



# Picture perfect: ELT textbook images and communicative competence development

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## Abstract

Images are an important resource in English language teaching (ELT) textbooks. Still, knowledge of how textbook images may support the development of the learner's communicative competence is still scarce. This paper provides examples of how textbook images can support such a development. The theoretical framework consists of models of communicative competence, the notions of input and output, principles for communicative approaches, as well as key tools for image analysis. As examples relating to the phenomenon under study, Nicaraguan textbooks for the teaching of English in secondary school have been used.

Keywords: Images, communicative competence, ELT textbooks, Nicaragua

## 1. Introduction

Images are an important resource in English language teaching (ELT). Research has highlighted their power to facilitate student comprehension of material and vocabulary learning, as well as creativity and engagement (Bezemer & Kress, 2009; Goldstein, 2009). Still, it has been argued that their potential remains under-exploited (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017; Hurst, 2014; Romney & Bell, 2012). Thus, closer consideration needs to be paid to the potential that textbook images can have for language learning and, more specifically, to their potential to aid the development of the learner's communicative competence (see also Gholami, & Rafik-Galea, 2017). This article looks at a group of images included in the recently published Nicaraguan textbook series entitled *Secondary English Book*. This is an exploratory paper that sets out to provide examples of how textbook images can be used to enhance the learner's communicative competence.

## 2. Background and previous research

Most foreign language teaching curricula around the world are based on a communicative approach to language learning. The communicative approach bases itself on the idea that successful language learning requires the communication of real meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This approach derives from the notion of communication competence, where the goal is also for students to negotiate meaning (Richards, 2006). This notion involves many aspects such as cultural knowledge and general world knowledge, in addition to linguistic competencies (see Council of Europe, 2018). Obviously, teaching materials have to take these aspects into consideration.

Although empirical research has shown that images have gained a salient role in ELT textbooks in the past decades (Bezemer & Kress, 2009), the research is relatively scarce (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017; Gholami & Rafik-Galea, 2017) and has mainly focused on the cultural content, including issues of gender (e.g., Hall, 2014; Tajeddin & Enayat, 2010), the presentation of indigenous people (e.g., Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017; Lund, 2016), the reinforcement of stereotypes (e.g., Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017, p. 16), and the presentation of celebrities as cultural figures (e.g., Babaii, Atai & Parsazadeh, 2019).

Other studies have set out to determine whether ELT textbook images can be considered educational or “purely” decorative (e.g., Hill, 2003; Romney, 2012; Romney & Bell, 2012), with different scholars using different categories / understandings of what decorative images are. Hill (2003) claims that images are purely decorative when there is no written instruction to indicate how they should be used. Romney and Bell (2012) use the same criterion in defining this type of image, while Romney (2012) draws the line according to the image’s possible function. If he cannot find the possible function of an image, then he views it as decorative. From this, it seems that the term “decorative image” is highly contentious and that identifying decorative images in textbooks is not a very fruitful approach (see also Romney, 2018).

While the above research has provided insights into the affordances of images for instructional purposes in ELT, it has not addressed how images can contribute to engaging learners in language learning activities, in relation to communicative competence development. Therefore, this article addresses the following question: *In which ways can ELT textbook images support the development of the learner’s communicative competence?* In order to provide an answer to this question, two sub-questions have been formulated:

1. In which ways can ELT textbook images contribute to providing meaningful input?

2. In which ways can ELT textbook images contribute to supporting the production of language output from the learner?

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### ELT textbook images: A brief definition

Generally speaking, “images” in ELT textbooks can be defined as visual input that may accompany verbal text or stand alone as resources in their own right (Haiyan, 2018). Images may take the form of photographs, charts, diagrams, drawings and paintings (Hewings, 1991). Whether images accompany verbal text or stand alone, they can be a fundamental component of ELT textbooks and a means of fostering the learner’s communicative competence (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017). The following sections will theoretically elaborate on how textbook images can contribute to such a development. But, first, the terms “communicative competence” and “Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)” must be defined.

