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Representation in coursebooks: A Critical perspective¹

1. Introduction

Despite the abundance of written and audiovisual language materials available in both online and printed forms, coursebooks still play a prominent role in many language classrooms around the world. Coursebooks very often establish ‘the basis for the syllabus, the springboard for other activities and discussions, guidance for new teachers, and socialization into the practice of language teaching and learning for students’ (Chapelle 2016: 2). They seem to ‘have a magical hold on both teachers and learners most of whom just cannot do without them’ (Kumaravadivelu 2012: 21). Due to its central role in the language teaching and the learning process, it is fair to say that the coursebook may influence the students’ perceptions of reality and may contribute to creating among them a particular vision of the world (Ndura 2004; Matsuda 2012).

Critical pedagogues such as Apple (1979), Luke (1988), De Castell et al. (1989) were among the first to stress that the knowledge featured in the curriculum and in the coursebooks in mainstream education is never neutral, but is the product of what Williams (1973: 9) terms a *selective tradition*: ‘from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded’. According to critical pedagogy, the knowledge selected serves particular interests

¹ This is a pre-publication Draft. The book (and chapter) were published in early 2022.

(especially those of the ruling classes) in order to sustain and legitimize the existing social and economic structures.

Critical studies of mainstream educational texts paved the way for the examination of the content of language teaching coursebooks, which considers the wider context within which materials come into being. In that way, as explained by Gray (2016: 99), research on coursebooks moved from the consideration of language teaching materials as ‘exclusively *curriculum artefacts* (in which the concern is with issues such as syllabus and methodology)’ to an understanding of materials as ‘*cultural artefacts* (in which the focus is on the meanings they seek to create for teachers and students, and the conditions of their production, circulation and consumption)’. From this second perspective, a greater attention of critical research is focused on the representations that language coursebooks embody. This body of research has adopted interdisciplinary approaches, which include contributions from feminism and racial studies, cultural and media studies, sociology, critical pedagogy and, more recently, political economy and Marxism (Gray 2016).

The concept of representation, widely developed in media and cultural studies (Hall 1997), refers to ‘the stock of ideas, images, and linguistic choices which are deployed in the creation of meanings, and the identifications that these seek to create in readers’ (Gray 2010b: 715). Since coursebooks make sense of the world through images and words, they present particular points of view and specific constructions of reality. Many critically oriented studies have shown that the representations of reality in coursebooks are often partial, distorted, overly simplified and biased. Generally speaking, the objective behind this body of critical research is to identify, analyse and criticize injustices or partial views generated by power structures in societies that appear in coursebooks and in that way contribute to the battle to overcome social inequalities.

This chapter deals with critical approaches in the examination of representation in language coursebooks. The aim here is to contribute to debunking two educational myths in relation to language teaching materials: the notions that they are neutral and apolitical. In other words, and in keeping with the main principles of critical pedagogy (Apple 1979), this chapter holds that language coursebooks are not innocuous tools to learn a language but have wide ranging political implications as they are bearers of potentially powerful messages to create meanings about the world. In what follows, I present a review of the main concerns of critical research on representation in language coursebooks. The chapter will then advocate for a turn to political economy in the studies of representation in language materials. By political economy, I refer to the relationships between social, political and economic factors within a capitalist economy (Block et al. 2012). This turn can be accomplished by looking at and analysing representation in coursebooks from a political and economic angle, and recognizing neoliberalism (the economic and political system of the current phase of capitalism) as a central concept in our research. Neoliberalism, with its principles of deregulation, privatization, competition and individualism, has a great influence on the socio-economic lives of people and cannot be ignored in research that claims to be critically engaged. Later in this chapter, an example of critical analysis of representations in language coursebooks from a political economy perspective is provided. Lastly, future directions in the field and the conclusions of this chapter will be presented.

