A Cultural Content Analysis of Four EFL Textbooks for Younger Learners in Croatia

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In light of the importance of the present National Curriculum in Croatia, this paper provides an analysis of the cultural content in four English textbooks for young learners used in Croatian EFL classrooms. The theoretical part of the paper provides a brief overview of the basic concepts of culture, such as *cultural awareness*, *cultural sensitivity,* and *cultural diversity*, and gives reasons for introducing intercultural communicative competence into foreign language learning. The analytical part presents the findings of a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of the representations of culture in terms of the presented topics, images, audio material, perspectives, values, and activities through which cultural terms are represented. The textbook materials are examined against Amanda Hilliard's analytic kit for cultural content. In line with previous studies, the results of the analysis confirm a limited scope of topics and preferred accents, uneven distribution of cultures and countries addressed, under-representation of minority groups, and overly positive viewpoints of the target culture. The article concludes with some practical suggestions for EFL teachers who seek to avoid superficial representation of cultural information by promoting intercultural skills and attitudes such as open-mindedness, tolerance for ambiguity, inquisitiveness, a sense of discovery, and sensitivity towards other cultures.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language (EFL), culture teaching, textbook analysis, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), younger learners*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Europe, and particularly in Croatia, the question of language and culture teaching has become particularly prominent over the last decade. It has been reflected in a number of Council of Europe publications[1] and in the current National Curriculum in Croatia (Kurikulum, 2019). As part of its educational policy, the Council of Europe has been reconstructing European identity by nurturing linguistic and cultural diversity since 1954. Contemporary foreign language teaching has also shifted its focus from the once predominant grammar and vocabulary-oriented approach towards a more culturally conscious, inclusive, and skill-based approach.

Under the influence of educational developments in Europe and strategic goals towards improving the quality of curriculum designs, many foreign language (FL) researchers (Brewster and Ellis, 2002; Byram, 2008; Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023; Kramsch, 1998; Sercu, 2010) have recognized the significance of developing learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) by incorporating cultural elements into FL teaching. On the basis of Selinker's (1972) term "interlanguage," Kordes (1991, pp. 300–301) developed the term "interculture" using the same analogy. It refers to an individual's degree of cultural competence comprising the elements of both the source and the target culture or non-existing features produced by the individual while coping with cultural phenomena (Liddicoat, 2005). Consequently, the term ICC refers to the knowledge of another language and culture, which allows a learner to interact effectively and interpret or negotiate successfully in cross-cultural communication (Guilherme, 2000; Korzilius et al., 2007). Such competence enables learners to recognize both cross-cultural and intercultural similarities and differences, look into their own cultural identity objectively, and understand other people's viewpoints. Despite the fact that both interlanguage and interculture are parallel, unique, and dynamic processes, many researchers (e.g., Kordes, 1991; Liddicoat, 2005; Meyer, 1991) agree that the latter is far more complex and difficult to programme than the former. The transformational model of intercultural competence that Glaser et al. (2007, p. 17) promote suggests that an individual's language proficiency may not always match that same person's intercultural competence. In other words, higher target

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[1] As part of national language syllabi in European countries, the following major documents are recommended by the Council of Europe: the Language Education Policy and the Common European Framework of Reference.

language proficiency does not imply better intercultural competence, and vice versa. This calls for further development of both competences in the EFL classroom by challenging learners to apply their general knowledge while reacting linguistically and culturally to situations which are not pre-determined. Encounters with versatile, yet carefully selected, textbooks and text types would most certainly enhance learners' interlingual and inter-cultural awareness (Aase et al., 2000; Byram et al., 2002; Fenner & Newby, 2000; Nomnian, 2013).

Particular attention in cultural content representation should be given to the most sensitive group of learners – young learners – whose ability to grasp abstract concepts is still limited and whose reading and writing skills are still progressively developing. The way cultural content is executed in the FL classroom is influenced by teachers' views as well as textual input and the syllabus (Bartram, 2010; Buttjes, 1991). Teachers' responsibilities include various decision-making processes and choices, ranging from the deliberate implementation of specific teaching styles to the cautious selec-tion of teaching approaches and resources. The textbook, as the most use-ful teaching tool, plays an enormous role in addressing learners' specific needs and providing the best possible interaction with the target culture in the EFL classroom (Stevanović, 2018; Risager 2005; Byram, 1991). Design, publication and distribution of EFL textbooks in Croatia are regulated by Croatian laws and legal norms. After approval by the Ministry of Science and Education, teachers are entitled to choose a textbook that they feel would best meet their students' needs, coordinate well with their syllabus or the English National Curriculum, and be suitable for attaining the goals of FL instruction. However, the quality and the quantity of the cultural top-ics in Croatian EFL textbooks, particularly in those used by young learners, remain unexplored.

The goal of this study is to provide an overview of the cultural content, as well as an analysis of the types of cultural tasks and their educational po-tential, in four English textbooks for younger learners used in Croatian EFL classrooms. It has been hypothesized that this analysis will reveal a limited scope of topics and preferred accents, an uneven distribution of cultures and countries addressed, under-representation of minority groups, and overly positive viewpoints of the target culture. Much in line with the pre-vious body of research, it has been assumed that closed questions will pre-vail in tasks related to cultural content. In other words, the learners would not be encouraged to contribute with their own personal interpretations or opinions on the topics covered.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Language and culture in FL teaching

In the formal context of language teaching there has been a strong dichotomy between language and culture. Culture has often been implicitly transmitted through language but somehow remained separate from it. Many researchers, however, argue against this, suggesting that if "language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 8). Cunningsworth (1995, p. 56) further explains that "[a] study of language solely as an abstract system would not equip learners to use it in the real world". Samovar, Porter & Jain (1981, p. 24) concur, describing culture as "the foundation of communication." Tomalin & Stempleski (1993, p. 7) support this notion, claiming that the study of culturally influenced behaviour "should arise out of the language material being studied, but should nevertheless be clearly identified and systematically treated as a regular feature of the language lesson." The aforementioned researchers Kramsch (1993) and Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) draw attention to the predominance of visual and factual aspects of culture that have been explicitly promoted in curricula over the invisible, culturally influenced behaviours that have often been treated in an anecdotal or peripheral way. Such an uneven ratio of topics calls for a critical overview of the cultural content of the four EFL textbooks studied here and has been a major impetus for this study.

2.2. Previous research on the cultural content in Croatian EFL textbooks

As one of the three existing domains in the Curriculum for the English Language, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is perceived as an inevitable and integral part in successful foreign language learning. The English National Curriculum for primary schools in Croatia (Kurikulum, 2019, p. 10) explicitly states that by achieving educational outcomes within this domain, students become more understanding and empathetic interlocutors in a more interculturally sensitive environment. Moreover, the outcomes of this domain lead toward helping students to notice and interpret similarities and differences between cultures and appropriately communicate with native speakers of English.