#### Communicative competence and Communicative Language Teaching

As mentioned above, the ultimate goal of ELT in the communicative approach is the development of communicative competencies (Simensen, 2007). Hymes (1972) asserted that learners of a language need more than mastery of linguistic structures in order to successfully communicate in a language. Moreover, he put the goal of negotiating meaning at the heart of communicative competence (Savignon, 1987). He also claimed that a competent language user needs to take contextual factors of a communication situation into consideration.

Building on Hymes’ work, Canale and Swain (1980) developed a model of communicative competence. Their model dealt with “the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of rules of language use” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 6). Three elements are central in this model: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes knowledge of lexical items and of rules relating to morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. Sociolinguistic competence pertains to the knowledge of sociocultural rules of use and discourse rules (e.g., rules of politeness). Strategic competence includes verbal and nonverbal communicative strategies that speakers may use to avoid communication breakdowns by, for instance, rephrasing what they mean or changing the subject of conversation. Canale and Swain’s model has been very influential in so-

called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (cf. Skulstad, 2018a). Therefore, I will build on this model in my discussion.

The communicative approach to language teaching and learning emphasizes the ability to interact and to negotiate meaning as the ultimate goal. It puts the stress on providing environments, techniques and opportunities to practice the target language through the use of meaningful or authentic texts, and through the use of the language both in and outside of school settings. The following sections – and, especially, the presentation of Richards' and Rogers' (2014) principles for materials in communicative approaches – will elaborate on some central implications of CLT on textbook materials and images.

### The notions of *input* and *output*

Two important notions in CLT are *input* (Krashen, 1989) and *output* (Swain, 2005). Input refers to the content that the learner encounters by reading or by listening. Output refers to the language that the learner is able to produce, through speaking and writing. The input hypothesis posits that language is acquired by receiving “comprehensible input” which moves from basic rules of language to “structures that are a bit beyond our current level of competence” (Krashen, 1989, p. 2). The output hypothesis assumes that learning takes place when learners encounter a gap in their linguistic knowledge of the second language. By noticing this gap, learners become aware of it and thus, ideally, get motivated to improve their language skills (Swain, 2005).

### *Input*

There are different ways in which textbook images can contribute to the learners' communicative competence development. In this paper, I will consider two perspectives – the image–text relation and the social dimension of images, namely the representation of people, places and things in images.

The most commonly used approach in the analysis of the image–text relation in ELT textbook images is Levin's (1981) typology. Levin's categories that are particularly relevant for this research are *reiteration*, *representation* and *organization*. Images may be used to repeat or clarify the input provided by the verbal text. In this case, images may play either a *reiterational* or a *representational* role (Levin, 1981). Reiterational images are designed or chosen to repeat the input provided by the verbal text (Levin, 1981). In ELT materials, this kind of image would be similar to those in a picture dictionary, in which students see a picture and a word relating to the same thing (Romney, 2012).



Images that have a representational function are designed or chosen to make the text material more concrete by, for example, elaborating on and contextualizing the references to people, places and things offered by the verbal language (Hewing, 1991). Such images may contribute to facilitating students' comprehension of the materials. Other images may play an *organizational* role (Levin, 1981). Such images are intended to organize information in order to make it easier to understand, for example when an image at the beginning of a textbook unit outlines the content of the unit.

Levin's (1981) typology can help us identify the different functions of textbook images. As seen above, the different functions can shed light on how images may provide the learners with something to think / talk about – and to organize the content presented. Moreover, the work of van Leeuwen (2008) on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can help elaborate on the aspects that Levin's categories (1981) do not cover, i.e., the social dimension of images. The way people, places and things (represented participants) are represented in images can shed light on how meaningful images can be, which relates to the development of the learner's sociolinguistic competence.