2. Critical issues and topics

Fraser (1995) famously distinguished two ways to analytically approach social injustices: the redistribution and the recognition paradigm. The first considers that the root of injustices is in the political and economic structures of society which exploit labour, marginalise and deprive many people of the basic resources that they need to survive. On the other hand, the

recognition paradigm maintains that the problem lies in the cultural or symbolic sphere, and particularly on those ‘social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication’ that involve cultural domination, misrecognition of some identities and lack of respect for their beliefs and particular cultural attributes (Fraser 1995: 71). While the redistribution paradigm seeks an economic restructuring in order to fairly distribute resources and wealth, the recognition paradigm attempts to respond to social injustices by positively valorizing and recognizing marginalised groups.

From the 1970s onwards, following the main trends in the social sciences and humanities, critical research in applied linguistics has prioritised the recognition paradigm, also known as identity politics, and has ignored the redistribution or material dimension with no references to socioeconomic inequalities, social class or the whole political and economic system (Block et al. 2012). In a similar vein, critical research on representations in language coursebooks has been mainly framed in identity terms, such as gender, race or sexuality and has adopted a *culturalist* approach that celebrates difference and diversity (Bori 2018). However, redistribution issues have not had a major importance within critical language coursebooks studies. This trend in applied linguistics generally, and particularly in language coursebooks research, coincided with the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant ideological paradigm since the 1970s (Block et al. 2012), with its powerful discourse which sustains that economic stratification and structural inequalities are no longer relevant, mainly because of its meritocratic narrative according to which everybody has the chance to succeed, no matter the race, ethnicity, gender or social and economic background. Although this may seem like a path to equality, what neoliberalism actually praises is very competitive individualism and exclusivity.

The beginnings of critical research on representations in language coursebooks can be found in the 1970s. In that period, research on representations in coursebooks was especially

concerned with gender issues in an effort by critical scholars to identify and eliminate sexism (Schmitz 1975; Hartman and Judd 1978). Later, the scope of interest of this body of research was extended to studies of race and ethnicity (Arizpe and Aguirre 1987; Ndura 2004; Gulliver 2010), sexual orientation (Gray 2013), and to studies about cultural representations, which paid greater attention to diverse countries where the target language is spoken (Ramirez and Hall 1990; Coffey 2013), and especially to intercultural communication and multiculturalism (García 2005; Shin et al. 2011). From this last perspective, it is worth noting a recent book by Risager (2018) which presents five comprehensive approaches to analysing cultural representations in foreign language coursebooks, based on five theoretical traditions to understand culture and society: national studies, citizenship education studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies and transnational studies (see also Risager this volume).

All the research referred to above, grouped under the general umbrella of identity politics, has helped to uncover gender, racial and cultural bias and other kinds of exclusion and inequalities that appear in coursebooks. These studies have contributed to greater awareness of these issues among people involved in the language teaching and learning process. As a result, progress has been seen in many language coursebooks towards more balanced representations of gender, race and culture. The most significant example of the impact of this body of research is related to gender representation in coursebooks. Not only are teachers and students sensitised to this matter, but publishing houses and authors are also very careful not to include sexist content in coursebooks (Kuzmanović-Jovanović and Đuričić 2015). In this sense, to understand representation in coursebooks, the commercial considerations of publishing houses should be taken to account. As explained by Gray (2010a), publishing houses create global English language teaching coursebooks with the ideas of *inclusivity* and *inappropriacy* in mind in order to successfully sell their products in world markets. The first concerns how to prevent stereotypical representations in relation to gender or race, while