   One of teachers' primary tools in promoting and representing social and intercultural skills and attitudes are EFL textbooks (Azizifar, Khoosha & Lotfi, 2010). Brugeilles & Cromer (2009, p. 14) define a textbook as

"the core learning medium composed of text and/or images designed to bring about a specific set of educational outcomes; traditionally a printed and bound book including illustrations and instructions for facilitating sequences of learning activities."

Research on EFL textbooks in the Croatian educational context reveals a diverse range of materials approved by the Ministry of Education that vary in both dimensionality (one- or two-dimensional) and scope (global or local). The present analysis focuses on locally produced, two-dimensional textbooks, under the assumption that non-native authors are more likely to include representations of both source and target cultures. Such an approach aligns with the objectives outlined in the National Curriculum, which emphasize the development of intercultural competence. These objectives include the ability to identify and interpret cultural similarities and differences, foster empathy and adaptability, promote openness and respect for English-speaking cultures, and ultimately facilitate effective and context-sensitive communication with both native and non-native English speakers. Moreover, the curriculum aims to prevent prejudice and discrimination, and encourages peaceful conflict resolution, while expanding learners' global awareness.

Despite these curricular goals, existing research suggests that Croatian EFL materials often reflect a narrow cultural scope. English in these textbooks is predominantly associated with Standard British and Standard American varieties, reinforcing a limited view of the language's global role. Vodopija-Krstanović and Brala-Vukanović (2012) observe a persistent tendency in Croatian classrooms to reproduce traditional teaching practices, often relying on outdated models of English language instruction. In the context of globalization, where English functions as a lingua franca across diverse cultural settings, such approaches are inadequate. As Blažević (2021) notes, the continued reliance on native-speaker norms poses challenges for learners, who may struggle to define a clear linguistic and cultural target.

Another significant concern lies in the ethnocentric interpretation of target cultures. When English-speaking cultures are viewed solely through the lens of learners' own cultural frameworks, opportunities for genuine intercultural understanding are reduced. Barac and Košuta (2011) highlight the risks of such an approach, which include the reinforcement of stereotypes, the development of biased attitudes, and the potential for cultural misinterpretation. Similarly, Andraka (2019, p. 286) underscores the need for greater sensitivity in intercultural interactions, offering practical guide-

lines to help educators and learners resolve such complexities effectively. Andraka's (2019) criteria for evaluating cultural content (presence of varied cultural contexts, balance between macro (*political, historical*) and micro (*daily life*) content, representation of both positive and negative cultural aspects, realistic vs. stereotypical portrayals, and up-to-datedness and accuracy) and Bilić Štefan's (2008) early primary education findings will serve as a reference for the current study. Andraka (2019) emphasizes that textbook content often reflects the authors' cultural perspectives, making it subjective rather than truly authentic. Bilić Štefan (2008) analyzed EFL textbooks for grades 1–4 in terms of developing ICC and found focus on socio-cultural knowledge with fewer activities fostering intercultural skills. She highlighted examples of stereotypical depictions (e.g., guessing nationalities based on traits), suggested some activities to promote ICC, and concluded that factual knowledge dominates in early primary EFL materials.

Overall, the reviewed research indicates that Croatian EFL textbooks tend to favor Anglophone cultures (especially British and American), often include stereotypes, and lack diverse cultural perspectives. While some efforts aim to promote intercultural competence, these are often limited or rooted in subjective authorial choices.

2.3. Criteria for evaluating cultural contents in EFL textbooks

Evaluating cultural contents in EFL textbooks is without a doubt a complex and challenging process which requires a systematic analysis of integrated components adopted to varying teaching contexts. Textbook evaluation can be approached in two ways – predictively (Byrd, 2001, p. 415) and retrospectively (Ellis, 1997, p. 36), and in three accomplishment phases – as workplan, as in-process, and as outcome. A key criterion in evaluating cultural content is identifying whether the material effectively supports both language acquisition and the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Chen, 2012; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Lu, 2006; Widdowson, 2005).

Much aware of how immensely textbooks influence teaching, language educators and applied linguists have suggested specific evaluation criteria (Kilickaya, 2004; Lu, 2006; Olajide, 2003; Tseng, 2011). As a result, many researchers have also proposed checklists (Byram et al., 1994; Cunningsworth, 1995; Kilickaya, 2004; Reimann, 2009; Risager, 1991; Sercu, 1998) related to different aspects of cultural issues: racial and cultural stereotypes (Harmer, 1991; Rong et al., 2021; Saputra, 2019); educational and social

appropriateness (Ur, 1996); cultural norms (Kamsch, 1993; Richards, 1998); age, gender, and social environment (Davies and Pearse, 2000; Lu, 2006,); cultural topics (Byram, 1997c; Byrd, 2001; Moran, 2001; Widdowson, 2005). Recently, more elaborate and updated versions of the textbook evaluation checklists have been provided by Sheldon (1988) Cunningsworth (1995), and Gray (2000). However, only a few scholars (Byram, 1994; Damen, 1987; Hillard, 2014; Risager, 1991) have constructed assessment models and focused on broader overviews and intercultural dimensions of the cultural content. Among these, Hilliard's (2014) model is particularly noteworthy for its emphasis on fostering critical cultural awareness and promoting reflective engagement with cultural content, thereby supporting the development of intercultural communicative competence. Regardless of the evaluation approach, several key criteria have emerged from international research, highlighting critical shortcomings in EFL textbooks. These include the frequent absence of authentic materials and representations of deep culture, which limits learners' opportunities for meaningful educational engagement and intercultural development (Rong et al., 2021; Saputra, 2019). Additionally, evaluative focus should be placed on the portrayal of gender roles, with calls for more inclusive and modern representations of women and girls in both visual and textual content (Britton & Lumpkin, 1977; Gray, 2010). Criteria should also address the need for balanced and respectful depiction of age and minority groups (Taylor-Mendes, 2009), as well as fair representation of both source and target cultures.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Aims, research questions and hypotheses

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the topics, images, ethnic groups, audio material, values, and viewpoints embedded within English language textbooks and to assess the pedagogical effectiveness of the cultural information and activities they contain. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of cultural content are included in four English language textbooks for younger learners currently used in Croatian primary schools?
2. What is the ratio of different ethnic groups and cultures represented in the textbooks?
3. What is the distribution of English accents presented in audio recordings?