Anchoring his work in Halliday's social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), and following a multimodal approach to language and communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005), van Leeuwen introduced a series of concepts and tools for studying images in terms of what they can potentially represent. Regarding the visual representation of people, places and things in multimodal texts, van Leeuwen (2008) asserts that:

We are made to see the people depicted as though they are strangers or friends, as though they are “below” us or “above” us, as though they are in interaction with us or not, and so on, whatever the actual relations between us and those people, or those kinds of people (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 138).

Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 147) describes how people can be depicted in images in different ways. People may be depicted in *categories*, meaning they can be visually grouped in terms of “cultural” or “biological” characteristics, or both. As such, they can connote negative or positive values and associations attached to a particular sociocultural group (van Leeuwen, 2008). People may be represented in *roles*, meaning that they may be engaged in some kind of action as “agents” (or doers) or “patients” (the people for whom the action is done). *Exclusion* refers to not including “specific people or kinds of people in representations of the groups (institutions, societies, nations, etc.) in which they live and work, and to which they therefore belong” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 142). Applying this description, textbook authors may opt to exclude certain groups. In such a case, unrepresented groups will come across as “not

belonging” to the reader’s world or context. Arguably, the viewers can be excluded from the textbook images, too, when the elements depicted do not match their own context and situation.

With reference to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), one can also look at how contact is created between the represented participants and the viewer. Here, one can talk about *demands* and *offers*. In an image in which the represented participant is gazing at the viewer, he/she is demanding something from the viewer. On the other hand, if the represented participant gazes away from the viewer, the participant is positioned as “an object of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119).

### Output

Textbook images can also support the production of language output. In order to shed light on this aspect, I build on Richards’ and Rogers’ (2014) three principles for communicative approaches, which are commonly quoted in discussions of the relevance and appropriacy of learning materials (see, e.g., Simensen, 2007; Skulstad, 2018b). The three principles are:

- a. The communication principle: activities that involve real communication promote learning.
- b. The task principle: activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.
- c. The meaningfulness principle: language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

The communication principle addresses the need for activities to encourage real communication. Images – in connection with activities – may support real communication, which is the opportunity to negotiate meaning. An activity may elicit a discussion from the learner and an image attached to the activity may serve as a starting point or visual clue to the work to be done, e.g., “Look at the image and discuss”.

The task principle highlights the need for tasks to be meaningful. “Task” refers to classroom work that involves the learner in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language (cf. Nunan, 2004). Here, the term “task” has a broader scope than the term “activity”, in that tasks build on the learner’s existing language repertoires, have a clear goal which is to produce some language outcome, and involve a focus on meaning and the opportunities for reflection on language use (Richards, 2020). Tasks can be said to be meaningful when students are given the possibility to use language in situations that resemble a real-life activity (Nunan, 1999). That is, they address the projected or known real-world needs of students (Gilmore, 2020).

The meaningfulness principle applies to the content of the learning materials. Meaningful content relates to the learners’ context and situation and will, hopefully, be motivating for them (see Lund, 2010). Meaningful content is

also expected to spur the learner's curiosity and critical thinking skills, i.e., judgements of whether something is good, bad, valid, or true (Hornberger, 2006). This can be done, for instance, by presenting new, thought-provoking, controversial or ambiguous content.

#### *Images and activities*

Textbook images can be linked to a variety of activities and, obviously, they can support the production of language output in different ways. A key element here is the presence or absence of a reference to how the images are expected to be used (e.g., look at and describe, look at and discuss). The notion of open and closed activities (cf. Ellis, 2005) can also deepen our understanding of the different types of such work. Open activities allow the learners to make their own choices and voice their own opinions, for instance by requiring descriptions, explanations or discussions. Closed activities, on the other hand, limit themselves to requiring specific information to be lifted from a reading passage or mechanical language work (e.g., a fill-in exercise). Language-focused work, related to grammatical competence, can be encouraged by this type of activity. One can say, then, that open activities – in connection to images – can encourage the negotiation of meaning (cf. Richards & Rogers, 2014). Moreover, one can also say that closed activities can also support the production of language output, especially to “metalinguistic reflection”, defined as any conscious act of reflection about language, including learners' planning of how they will process it linguistically, to borrow one concept from Swain and Lapkin (1995).