inappropriacy refers to topics which should be excluded in certain geographical areas to avoid offending local social, political and religious sensitivities. In the Middle-East, for example, topics such as 'alcohol', 'Israel and six pointed stars', or 'pork' should not be mentioned explicitly according to the English language industry (Gray 2010a: 120). Another reason to explain the evolution towards more equal representation of gender, race and culture in coursebooks, might be found in the currency gained by identity politics in mainstream discourses in recent decades. Indeed, identity politics became dominant in liberal discourse at the time when neoliberal economic policies were on the rise - from the 1970s and 1980s onwards. This can be explained, as Halliday (1990) argues, by the fact that capitalism has no problem recognizing and even celebrating differences, while class division and the economic structure of the society remain untouched. Radical scholars from various disciplines for quite a few years now have been warning of the dangerous replacement in critical research from material and economic realities to recognition issues like race, gender, sexuality or nationality (hooks 2000; Michaels 2006; Reed 2009). According to these authors, if the focus is only on identity politics, critical research may end up being complicit in obscuring the most important injustices in our capitalist societies, located in the socioeconomic dimension. Since identity politics draw attention away from unequal economic distribution toward the battle against sexism, racism, homophobia, and cultural discrimination, it situates inequality as a problem of discrimination regarding certain identity groups, and not as a result of the economic structures of society. In saying this, I am by no means suggesting that we should give up the struggle for gender and racial equality, as discrimination based upon sex, race and ethnicity is still part of our daily lives, but neither should we underestimate the positive aspects and the gains made so far in recognising historically marginalised groups. Following Fraser (2009) and hooks (2000), I would like to stress that in the last decades, feminist and antiracist critical theorists have tended to ignore the critique of the capitalist economic distribution as the core

problem in our societies and this could lead to confusion over which main issues critical theory should address. Surely language material developers and teachers could benefit from thinking about these kinds of criticisms, as they would be able to become aware not only of sensitive matters regarding identity but also of issues in the realm of the political economy. Indeed, all this is especially relevant due to the fact that mainstream language materials, probably without consciously doing so, support and promote the current economic and political system with their prioritization of consumerism, individualism and self-entrepreneurship, as will be explained below.

One notable exception to the traditional focus on identity issues in discussions and debates on representation in coursebooks is the study by Auerbach and Burgess (1985) of the hidden curriculum in ESL materials developed for newly arrived immigrants in North America. These two scholars show that materials do not consider the socioeconomic situation of readers, as they only reflect the values and practices of the middle classes and ignore any broader social circumstances that may affect the life of adult newcomers in North America, such as competition, discrimination and the structural demands of the economy. Furthermore, according to this study, materials prepare students for subordinate roles in the host society by giving them linguistic tools to obey but not criticise, complain or disagree, perpetuating in this way the hierarchical structure of society between dominant classes and immigrants. Since the 2008 global economic crisis, critical research on language coursebooks has been showing a greater interest in themes related to political economy, which include general considerations of contemporary capitalism in the research. There is a limited but growing body of investigation concerned with the impact of capitalism on the content of coursebooks, and especially with the promotion of neoliberal values. Gray (2010b; 2012) was one of the first authors to develop a political economy perspective to examine global ELT coursebooks. He argues that the representation of the world of work in global coursebooks, associated with

mobility, flexibility, freedom of choice, individuality and the full realization of the self, coincides with the values and practices of neoliberalism (Gray 2010b). In another study, Gray (2012) argues that the neoliberal ideology in global ELT coursebooks is reinforced by the rising cult of the celebrity. For Gray (2012: 87), fame-related content serves to promote the ‘aspirational content’ which is centred on the following aspects: ‘spectacular personal and professional success, celebrity lifestyles, cosmopolitanism and travel’. This author shows how the concept of celebrity has radically changed in the ELT publishing industry from the 1990s onwards. While well-known characters previously appeared mainly in relation to their personal success (literary prizes, gold medals) or their character (bravery, dedication, intelligence), after the 1990s with neoliberal politics ever-more firmly ensconced in societies around the world, celebrities appear characterised mainly by their wealth or by their business and professional success stories.

Along these lines of investigation, Babaii and Sheikhi (2018) examine neoliberal traces in American and British ELT materials used in Iran, such as market mentality, individualism, competition, consumerism and branding. Elsewhere, Xiong and Yuan (2018) uncover the neoliberal discourse of one of the most popular ELT series in China. Moving their focus to recent French-language coursebooks, Block and Gray (2018) examine the ways in which students are situated as self-branded individuals. In particular, these two authors highlight that characters presented in the coursebooks embody certain of the main features of self-branding, such as excitement and competence. Their study concludes by arguing that narratives around self-branding and self-care, which are aligned with the hegemonic neoliberal discourse, play a key role in the coursebooks’ content analysed (Block and Gray 2018). In another recent study, Bori (2018) discusses the neoliberal representation of the world in coursebooks for teaching a non-global language, Catalan, through the promotion of an entrepreneur and consumer identity among learners.