4. What types of values and viewpoints of the target cultures do the textbooks promote?
5. What are the types, objectives, and educational potential of cultural tasks in each textbook, and do they address students' knowledge, attitudes, and cultural frame of reference?

To address these questions, four Ministry of Science and Education-approved textbooks commonly used in Croatian primary schools were selected for analysis. The selection was based on their prevalence in Croatian EFL classrooms, target audience age level (older younger learners aged 9–11) and local publishers/authors. The textbooks will be referred to throughout this paper as TXB1, TXB2, TXB3, and TXB4. The textbooks were selected based on their frequent use in young learners' classrooms, specifically in grades 4 and 5. However, three textbooks are designed for the fourth year of learning and one for the first. The analysed cultural content focused on the texts in a stand-alone culture section (TXB1, TXB2, TXB3) but also in texts with a more integrated approach and no explicitly marked cultural corners (TXB4). The following hypotheses guided the study:
1. The textbooks will predominantly feature a limited range of topics, focusing mainly on "Big C" aspects of culture (e.g., history, institutions, landmarks).
2. The representation of ethnic groups will be uneven, with a predominance of Caucasian characters and children, particularly given the younger target audience.
3. Standard British and Standard North American English accents will dominate the audio recordings, with limited or no regional accent variation.
4. The cultural materials will predominantly promote Western values.
5. Most tasks include closed questions and do not fully foster intercultural dialogue or the development of intercultural communication competence (ICC).

3.2. Sample of textbooks and data analysis

The sample consisted of four textbooks currently in use in grades 4 and 5 of Croatian primary schools, all of which are approved by the Ministry of Science and Education (Table 1).

Table 1
Data on four EFL textbooks for 4th and 5th grade of primary school
Tablica 1
Podatci o četirima udžbenicima engleskoga jezika za 4. i 5. razred osnovne škole

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Textbook	*Hello, World! 5*	*Dip in 4*	*The New Building Blocks 4*	*Way to go 1*
Edition	*4th edition (2022)*	*3rd edition (2023)*	*2nd edition (2022)*	*2nd edition (2023)*
Authors	Ivana Kirin & Marinko Uremović	Suzana Ban & Dubravka Blažić	Kristina Čajo Anđel, Daška Domljan, Helena Gustović Ljubić & Mia Šavrljuga	Biserka Džeba & Davorka Nekić
Publisher	Profil-Klett	Školska knjiga	Profil-Klett	Školska knjiga
Target learners	5th grade, 5th year of learning	4th grade, 4th year of learning	4th grade, 4th year of learning	4th grade, 1st year of learning
Pages	118	151	115	124
Structure	5 Units Appendix Grammar Summary	6 Units Holidays Word List	6 Units Grammar Day Holidays Word List	4 Units Holidays Word List

The cultural content in this study (2014) was analyzed using Amanda Hilliard's Framework for Analysing Cultural Content in English Language Textbooks (2014), which integrates key elements from widely used checklists developed by Risager (1991), Sercu (2010), and Gray (2010). This holistic and multidimensional framework (APPENDIX) allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of cultural representation, considering topics, visuals, audio materials, perspectives, values, and the educational potential of cultural activities. The results should also prove useful to pre-service and in-service teachers and textbook designers in the Croatian educational context. Data analysis involved three distinct phases of analysis:

1. The first reading focused on the general structure of each textbook (e.g., the number of units, the main topics), including text types, visuals, and the distribution of accents in the audio material (APPENDIX, Sections I and II). Quantitative data (e.g., frequency counts) were collected and subsequently reviewed by two independent observers to ensure inter-rater reliability. The results showed 75% agreement on the basic topics, visuals, and accents.
2. The second reading, in line with Byram's (1991, pp. 173–184) textbook assessment model, examined authors' point of view and values promoted by the cultural content of the textbook (APPENDIX, Section III).

3. The third reading assessed the task types, their objectives, cooperative potential, and educational value (**APPENDIX**, Section IV) in terms of their capacity to foster learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Topics

TXB1 does not feature a stand-alone culture section but rather adopts an integrative approach, embedding cultural content within activities aimed at developing other competencies. Cultural elements are presented under the "*Intercultural Competence*" label on the *Contents* page, with each subsection focusing on *Comparing Cultures* and *Celebrating Diversity*. Characters are represented through photographs of real-life people, supplemented by occasional illustrations, drawings, and charts related to the activities. The visual material is engaging, varied, and colorful. The cultural content is extensive in some areas (e.g., personal life, family life, education, travel, culture, and geography – *the UK, the USA, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland*) but relatively limited in others (e.g., sports, health, economy, religion, politics, and community). The selection of topics appears to reflect considerations of learners' interests and age appropriateness. Furthermore, the inclusion of modern topics such as media, the internet, street food, and architecture add diversity.

In *TXB2,* cultural elements are integrated in the text. The cultural content is somewhat limited and unevenly distributed between macro-cultural and micro-cultural elements. Macro-cultural topics cover areas such as family values, personal identity, environment, science, animals, education, travel, and media and communication. Micro-cultural content is less prominent but appears in themes like music, fashion, community, and health. Topics related to hobbies, leisure, geography, transportation, and history are only briefly mentioned, while sports, religion, current events, economy, politics, arts, humanities, and occupations are entirely absent. The level of authenticity varies; for example, a story about Indian tribes seems adapted for educational purposes, whereas an Ashanti tale remains close to its traditional form. The predominant approach to cultural material is comparative (e.g., Croatia/USA, We/They, Christmas/Thanksgiving, young/old), often explicitly framed as *How different are we?*

TXB3 includes five *Culture Corners*, mostly focusing on the UK (e.g., the school system, monarchy, geography, and landmarks). Notably, several