Moreover, one can talk about “active” or “passive” functions (Romney, 2012): Images can have an active function when it is clear how they should be used. Conversely, they can have a passive function when the book does not give a hint in this respect. However, the passive function can be “activated” by the teacher, by drawing the student's attention to these kinds of images or by preparing tasks for students to complete using the images. In this way, ELT textbook images may be used to support the production of language output.

## **4. Materials and methods**

A series of Nicaraguan ELT textbooks was chosen to exemplify how textbook images may support the development of the learner's communicative competence. As a Nicaraguan teacher myself, this is the learning context I am most familiar with. This allows me to speculate in an informed way about what learners might find meaningful and useful.

The *Secondary English Book* series is used in secondary school (grades 7 to 11). I have chosen relevant images from the first three textbooks in the series, as they are the first books the learners meet and are central for them: Book 7

(Illescas, 2016), Book 8 (Moraga, 2016), and Book 9 (Valle, 2016). The three textbooks are similar in their presentation of content and organization. The series deals with everyday topics such as food, health and clothes and relates them to Nicaraguan culture. The books for grades seven and eight are 162 and 166 pages long respectively. The book for grade nine is slightly shorter, with 138 pages. The three textbooks consist of six units each, with each unit following the same pattern of activities. Language input is provided in short reading texts, with follow-up activities for language practice and recycling. Images appear next to reading materials and follow-up activities.

A group of images was purposefully chosen to illustrate the categories presented in the theory section of this paper (see Patton, 2002, for a description of purposefully sampling). The following table summarizes the elements that deal with the image–text relation and the representation of people, places in things in images:

| The image–text relation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Representation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reiteration: an image repeats the text material</li><li>• Representation: an image contextualizes or elaborates on the text material</li><li>• Organization: an image provides an organizational frame</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Categories: people may be grouped into cultural or biological groups</li><li>• Exclusion: people may be excluded from the context where they generally participate – and belong</li><li>• Contact: demand (represented participants gaze directly at the viewer), offer (represented participants address the viewer indirectly)</li></ul> |

*Table 1: The categories used to provide examples of the image–text relation in ELT textbooks*

In order to illustrate the different type of work that ELT textbook images can support, specific examples were identified as well. With reference to the communication principle (Richards & Rogers, 2014), I paid attention to the type of work required by the activity – i.e., open or closed. Here, references to how the images are expected to be used by learners are central: such references are typically written and give a clear instruction to learners, e.g., “look and explain”. I then identified an image with very little – or no – relation to the text material or activity, in order to explore how images can contribute to developing competences in their own right.

#### 4.1 Examples of how ELT textbook images can be used to support the development of the learner's communicative competence

This section will be divided into two parts: Firstly, I will look at the image-text relation and the representation of people, places and things in the images selected. Then, I will look at the different types of language work that can be linked to images.

The image-text relation

##### Reiteration

This type of image is designed or chosen to repeat the text material (Levin, 1981) and, in textbooks, reiterational images are typically used as an aid for vocabulary learning (Carpenter & Olson, 2012). That is, work that deals with grammatical competence (cf. Canale & Swain, 1980). One example here is an image of the different means of transportation used in Nicaragua, with labels of their names in English (Book 9, p. 66; see Figure 1 below). This type of image can be useful for near beginners, but students with a more advanced level of proficiency need also input that can help them learn and remember vocabulary (Zimmermann, 2014).