What all these recent studies have in common is to highlight the different ways in which neoliberalism finds expression in language coursebooks. They show the relevance of examining language materials through the analysis of the economic and material basis of society. More in-depth work in this direction is needed to uncover the ways in which the dominant economic and political system has penetrated all spheres of our lives, which also include language education and the content of language coursebooks. In this way, all those involved in the language teaching and learning process could become more aware of the promotion in coursebooks of a set of values and practices that is in accordance with neoliberal ideology. While some authors have argued that language teaching is only about teaching language (e.g. Swan 2012), I would say that it has wider implications. Indeed, the prevailing trend in language education (and by extension in many language coursebooks as shown by the critical studies from the political and economic perspective discussed above) is to teach a linguistic repertoire that enables students to perform practical activities, most of them related to consumerism and self-management. To be clear, language teaching is not at present only about teaching language, but rather about preparing students to develop certain roles in society, especially as consumers and self-entrepreneurs.

3. Implications and challenges

As indicated above, critical research on representation in language coursebooks could benefit from turning attention from the original focus on identity issues to a more politically engaged approach centred on the prevailing economic system and its ideological manifestations in language materials. As Block et al. (2012: 2) argue, we are called to turn to political economy in our applied linguistics research in order to ground ‘neoliberalism in the wider economic and political developments of contemporary capitalism’ and to provide ‘the vital political and economic dimension to issues of social identity, language and language teaching’. In this

regard, insights from Marxist theory, such as ideology, social class, commodification, exploitation and economic inequalities, can bring a lot to applied linguistics research, as recent studies have demonstrated. Holborow (2012, 2015), for example, has been inspired by the Marxist understanding of ideology to show the ways in which neoliberal meanings such as entrepreneur, human capital and market have come to dominate the language of social settings previously independent of the economy, as in the case of higher education. These key words have been promoted in the education field by think tanks such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with the purpose of spreading neoliberal ideology (Holborow 2015). Elsewhere, Block (2014) argues that applied linguistics would benefit from the inclusion of social class as a key construct as it could allow a better understanding of a wide range of language-related phenomena in sociolinguistics, bi/multilingualism and second language acquisition and learning research in the era of neoliberalism. Indeed, Gray and Block (2014) illustrate the validity of social class as a key construct to examine representation in language coursebooks. These authors detect the progressive disappearance of characters, practices or topics related to the working class in global ELT coursebooks, which happened at the same time that neoliberalism was gaining momentum in the 1990s. Similarly, Copley (2018) provides a comparison between current global ELT coursebooks and earlier materials from the late 1970s. One of the main insights of his study is the sharp contrast between the emphasis on collective problems and class solidarity in earlier coursebooks and the individualization that appears in neoliberal coursebooks today.

In short, while great advances have been made in understanding representation in coursebooks in terms of identity, much still remains to be done to link language materials and their representations to the broader social, political and economic context. What is needed now therefore is not more sophisticated research on identity representation in language

coursebooks, but a more profound understanding of the coursebook situated within a general framework of capitalism. Another issue of concern particularly to language materials developers is to conceive alternative language coursebooks that could open venues to challenge neoliberalism in the classroom, offering spaces to reflect upon and question widespread neoliberal assumptions. This is a particularly difficult challenge indeed, especially with neoliberalism as the dominant ideological paradigm in education and in the society as a whole, but it is certainly worth trying. There are no universal recipes or magic solutions to develop these kinds of alternative language materials. However, the focus advocated by critical pedagogy on the ‘relationships between language learning and social change’ (Norton and Toohey 2004: 1) might serve as an inspiration and guide for new materials in the field, which should also keep in mind the specific realities and traditions of the community to which materials are addressed, as education cannot be detached from the specific context in which it is located.