topics address Australian culture and iconic symbols, whereas the USA is mentioned only once, in reference to Disneyland Park in California. Other topics include animals, major cities, and food. However, subjects such as community, health, welfare, occupations, leisure, hobbies, art, and economy are entirely absent. Holiday-related materials are relegated to the appendix. Characters are depicted through illustrations or occasional photographs of real people.
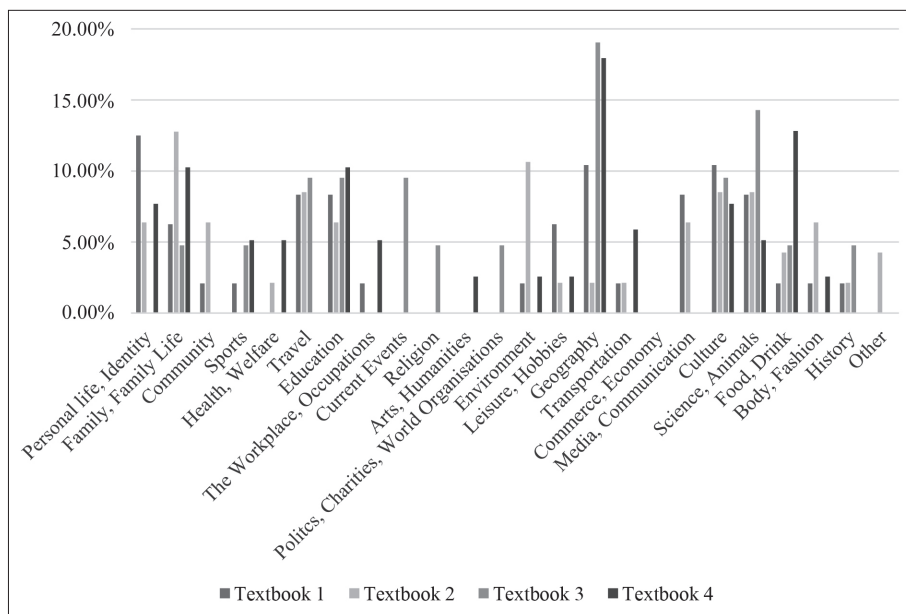
In *TXB4* there are no explicitly marked *Culture Corners*. The few culturally specific topics focus primarily on cities such as London, New York, Chicago, and Washington. Some variety is introduced through topics related to family life, education, personal life, food and drink, transportation, and animals. However, representations of geography, cultural products, and perspectives remain largely superficial and fact oriented. Topics such as community, sports, politics, current events, media, and economy are completely absent. The dominant approach to cultural content is comparative (e.g., *What is the same in two different languages/cultures?*), focusing solely on the target cultures (the UK and the USA) while omitting any references to the source culture (Croatia). The textbook images include both illustrations and authentic photographs. Figure 1 below gives an overview of the all the topics represented in the four primary school EFL textbooks. Results of the comparison between the textbooks showcase the topics that appear in all four textbooks (e.g., *family life, education, geography, culture, animals,* and *food and drink*), those that appear only in some (e.g., *identity, community, health, travel, workplace, environment, hobbies, transportation, media, history, body and fashion*) and those that appear in none or almost none (e.g., *religion, politics, current events,* and *commerce and economy*).

Figure 1
Representation of topics in four primary school EFL textbooks
Slika 1
Zastupljenost tema u četirima udžbenicima engleskoga jezika za osnovnu školu

4.2. Representation of ethnicity and gender in textbook images

The ethnicity and gender of people depicted in textbook images were de-termined by analyzing their appearance, clothing, environment, and sur-rounding objects, supported by information found in the accompanying texts. No ambiguous cases of ethnicity or gender were recorded in any of the four textbooks.
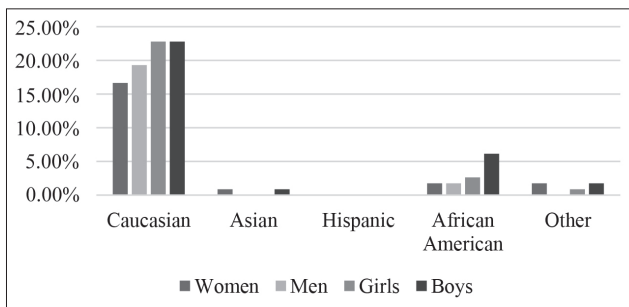
As shown in Figure 2 below, the predominant ethnicity in *TXB1* is Cauca-sian. Out of 114 illustrated characters, 93 (82%) are Caucasian, 14 (12.28%) are African American, and only 2 (1.75%) are Asian. The "Other" category, which includes Native Americans, Middle Easterners, and other minority groups, accounts for just 5 characters (4.39%). Notably, people of Hispan-ic descent are entirely absent from the visual content. *TXB1* departs from the traditional patriarchal representation of white middle-aged men, with images of men and women appearing in nearly equal proportions (21.05% each). Due to the textbook's target audience – primarily younger students – there is also a significant representation of boys (31.58%) and girls (26.32%), who together comprise 57.9% of the visual content.

Figure 2
Ethnicity and gender representation in *Hello, World! 5* images
Slika 2
Zastupljenost etničke pripadnosti i roda na slikama u udžbeniku *Hello, World! 5*

As in *TXB1*, in *TXB2*, racial diversity is markedly underrepresented (Figure 3). However, the percentage of African Americans (12.27%) in TXB1 is much higher than in TXB1 (5.50%). As shown in Figure 3, out of 109 illustrated characters, 97 (88.99%) are Caucasian (60 male and 49 female). Only six characters (5.5%) are African American (one male, five female), while three (2.75%) are Asian. No characters of Hispanic descent are depicted. Three male characters (2.75%) fall under the "Other" category, representing Native Americans and other minority groups. The gender split is slightly male dominated, with 60 male characters (55.05%) and 49 female characters (44.95%).
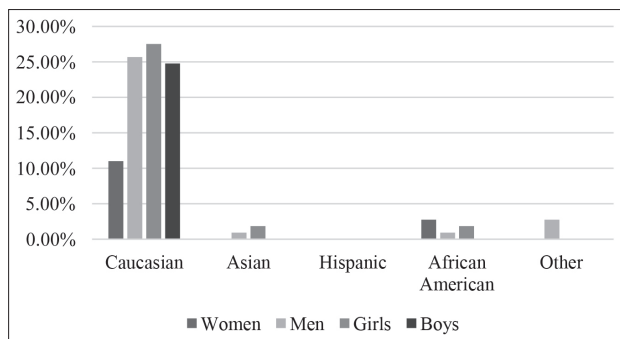
The textbook features six leading characters, equally divided between males and females (three each), with five of them being Caucasian and one African American. All leading characters are illustrated and portrayed as equally capable and courageous, with girls performing roles traditionally associated with boys (e.g., catching burglars, and climbing trees).