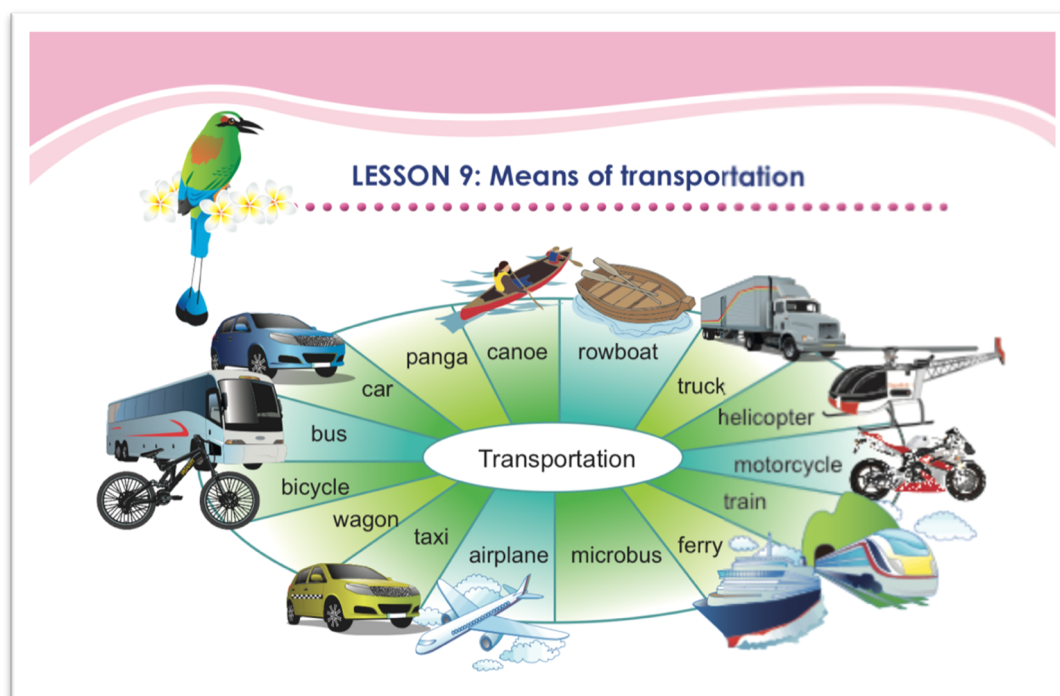


Figure 1: Example of a reiterational image in supporting vocabulary learning

Reiterational images may also be used to support the presentation of grammar rules, for instance, definite/indefinite articles (Book 9, p. 11; see Figure 2). This type of work deals with grammatical competence also

(cf. Canale & Swain, 1980). The activity connected to the image presents a grammar phenomenon (i.e., the indefinite articles “a” and “an”) and illustrates their use with images and verbal text. Images like this are common in ELT textbooks. A drawback with such activities is that they do not have that extra step which encourages metalinguistic reflection. In the example above, the presentation of the grammatical point is rather simple. A way of achieving this could be by attaching short notes explaining the grammar point in more detail, and by asking the learners to reflect on why they use “a” and not “an” in some cases, and vice versa.



### Lesson 4: Indefinite article an / an

| Indefinite article a / an                                                  |                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Use “an” before nouns with vowel sounds.<br>an eraser / an orange / an egg | Use “a” before nouns with consonant sounds<br>a pen / a ruler / a computer / a book |

Activity 1

Let's practice a / an: Say a or an before these words. Look at the examples.



1. an eagle  
.....



2. a pig  
.....



3. .... rat



4. ....apple



5. .... watermelon



6. .... orange



7. ....ant



8. .... pineapple



9. .... tortoise

*Figure 2: Example of a reiterational image in supporting grammar learning*

## Representation

The purpose of this type of image is to make the text material more concrete (Levin, 1981). One example here is an image of San Juan del Sur – a popular Nicaraguan beach – together with a reading passage that describes the

activities one can do there (Book 7, p. 143; see Figure 3). Learners at different levels of proficiency might benefit from images that contextualize, elaborate on and help explain the input provided by the text. Beginners who are at a beginning stage might find them quite useful as they provide visual clues that can help understand the topic, especially when the images refer to elements that are familiar to them.

