by textbooks go beyond the realm of specific subject matters. They also teach lessons about the world and about learning in general.

Before assessing the findings of this study it is necessary to sound a cautionary note. I would like to point out that this study is limited within the very methodological approach that gives form to it. Content analyses of textbooks can be relevant sources of information regarding content, form, and implicit messages embedded in these materials, but one can never be fully sure about how these materials are going to be actually implemented in the classroom, or about how learners are going to make sense of these lessons in the long run. A second limitation resides in the absence of a second investigator's analysis of the sample. I tried to minimize the effects of my bias through the various readings I carried out, each of which had a different focus. By doing so, I could triangulate the data and define what themes emerged from the readings of these materials more consistently.

Three major themes emerged from the analysis. First, there is the suggestion that the world is a perfect place, where there are no apparent conflicts to be solved. In that world, people, animals, places, and objects are marked by homogeneity and relationships are free from difficulties. In addition, everybody seems to share the understanding of the same fixed meanings and universal truth.

The second message is that the world is fragmented at various levels. Settings that characterize social life are portrayed as isolated places, being schools, for example, disconnected from other environments. In schools, knowledge is treated as a sum of independent disciplines. EFL, one of these disciplines, is dealt with as a collection of bodies of information, acquired through the accomplishment of mostly unrelated activities. In general, learning is associated with the ability to reproduce vocabulary and structures in decontextualized and disconnected tasks.

This fragmentation is unarticulated and does not seem to pose problems either to the users of or to the people described in these materials. This fact somehow reinforces the portrayal of the perfect world. By ignoring more holistic representations, and by neglecting the necessary relationships among parts that characterize broader notions, the text's private ways of seeing the world and the social relations that occur in it are implied as the correct, and only, views. And because the described views are predominantly the ones of a more privileged social class, the message given is that efforts to transform dominant traditions are absolutely unnecessary.

The third message supports this conservative emphasis. Enculturation to school conventions includes a perception that school routines are characterized by rules and roles marked by individualism. The textbooks suggest that knowledge is possessed by individual experts, that it is to be acquired through relations that are eminently individual, and that it is to be reproduced in private routines that offer no chances of change.

The textbooks, besides teaching EFL lessons, also teach more fundamental lessons to their users. It is indeed important that materials developers and teachers, while designing and using textbooks, ask themselves what kind of language users they are helping form. Yet it is also essential that these questions be asked as well: What kind of learners are we helping raise? What kind of citizens are we helping develop? ‘The language user’, ‘the learner’, and ‘the citizen’ are different but interdependent identities developed by the same individual. In this respect, the results of this study indicate that popular EFL textbooks in Brazilian elementary schools are likely to teach children to become uncritical people, numb to the complexities that characterize life in social groups. Through the content and activities proposed, the language user is led to assume that language is convention only (with no space for creation and error), that meanings are stable, and that communication is unproblematic. Similarly, a foreign language is suggested to be a simplistic set of codes that can be easily incorporated to these users’ also unproblematic conception of language. Under this view, a foreign language has nothing to add to this conception, dismissing Vygotsky’s notion that ‘a foreign language facilitates mastering of higher forms of the native language’.

Accordingly, the users of these materials are unlikely to become aware of the relevance of social exchanges as a prerequisite for true learning, of the

holistic character of knowledge, and above all of their role as responsible agents in the learning process. In this respect, the message given is that teachers and students are independent elements and that learning is mastering ready-made information (but never discussing either the relevance of this information or the practices implemented in its acquisition). These textbooks also imply that it is ‘natural’ to have different ways of learning in and out of school.

The discussion of what kind of citizens the analyzed textbooks are helping to develop is quite relevant in the Brazilian context, due to a paradoxical relation involving the audience of these materials: On the one hand, students who learn EFL in elementary schools are likely to be privileged members of the Brazilian society; on the other hands, these same learners are led to incorporate early in their lives the notion that knowledge of the English language is the gateway to a more powerful world than theirs. However, this tension is never clearly articulated. Learners are not invited to establish connections between EFL and their own worlds. Moreover, these materials suggest that the new world (symbolized by EFL) is also unproblematic and can be achieved through the incorporation of a body of simplistic, disconnected information.

Overall, the messages do not inform the user that literacy, and learning, and citizenship, involve realization and critical evaluation of the practices associated with membership with both the micro- and macro-dimensions of social groups. The language users-learners-citizens that take these worldviews for granted will probably reproduce their dominant position in the Brazilian society, and will not develop necessary tools to help their group obtain the passport to a more prestigious world.

These perceptions challenge the practices (at both macro and micro levels) proposed by the Brazilian National Parameters for Education, whose guidelines attempt to address the rapid changes and the impact of globalization which characterizes the beginning of this new millennium. In this respect, this work opens up avenues for further research on currently produced and used materials not only in Brazil, but also in other educational scenarios in which EFL has a prominent role; in addition, these findings also point to the need for in depth examinations of practitioners’ operationalizations of these materials.

Different times require new social relations. They also reveal new ways of representing the world, and presuppose new mechanisms to enable social members to cope with new needs. What forthcoming generations will be required to know, or do, in years to come, cannot be known. But because education is a process aiming at the future, awareness of the complexities of an increasingly pluralistic world seems to be a fundamental concern of educational enterprises. Textbooks can become major allies in this process of awareness by incorporating both these complex notions and a critical conversation on these complexities.

Appendix – Textbooks analysed in the article