Figure 3
Ethnicity and gender representation in *Dip in 4* images
Slika 3
Zastupljenost etničke pripadnosti i roda na slikama u udžbeniku *Dip in 4*

TXB3 contains the lowest number of illustrated characters (85) and is the least diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender. As shown in Figure 4, 83.53% of characters are Caucasian, making them the overwhelmingly dominant group. Among these, men are the most prominent (30.59%). However, the textbook images depict more girls (17.65%) than boys (15.29%). Black population is the second most represented ethnic group, comprising 15.3% of the visual content. The "Other" category accounts for only 1.18%, with no representation of Asian or Hispanic characters.
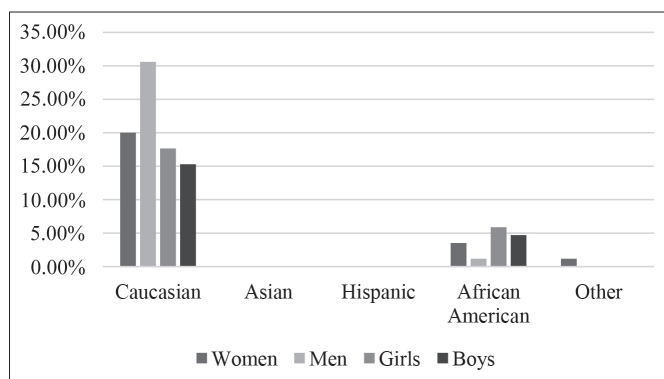
There are seven leading characters (four male and three female), consisting of one male adult, six children (three male, three female), and Ronnie the rabbit. Of these, six characters (85.7%) are Caucasian, while one character (14.3%) is Black. Disability is represented by nine characters (10.59%) with visual impairments.

Figure 4
Ethnicity and gender representation in *New Building Blocks 4* images
Slika 4
Zastupljenost etničke pripadnosti i roda na slikama u udžbeniku *New Building Blocks 4*
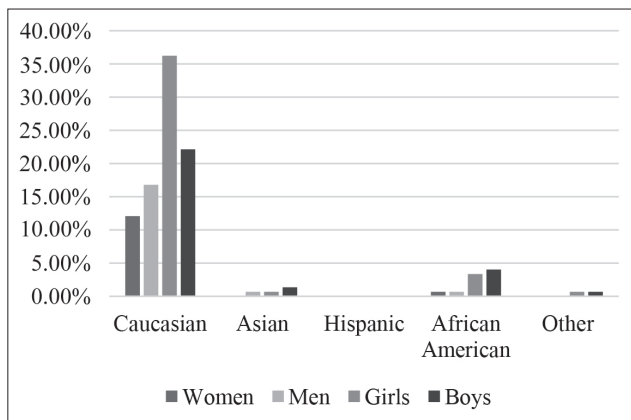

As shown in Figure 5, *TXB4* also predominantly features Caucasian characters. Out of 149 illustrated and real-life characters, 130 (87.25%) are Caucasian, 13 (8.73%) are Black, and only 4 (2.68%) are Asian. The "Other" category, comprising Native Americans and other minority groups, accounts for just 2 characters (1.34%). Hispanic characters are completely absent. As illustrated i Figure 5, *TXB4* includes a higher proportion of female characters, particularly girls (36.24%). Consistent with its focus on younger learners, the visual content favours children (58.39%) over adults (28.86%).

Figure 5
Ethnicity and gender representation in *Way to go 1* images
Slika 5
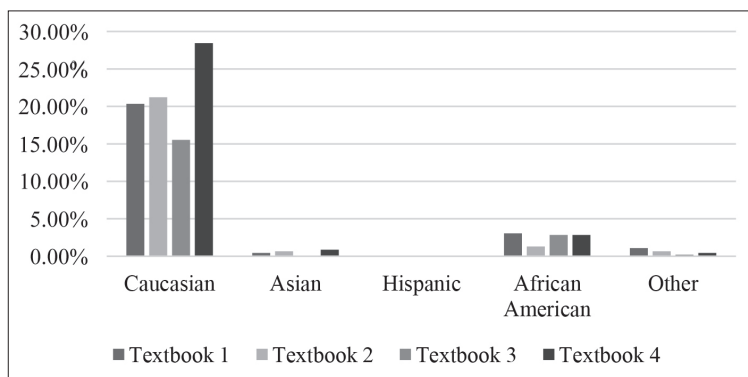Zastupljenost etničke pripadnosti i roda na slikama u udžbeniku *Way to go 1*

A comparative analysis of the data presented in Figure 6 reveals a strong tendency across all four textbooks to overrepresent Caucasian characters, whose percentage ranges from 82% to 88.99%. This makes them the most dominant group throughout the textbooks. The under-representation of other ethnic minorities is evident, with the presence of African American and Asian characters varying from as low as 1.75% and 5.5% to a maximum of 15.3% and 2.75%, respectively. The "Other" category consistently records low percentages, indicating that groups such as Native Americans and Middle Easterners are rarely mentioned. Characters of Hispanic descent are entirely absent across all four textbooks. In contrast, gender representation shows a more balanced distribution, with a visible trend towards increasing the presence of female characters, reflecting a broader effort to promote gender equity in educational materials.

Figure 6
Representation of ethnicity in four EFL textbooks
Slika 6
Zastupljenost etničke pripadnosti u četirima udžbenicima engleskoga jezika za osnovnu školu
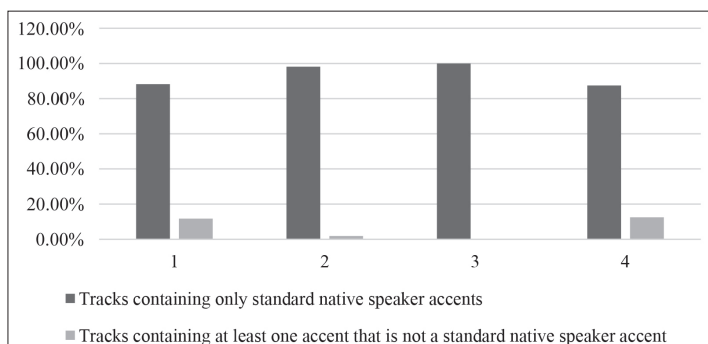

4.3 Audio material

As shown in Figure 7, the percentage of audio tracks that include an accent other than standard native speaker accents is almost imperceptible and ranges from 0.00% in *TXB3* to 2.82% in *TXB1*.

Figure 7
The distribution of accents in audio recordings in four EFL textbooks
Slika 7
Distribucija izgovora zvučnih zapisa u četirima udžbenicima engleskoga jezika za osnovnu školu

TXB1 is structurally equipped with 51 tracks, each corresponding to a specific lesson and reinforcing the cultural content presented in the textbook. Five young characters are introduced, each possessing distinct accents aligned with the topics of their respective lessons. The dominant accents are Standard British/Australian and Standard American (88.24%). However, there is an effort to modify the audio material by incorporating regional

accents (11.76%), such as Irish. Additionally, speakers from Jamaica and South Africa are also included, thus contributing to a small degree of accent variation in the tracklist.

TXB2 is accompanied by a CD containing 55 tracks that overemphasize a standard, non-regional English dialect (98.18%). A combination of Standard British and Standard American accents is used interchangeably, primarily between family members, leaving limited space for regional variations. Marks of a Southern American accent (1.82%) are occasionally present. Speakers of African descent and Native Americans contribute to a slightly greater variety of accents in the audio material.