**Activity 13**

**Reading: San Juan del Sur**

1. Have you been to San Juan del Sur?
2. How often do you go there?
3. Do you take a tour by boat?
4. Where do you eat?

San Juan del Sur is a beautiful city. It's on the Pacific Ocean and it's a very interesting and exciting place. There is a long beach and there are many restaurants along the beach. There are parties every weekend. There are many boats in the harbor. Many people enjoy being at the beach. Some people bring their food, other people eat at the restaurants, or go to the center of the city to look for other kinds of food. I love to go on my vacations in San Juan del Sur. All my family prepares to spend a great time there.



*Figure 3: Example of a representational image*

### Organization

In textbooks, this type of image can be seen first and foremost as a resource that organizes information. One example here is a doctor's schedule, with the name of the doctor and his/her patients, illustrated by means of a computer (Book 8, p. 153; see figure 4). The learner is expected to look at the information (e.g., "specialist" and "name / time available" and use the table as an organizational resource to understand the content of the image. Clearly, images that provide an organizational frame can be useful in helping learners to understand content, especially for near beginners. However, learners would benefit more if the images indicated how learners could actively use them in their own language work, for example in oral discussions.

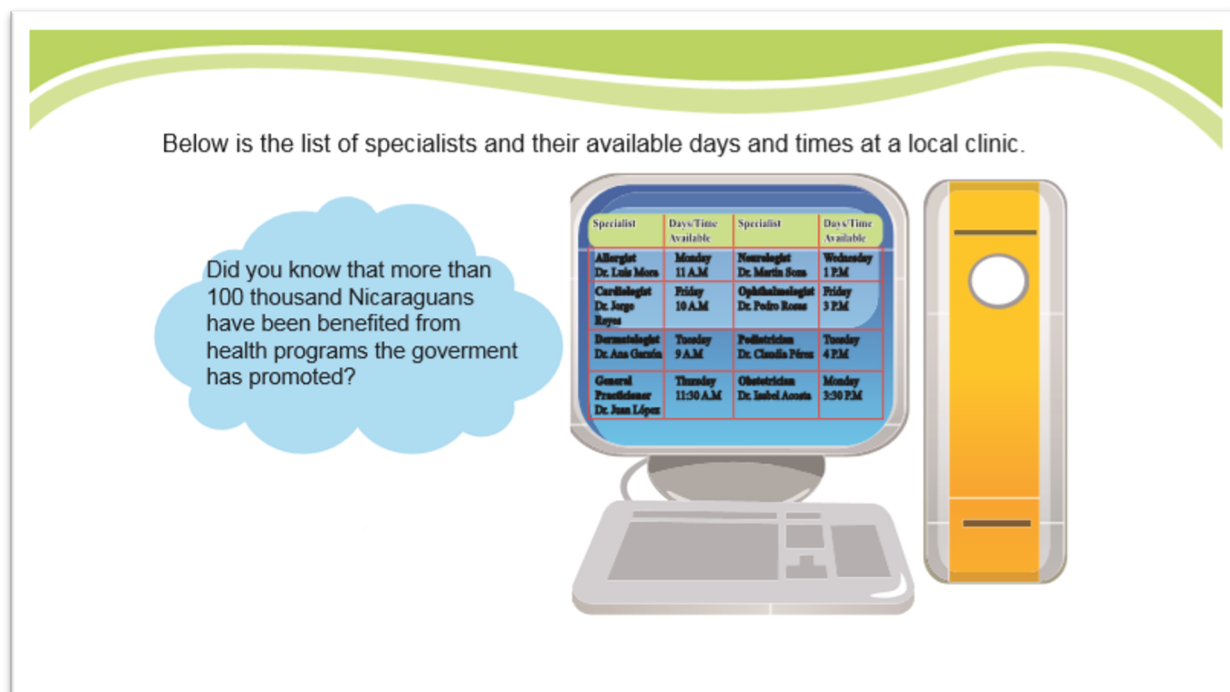


Figure 4: Example of an organizational image

### The representation of people, places and things

In order to illustrate how the represented of people, places and things in images can shed light on the social dimension of images, let us look at the following example:

**Activity 7**

**Housework in the Moreno Family:**

1. Do you like to clean your house?
2. Do you think it is necessary?
3. Why is it necessary?
4. What chores do you do at home.