4. Recommendations for practice

This section aims to illustrate with an example what the turn to political economy in language materials studies discussed above might look like. The analysis presented here is a small part of the results of many years' research about the neoliberal content of current Catalan language coursebooks. A considerable part of this research is explained in a more extensive study with a much broader corpus (Bori 2018). Due to limitations of space, the analysis here is based on two Catalan language coursebooks and the specific concern will be on the representation of housing. This is one of the topics which frequently appears in coursebooks (together with ‘food and drink’, ‘health and body care’, ‘travel’, etc.), and is mentioned in the lists of appropriate themes for language courses such as the one in the *Threshold Level 1990*, reproduced in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR).

In order to show the relevance and validity of a political economy approach to analyse representation in coursebooks, the housing-related content will be examined against the backdrop of the recent political and economic transformations in Spain in this area. In line with the dominant neoliberal policies around the world, the Spanish state has withdrawn from the housing sector, which now is organised according to the logic of market-based competition (Rolnik 2013). Private banks play a key role in the Spanish residential sector not only for providing credit to buy a house or to construct buildings but also for getting involved in the business of selling and renting houses. Furthermore, becoming a homeowner has turned into a social ideal in Spain, while renting is often denigrated.

The examination of housing as content in learning materials is especially relevant to the Catalan context if we bear in mind that Spain had ‘one of the highest boom and bust in the housing and credit market’ in the world, as explained by the economist scholars Akin et al. (2014: 224). During the first years of this century, the construction of new dwellings in Spain was higher than the total number of new-builds in France, Germany and Italy together (Akin et al. 2014). The economic recession, which started in 2008, meant that thousands of Spanish families were not able to pay their mortgages due to mass unemployment and were evicted from their homes. This entire historic context is particularly important in order to carry out the content analysis of a sample of Catalan language coursebooks from a political and economic perspective which is discussed here.

With this background in mind, the critical examination was achieved through a detailed scrutiny of language and visuals in the units dedicated to housing to see to what extent and how neoliberal values and practices are portrayed in language coursebooks. In the analysis, I took into consideration the voices of the authors, the comments the characters make, the experiences and results explained, the activities provided in the textbook and the visual material that accompanies the texts. I translated all the direct citations from the coursebooks

from Catalan to English. The two Catalan coursebooks examined here are *Nou Nivell Elemental* which includes three volumes and was published in 2010 and *Passos 2*, the latest edition of which was published in 2017. Both coursebooks are for a low intermediate level (e.g. the CEFR's B1 level). These materials are mainly aimed at foreign adults living in Catalonia. The great majority of adult learners of the Catalan language are recently arrived immigrants, especially from South and Central America, according to the data of the main centre for teaching Catalan to non-Catalan adult speakers, the Consortium for Linguistic Normalization (CPNL 2010).

The unit dedicated to housing in *Nou Nivell Elemental* appears in the first volume of the coursebook (Anguera et al 2010: 34-51). From close inspection of the text, it can be noted that this coursebook presents a type of housing accessible only to the wealthy classes of society. In one activity, students have to find an ideal home for different people. The real estate announcements presented in the coursebook include houses and apartments whose prices go from 300,000 euros up to almost 600,000 euros. Later, there are three dialogues about buying a house in an exercise to practice Catalan pronouns. In these texts, the problems of buying a house (such as spending lots of money or taking out a mortgage) are minimized whilst homeownership is celebrated. In one dialogue, for example, a young woman explains to her friend that she has just bought an apartment with a mortgage. Despite the implications of this decision, the young woman says that she did so 'without giving it a lot of thought'. The friend congratulates her and suggests throwing a party to celebrate the decision. Such comments contrast sharply with the reality on the ground for many families in Spain who in recent years have lost their homes because they were not able to make their full mortgage payment. The immigrant population, among the most important groups of Catalan language learners, was especially affected by the housing crisis and, in quite a number of cases, they were evicted from their homes (Human Rights Watch 2014). If textbooks want to include this

kind of content, it would, at the very least, be necessary to present other perspectives acknowledging, for example, the risks of taking out a mortgage and, particularly, to propose activities where students could share and reflect upon their own lived experiences in this field.