TXB3 offers a total of 65 tracks, supplemented by an appendix that includes an additional track, three holiday-themed recordings, and five sing-along songs. As illustrated in Figure 7, the focus is almost exclusively on Standard British and Standard American accents. Regional accents (0.00%), as well as international varieties, are entirely absent from the audio material.

TXB4 contains 40 tracks featuring Standard North American and Standard British accents with 87.50%. Regional variations (12.50%) appear sporadically, such as the New York accent assigned to several characters and the London accent used by the narrator. Despite these inclusions, other international accents are missing, limiting the overall cultural diversity represented in the audio content.

4.4. Underlying values and viewpoints

One of the categories of the framework analysis (**APPENDIX**, Section III) examines the authors' point of view and values promoted by the cultural content of the textbook. Less explicit viewpoints voiced by the characters through their cultural encounters are also taken into consideration.

TXB1 emphasizes Western values of individualism, success, mobility, travelling, and globalisation. Every character is presented in a positive light, as a strong unique individual. All the characters share their love for travel and nurture a positive attitude towards cultural diversity. Even the challenges our characters had to face, such as having a hard time getting to school and being educated, are quickly resolved and turned into something positive. The characters steer away from the patriarchal portrayal of white middle-aged men, the number of which is equalized by the images portraying women. There are no occupational divisions, i.e., domestic roles are shared by all the family members, boys prefer languages and dance over technol-

ogy, while girls like science and want to become astronauts. However, the message to students is not always clear. Although the textbook authors seem to have made a conscious effort to promote cultural diversity by introducing various parts of the world (Ireland, Japan, France, Croatia, the UK, the United States, South Africa, Jamaica, Australia, Egypt, Italy, Brazil, China, and Mexico), the visuals do not necessarily match the underlying values promoted by the textual or audio input. For instance, characters take a stance in favor of gender equality while comparing male and female activities, but visuals still support stereotypical views of a man sitting at a desk with his laptop and a woman baking a cake. Similarly, stereotypical images of Colombia, China, India, and Indonesia depicting children climbing mountains, ziplining over and floating across the river just to reach school might be misinterpreted as the norm in these countries. The accompanying activities should help learners resolve such misconceptions and ambiguities by introducing a multi-perspective point of view and encouraging them to objectively express their own ideas on the topic (**APPENDIX**, Section III). This could have been achieved by introducing open-ended questions, reflective dialogues, and classroom discussions about individual interpretations based on individual answers to the tasks. Exposing students to broader cultural topics is only beneficial if the content is not approached from a tourist-like viewpoint. Such a viewpoint is particularly evident in the textbook's emphasis on travel, historical symbols, geographical landmarks, and Big-C cultural elements. At times, intercultural communicative competence seems forced, and comparisons remain at the superficial level of factual knowledge.

In *TXB2*, American, Croatian, African American and Native American cultures are compared and contrasted. However, the only intercultural situation is a family gathering of the characters at the Thanksgiving dinner table. The main values promoted by the textbook are family values, reflecting our characters' beliefs and principles, and the wisdom of the elders, expressed through the African story about Anancy the spider and the Native American story entitled "An Indian Tale." Here again, the tourist-like viewpoint is evident in idyllic and beautifully depicted landmarks and sights. The readers may notice several stereotypical representations, such as that of cowboys being described as people with big hats and Indians as people with long hair, or a visual representation of an African woman dressed in her tribal costume while residing in the middle of the rainforest. The basic premise of the textbook structure and content is the juxtaposition of the main motifs (young/old, boys/girls, cowboys/Indians, Christmas/Thanksgiving, we/they) within two different cultures (Croatia/USA). Even the title

How different are we? implies inevitable cultural diversity instead of potential cultural commonalities. A less suggestive title would avoid possible negative connotations and, instead of pointing out the differences, grant readers more freedom in acknowledging them and instilling understanding for them. Multi-perspectivity is provided but restricted to only two cultures – Croatian and American.

Some of the values promoted by *TXB3* are discipline, responsibility, sportsmanship, cooperation, happiness, healthy nutrition, friendship, and equality. Such an overly positive representation of Western lifestyle, mobility, and cosmopolitanism through the point of view of a Western individual leaves no space for multi-perspectivity or dwelling on hardships, prejudices, disabilities, or discrimination. The content of the texts advocates positive feelings and attitudes as while conveying the message of friendship and unity among people. However, occasional stereotypical representations such as that of the citizens of Zanzibar who struggle with famine and malnutrition in the text about a young doctor from England who spent a year abroad as a team member of the *Doctors Without Borders* organization might give an unrealistic, negative, and very limited view of the people and culture of Zanzibar. Despite the fact that the text initially promotes health care, empathy and impartial medical humanitarian assistance to the people who need it most, the portrayal of the African culture remains superficial and is reduced to mere hardships. At the macro level, broad social facts about the contemporary society of the UK and Australia are incorporated in the textbook. These refer to capital cities and their symbols, educational systems, the most popular sports, and wildlife. Some cultural values have been relegated to an appendix at the end of the book or are integrated into the songs (*Kookaburra*, *The Animal Fair*, *Miss Polly*) and tales (*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*).

TXB4 primarily covers the cultural-historical content of British and American nature by comparing and contrasting their largest cities through the lens of their respective characters. The students' source culture is not addressed or compared. The textbook explores some notions of a modernized society based on socio-economic mobility, means of transportation, and discussions about the pollution and protection of various environmental systems. The textbook represents a Western viewpoint and Western values from the overly positive perspective of a tourist, with reference to the most famous sights (buildings, rivers, museums, etc.) and globally recognizable features (yellow cabs in New York, double-decker buses, and phone booths in London). Characters express their mono-perspective views describing

the cities as dynamic and vibrant urban centres that promote coexistence, growth, and social and cultural interaction among its inhabitants. Other values promoted by the textbook are family values, friendship, tolerance, awareness, and the appreciation of cultural differences.

4.5. Activities through which cultural terms are represented

The tasks in each textbook were examined for pedagogical implications using Sections IV and V of the framework (**APPENDIX**). Educational aspects included examining the task types, accompanying visuals, educational potential of tasks, level of students' cooperation, objectives of each task in the textbook, and other characteristics, determining whether the texts and tasks address students' knowledge, attitudes, and cultural perspectives, and thus enhance their ICC.

TXB1 features a wide range of activities aimed at enhancing students' cultural awareness and knowledge of "Big C" cultural topics. Tasks range from receptive (e.g., true/false, matching, multiple choice, and listen and tick) to productive (e.g., describing family/friends, discussions, and project work). Students are encouraged to express opinions and compare cultures, while teachers use these tasks to introduce or revise cultural content. Activities are varied, well-sequenced, and visually supported with age-appropriate materials.