**Family Time**

We do a lot of work in the Moreno family. We all help around the house. My mother does the grocery shopping. She also prepares the meals. My older sisters wash and iron the clothes. My younger brothers and sisters sweep and mop the floor. I do the errands, clean the yard and help to wash the dishes with my father. He also helps cooks with my mom. We all do housework every day. We keep our house very clean so we can stay healthy.

Figure 5: The representation of people, places and things

Figure 5 shows a family consisting of a mother, father and daughter. They are presented in categories, both from a biological and a cultural perspective. In other words, the persons inside the picture frame can be considered “all the



same". They also share the same social status (middle-class family or perhaps a wealthy one) and clothing style. From this it follows that the image may **exclude** people from a poorer background, or "resource-challenged families". This can apply to such disadvantaged families inside the picture frame and to the viewers also. When it comes to **contact**, the represented participants do not address the viewer directly. Their attention is drawn towards the main activity they are engaged in (cooking) – and the objects they are using (e.g., a frying pan). One can say, then, that the family portrayed is positioned as an object of contemplation, perhaps as a role model. The viewer, then, is expected to follow the norms depicted in the image.

On a general level, this image depicts Nicaraguan society in a highly positive way. It depicts children as happy people in out-of-school settings. It shows a family cooking together, with a strong focus on how both genders contribute to cooking and keeping the family in harmony. In other words, the book features what some scholars call "a highly romanticized view" of certain cultures, i.e., "universal values such as motherhood, the family, wisdom of older people, etc." (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 44). The overall idea seems to be to provide a positive picture of Nicaraguan society. However, figure 5 portrays a different picture of Nicaraguan society from what many Nicaraguans experience in real life. Both the images and the text exclude resource-challenged families. They exclude children, teenagers or adults depicted in a vulnerable way. Almost 50% of the Nicaraguan population lives below the poverty line (FIDEG, 2016). Clearly, the images position poorer students as "strangers" and the presentation of an authorized view of reality may disturb some students' values and sense of self (Warthon, 2011). Consequently, the learners may feel "excluded" from the textbook content and discouraged from describing their reality using the target language (see also Banegas, 2010). However, as will be seen in the following section, all images have an inherent value in themselves which can be exploited purposefully. Thus, one cannot argue that images such as the one described above do not have a relevant role to play in CLT.

## Images and activities

In this section, I will provide examples of how images can support the production of output from the learner. This will be done in terms of the activities that can be connected to images – both closed and open activities – and in terms of images as resources in their own right.

### *Images presented in connection to open activities*

In order to illustrate how images that are connected to open activities can support the production of language output, let us look at the following example (figure 6):

**Activity 13**

Gestures



Holding your hand out to the side with your thumb up is the signal that you want a ride. Hitchhikers usually smile and move their hands to get the drivers' attention. Long-distance hitchhikers often carry a sign announcing their destination. It is more common to see a woman hitchhiking with a man or another woman for safety and company.

- **What about Nicaragua? Are there any cultural gestures or body language in your city, town, community, or village? Discuss them with a classmate and your teacher.**

*Figure 6: An open activity in connection to an image*

The images in figure 6 (Book 9, p. 82) depict gestures and refer to how people hitchhike in certain contexts. Thus, this can be said to be part of a “real-life activity”, as learners are likely to participate in such an activity in their real-life experiences. In this activity, the images are a key resource, as they point to ways in which people can address others in order to get a ride. The learners will certainly be familiar with these types of hitchhiking and this might be an advantage when trying to produce language output. Moreover, the activity asks them to think of other cultural gestures in the country. This information must, in turn, be discussed with another classmate and the teacher. The activity therefore promotes meaningful language use: it requires the learners to reflect on an issue and voice their opinion. The imperative “discuss” signals this goal.