TXB2 focuses on "Big C" cultural content through activities such as reading texts, matching tasks, listening to dialogues, sequencing, and games. Visuals support interpretation, and many tasks encourage pair and group cooperation, especially in game-based activities. While cultural awareness and comparisons are promoted, the activities rarely simulate real intercultural communication. Cultural sections consistently combine reading, listening, speaking, and writing tasks linked to the cultural material.

TXB3 relies heavily on reading and listening comprehension, with tasks prioritizing accuracy (e.g., spelling and grammar) over fluency (e.g., opinion sharing). Activities are supported by illustrations and involve individual, pair, or group work. The focus remains on receptive skills and "Big C" cultural elements, which is suitable for younger learners but could be broadened to include critical perspectives and cross-cultural engagement to deepen students' global understanding.

TXB4, like *TXB3*, centers on vocabulary and language, with less emphasis on cultural competence. Cultural topics primarily address "Big C" culture and are approached through receptive tasks (e.g., matching, closed-ended questions). Activities are structured for individual, pair, and

group work and are visually supported by images, comics, and maps. However, cross-cultural or multicultural comparisons are absent, as the source culture is not referenced in relation to the target cultures.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined four Croatian-authored EFL textbooks for primary schools, all targeting younger learners (4th and 5th graders) and published by two different publishers. Three textbooks integrate cultural content throughout the units (*TXB1, TXB2*, and TXB*4*), while *TXB3* includes a separate cultural section. Within the scope of this study, textbook evaluation is approached in a retrospective way, focusing on the analysis on materials-in-process or analyzing the textbooks that have actually been used in the classroom. Such an evaluation aims at providing information on how to improve/adapt currently used materials and test the validity of a predictive evaluation. In this light, this study applied a customized evaluation framework to address these gaps in Croatian EFL materials.

In response to the first research question, the findings indicate that while the textbooks present a variety of cultural topics, there is a tendency of textbook publishers to oversimplify or completely avoid some issues (Figure 1). The topics are age-appropriate but heavily focused on personal themes (e.g., family, travel, etc.) and traditional "Big C" cultural elements such as education, history, institutions, and landmarks (Brooks, 1975). British and American cultures dominate, with only occasional mentions of other cultures, confirming the first hypothesis. This confirms patterns identified in previous studies (e.g., Galloway, 1985; Shrum & Glisan, 2005), where culture is often reduced to factual information or superficial "tour-guide" portrayals.

Addressing the second research question, the visual materials predominantly depict Caucasian characters (Figure 6), aligning partially with Sleeter and Grant's (1991) findings on racial underrepresentation. Increasing inclusion of racial minorities, women, and girls is apparent, particularly in *Textbooks 1, 2*, and *4* (Figures 2–5), thus partially confirming the second hypothesis and supporting trends identified by Gray (2002, 2010). People with disabilities and other marginalized groups still remain largely invisible. The overrepresentation of boys and girls compared to adult men and women suggests authors' deliberate intention to target a younger audience. Gender stereotypes occasionally emerge and comply with similar issues noted by Gray (2010).

The results based on the third research question reveal a strong preference for Standard British and North American accents in audio materials (Figure 7). While other varieties of English (e.g., Irish, Jamaican, South African, etc.) are sporadically included (*TXBs 1* and *4*), the dominance of British and American norms prevails, corroborating earlier research on the privileging of Inner Circle English varieties (Kachru, 1992). These findings support the third hypothesis and highlight the need, as emphasized by Jenkins (2009), for greater exposure to World Englishes to better prepare learners for authentic intercultural communication.

The findings related to the fourth research question support previous studies (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Gray, 2010; Shin et al., 2011) by confirming that Western values such as individualism, mobility, and consumerism are predominantly promoted. The fourth hypothesis is thus confirmed. Cultural portrayals are often idyllic and tourist-oriented, emphasizing famous landmarks and leisure travel while omitting complex socio-cultural realities. This one-dimensional perspective risks providing learners with an overly positive image of foreign cultures, potentially leaving them unprepared for real-world cross-cultural encounters (Byram, 2008).

In relation to the fifth research question, the textbooks include activities that generally aim to raise cultural awareness and address learners' prior knowledge about the foreign culture but fall short of promoting deeper intercultural sensitivity and communication skills. In line with "the information acquisition" model (Shrum & Glisan, 2005), activities mainly focus on transmitting cultural facts rather than fostering critical thinking or intercultural attitudes. While productive tasks and collaborative learning are present, particularly in *Textbooks 1* and *2*, they lack sufficient opportunities for learners to engage in complex cultural reflection or dialogue. Instead of focusing on the culture of a certain society, coursebooks should promote comparisons among a variety of cultures so that learners should become aware of their own cultural values. Although mostly designed for individual work, pair and group tasks are also included, though the latter could be expanded to further foster cultural communication and collaboration. It is of the utmost importance to include authentic tasks that have communicative potential and trigger peer or whole class interaction. Moreover, including more affectively engaging activities can help learners use their emotions and experience to make meaning of the text. These findings confirm the fifth hypothesis and reflect concerns raised by Byram (2008) regarding the limitations of mono-perspectivity in EFL materials.

The textbook analyses reveal persisting issues outlined in previous text-book evaluations in Croatia (Andraka, 2019; Bilić Štefan, 2008): the dominance of Anglo-centric cultural narratives, an overemphasis on factual knowledge, and insufficient promotion of intercultural competence.

6. CONCLUSION

The cultural analysis of four EFL textbooks for younger learners used in Croatian primary schools reveals both progress and limitations in the representation of culture. While all textbooks feature age-appropriate, engaging content that familiarizes learners with key cultural aspects of English-speaking countries, they often follow traditional paradigms of cultural teaching that emphasize factual knowledge acquisition.

The study confirms that most cultural topics focus predominantly on British and American cultures, complying with the "Big C" approach (Brooks, 1975) and traditional models such as Galloway's (1985) "tour-guide" approach. Although there is a noticeable increase in the representation of women, racial minorities, and non-standard accents, the materials still favor dominant cultural narratives and native-speaker norms (Kachru, 1992). Visual and audio materials show emerging trends towards inclusivity, but marginalized groups – such as people with disabilities – remain mostly absent. The activities designed to develop cultural awareness tend to prioritize receptive and lower-order cognitive skills while offering limited opportunities for critical reflection and intercultural communication, which is crucial for developing learners' intercultural competence (Byram, 2008). Hilliard's (2014) findings were fully confirmed, and her analytic framework proved to be applicable in the Croatian context.