*Images presented in connection to closed activities*

**Activity 8**

Use your notebook. Can you recognize these people? Write the missing words using your own information.

Information.



His name is: \_\_\_\_\_  
He's from: \_\_\_\_\_  
He has: \_\_\_\_\_ hair  
His eyes are: \_\_\_\_\_ (color)  
He is: \_\_\_\_\_ (general appearance)



Her name is: \_\_\_\_\_  
She is: \_\_\_\_\_ (marital status)  
She's: \_\_\_\_\_ (weight) and \_\_\_\_\_ (height)  
She's: \_\_\_\_\_ (age)  
She is: \_\_\_\_\_ (general appearance)

*Figure 7: Closed activity in connection to an image*

The images in figure 7 (Book 8, p. 22) refer to two people – a Nicaraguan boxer (Alexis Argüello) and a Nicaraguan singer (Katya Cardenal). Next to the images, there is a series of statements about the two people, with gaps to be filled by the learners, e.g., “His name is Alexis Argüello”. This is a “fill-in” activity. Clearly, this type of representational image can be useful: the learners will probably understand the information better since they know the people who are referred to. However, the closed output activity requires a very limited production of language output: in this case, one word or phrase, as opposed to the previous example. Moreover, opportunities for meta-linguistic reflection are often lacking in such activities. Thus, teachers should guide reflected work building on such type of activities, where the learners reflect on why they make a certain choice over another.



Figure 9: Example of how images can serve as resources in their own right

Finally, one can discuss how images that are not connected to an activity can serve as resources in their own right. To this end, let us look at an image presented as an introduction to the topic “Live and let others live” (Book 8, p. 156). The image in question (figure 9) consists of several elements: on the left, there is the Earth being held by a group of hands. On the right, there is a group of interlocked hands. There is also a series of red bows. This image can be considered a complex meaning-making resource that can be exploited for the production of language output. As argued before, the passive function of images can be “activated” by the teacher, by drawing the student’s attention to elements in the image and the meanings they can potentially convey (e.g., unity and support, a global issue, etc.). In other words, all images have some inherent pedagogical potential but, in some cases, such potential needs to be exploited or encouraged by teachers.

The following example (figure 7) can help illustrate how images connected to closed activities support the production of language work:

## 5. Summary and final reflections

The present paper has provided some examples of how ELT textbook images can be used to support the development of the learner's communicative competence. We have seen that representational images may have the potential to help learners comprehend the text material. We have also seen that textbooks may exploit reiterational images as a way of supporting vocabulary learning and, in some cases, as a way of supporting grammar and pronunciation instruction. It has been shown that organizational images may provide an organizational frame and aid the comprehension of content. The paper has also shed some light on the meaningfulness of ELT textbook images and the representation of people, pertaining to the social dimension of the images. ELT textbooks consist of large numbers of images and this study only provides a glimpse which applies primarily to the *Secondary English Book* series. It must also be acknowledged that people may interpret images differently and, here, my position as a Nicaraguan teacher and researcher may have influenced the way I have commented on the images examined.

Levin's typology can be useful for helping us become more aware of the different functions as well as the affordances of textbook images. Levin's categories can probably be fruitful for teachers and learners as well as textbook writers, in order to help exploit images more fully. However, Levin's categories can only shed a certain amount of light on the image-text relation in textbooks; in order to gain insight into the content of images in terms of the people, places and things depicted, other perspectives must be brought in. In this paper, van Leeuwen's perspectives have been used in order to shed some light on how images may provide meaningful input in relation to the learner's context.

The principles and categories used in this paper can be considered useful for looking at images in textbooks in general, and not only at texts produced for the teaching of the English language. Again, these principles and categories are well established in the literature. However, one has to remember that language learning is context-dependent. Thus, contextual factors are to be taken into account when looking at other kinds of textbooks.

All in all, this article has shown how one can investigate ELT textbook images in terms of certain theoretical perspectives in order to determine what their affordances are. This, in turn, can help make more informed choices of images and, hopefully, put them to good use.

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