This study addressed the shift towards the learning outcomes for intercultural and global awareness enlisted in the English National Curriculum in Croatia, which should be systematically reflected in training policies and practices. It is safe to conclude that current cultural materials in the EFL textbooks for primary schools only partially meet curricular outcomes and do not make full use of its content. Overall, the findings confirm the concerns of earlier global (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Gray, 2010; Shin et al., 2011) and local research (Andraka; 2019; Barac & Košuta 2011; Blažević, 2021; Vodopija-Krstanović & Brala-Vukanović, 2012;) and call for a more dynamic and reflective approach to cultural education in EFL textbooks, especially for younger learners who are forming their first impressions of other cultures.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND LIMITATIONS

The results suggest several pedagogical and material design implications for textbook authors, publishers, and language educators:

   a) Future textbooks should integrate a broader range of intercultural content that moves beyond British and American cultures. This would encourage learners to develop a more pluralistic understanding of English as a global language (Jenkins, 2009).

   b) Authors should ensure balanced and non-stereotypical representation of genders, ethnicities, and marginalized groups in both visuals and texts, addressing critiques raised by Sleeter & Grant (1991) and Gray (2010).

   c) A wider range of world English varieties in audio materials could help learners become more aware of the diversity of English speakers globally (Kachru, 1992), which is critical for developing intercultural listening and speaking skills.

   d) Cultural activities should shift towards tasks that require critical thinking and engagement with multiple perspectives, as recommended by Byram (2008). Reflexions on students' personal experience, collaborative projects, role-plays, discussions, simulations, action logs, quizzes, culture capsules, proverbs, international food festivals, interviews, and intercultural dialogues should be encouraged.

   e) Training teachers to implement intercultural strategies – such as facilitating discussions on stereotypes, biases, and cultural similarities/differences – can compensate for the limitations found in existing materials (Byram & Gribkova, 2002).

In conclusion, while Croatian EFL textbooks show some improvements in cultural content, a more holistic and inclusive framework is essential to prepare young learners for the complex realities of intercultural communication.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to four EFL textbooks used in Croatian primary schools. Second, teacher's editions, workbooks, and additional materials were not taken into consideration. Finally, the study focused primarily on the visual, textual, and audio aspects related to cultural content and did not include classroom observations or feedback from teachers and students, which could have provided valuable insights into how these materials are actually implemented in practice.

Future research could address these gaps by (a) including a comparative analysis of other series of EFL textbooks designed by foreign authors; (b) conducting empirical studies with teachers and learners to explore how cultural content is delivered and received in classrooms; (c) investigating the effectiveness of additional intercultural activities in enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity and communication skills; and (d) exploring how digital materials and online learning platforms complement or contrast with print textbooks in terms of cultural representation. A mixed-method approach combining content analysis, classroom observation, and learner outcome assessments could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between textbook content and intercultural competence development in young learners.

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APPENDIX

Framework for Analyzing Cultural Content in English Language Textbooks (Hilliard (2014), pp. 250–252)

I. General Information

Personal Life, Identity	Family, Family Life	Community	Sports	Health, Welfare	Travel
Education	The Workplace, Occupations	Current Events	Religion	Arts, Humanities	Politics, Charities, World Organizations
Environment	Leisure, Hobbies	Geography	Transportation	Commerce, Economy	Media, Communication
Culture	Science, Animals	Food, Drink	Body, Fashion	History	Other

Images

	Caucasian	Asian	Hispanic	African American	Other	Not Determined	Total
Women							
Men							
Girls							
Boys							

Other Comments:

II. Audio

Accents Represented				
Standard North American	Standard British/ Australian	Regional American Accent	Regional British/ Australian	Non-Native Accent

Other Comments:

III. Cultural Dimensions

Micro Level				
Cultures andCountries Addressed	Characters (age, gender, background)	Material Environment	Situations of Interaction	Interaction and Subjectivity of the Characters (feelings, attitudes,values, perceived problems)
Macro Level				
Broad Social Facts about Contemporary Society (geographical, economic, political,etc.)		Broad Socio-Political Problems		Historical Background
International and Intercultural Issues				
Comparisons between Cultures		Intercultural Situations		Images, Stereotypes, Etc.
Point of View of Authors				
Multi-Perspectivity			Mono-Perspectivity	

IV. Educational Aspects

Task Types	Visuals	Educational Potential of Tasks	Main Objective of Tasks	Level of Cooperation Required	Other Task Characteristics

V. General Questions

1. Do the texts / activities address pupils' prior knowledge about the foreign culture?

2. Do the texts / activities address pupils' attitudes to the foreign culture?

3. Do the texts / activities address pupils' own cultural frame of reference?

4. Do the texts / activities focus on aspects of Big C or little c culture?

5. Would the texts / activities be helpful in developing pupils' communicative cultural competence?

6. How could the texts / activities be improved?

Analiza elemenata kulture u udžbenicima engleskoga jezika za osnovnu školu u Hrvatskoj

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U svjetlu važnosti postojećega nacionalnoga kurikula, u ovom radu prikazuje se kritička analiza kulturnoga sadržaja u četirima udžbenicima engleskoga jezika za učenike rane školske dobi koji su trenutačno u upotrebi u Hrvatskoj. U teorijskom dijelu daje se kratak pregled osnovnih pojmova kulture, kao što su kulturna osviještenost, kulturna osjetljivost i kulturna raznolikost, te navodi razloge za uvođenje međukulturne komunikacijske kompetencije u nastavu stranih jezika. Istraživački dio predstavlja rezultate kombinirane kvantitativne i kvalitativne analize zastupljenih kultura s obzirom na raspon tema, slika, zvučnih materijala, stajališta, vrijednosti i popratnih nastavnih aktivnosti. Evaluacija udžbeničkoga materijala temelji se na analitičkomu prikazu Amande Hilliard za kulturni sadržaj. U skladu s prethodnim istraživanjima rezultati analize potvrdili su ograničen opseg tema i preferiranih naglasaka (izgovora), neravnomjeran omjer kultura i zemalja o kojima se govori, podzastupljenost manjinskih skupina i pretjerano pozitivna stajališta o ciljnoj kulturi. Članak završava praktičnim savjetima namijenjenima nastavnicima engleskoga kao stranoga jezika koji žele izbjeći površno predstavljanje kulturnih činjenica, promičući međukulturne vještine i stavove kao što su otvorenost, tolerancija prema dvosmislenosti, radoznalost, smisao za otkrivanje i osjetljivost prema drugim kulturama.

Ključne riječi: *engleski kao strani jezik, poučavanje kulture, analiza udžbenika, međukulturna komunikacijska kompetencija, učenici osnovne škole*