The unit also promotes consumer organisations and real estate agencies. It provides two texts adapted from documents belonging to the Catalan Organisation of Consumers followed by reading comprehension questions about the texts. The first one is about the lease agreement, and the second one explains in great detail the different kinds of real estate purchase agreements and includes an extensive list of expenses related to selling or buying a property. It could be argued that teaching this kind of functional language is useful for students who do want to buy or rent property. However, the case can also be made that this kind of functional (read: narrow) language prepares students to develop a consumer role in society and not to be critical citizens, which is in fact the main goal of education according to critical pedagogy. Furthermore, it would not be difficult to imagine that, in learning a richer language which goes beyond these economic transactions, students interested in renting or buying a property, would also easily find the way to achieve this.

The coursebook then presents a listening dialogue between an employer of the Housing Office and a person that wants to buy a house with a mortgage, where we can listen to concepts such as a 'variable-rate mortgage', 'fixed-rate mortgages', 'the differential' and 'the index the mortgage is tied to'. Besides being above the language level of the coursebook, this kind of language is indicative again of the textbook's emphasis on consumption patterns that newcomers to Catalonia should manage. Following this exercise, in a matching activity, students are to answer whether statements such as the following are true or false: 'Hybrid mortgages are best because the rate of interest does not change during the period of the payment of the mortgage'. Finally, there is a role-play activity where students have to

simulate a dialogue between a real estate agent and a future buyer (or renter) of a dwelling. With all these kinds of activities and texts, the coursebook opts to present students with very specialised language related to the housing market which might not be relevant to their needs. The unit ends with a role play about buying and renting houses between two friends. The photograph that accompanies the task represents an upper social class reality, which probably many students would find difficult to identify with because of their working-class status. The friends in the picture are two elegantly dressed businessmen and their homes are illustrated with a picture of a large dining room and another of a villa with a swimming pool. The last text of the unit is about whether to buy or to rent a house, with advice from the Catalan government. The readers are told what economic status is required to buy a house with a mortgage, such as having money to make the first payment and job stability. In 2010, the year that this coursebook was published, employment stability was already a significant problem in Spain, with almost five million adult people without a job. At that time, there were also thousands of families losing their homes due to evictions. However, in the entire unit there is not a single reference to the evident risks that the practice of taking out a mortgage implies.

Passos 2 includes a housing-based unit entitled ‘Let’s Get Married to the Mortgage’ (Roig and Daranas 2017: 89-96). The main character of the unit is Rosa. She is an immigrant from Ecuador who has worked in many different places since she arrived in Catalonia four years earlier. At the beginning of the unit, the reader learns that Rosa has found a more secure job taking care of elderly people, and she wants to buy a house with a mortgage. Before embarking upon the more complex mortgage issue, the coursebook familiarises learners with the banking system. For example, students are asked which documents are necessary to open a bank account or what the difference is between a credit and a debit card. Later, there is a listening activity of a dialogue between two friends about their everyday banking transactions. One of the characters explains that he is taking a bank loan in order to buy a

house and even clothes or schoolbooks for the children because ‘it is impossible to do it in any other way’. With this argument, the coursebook echoes the familiar discourse of neoliberal apologists that maintains that *there is no alternative* (TINA) to the current political and economic system. The next activity involves listening to four radio announcements by private companies related to buying things on credit and discussing the advantages that each company offers to their customers. The learners are then invited to write down slogans for an invented bank that wants to sell their mortgage services to young people interested in buying a home.

The final task in the unit is called ‘We have to take on a mortgage: let’s do the math’. Using the modal ‘have to’, the coursebook again highlights the imperative need for this practice. The task is to advise Rosa from Ecuador and her boyfriend to buy an apartment in a city at the periphery of Barcelona by taking on a mortgage. Learners are to choose an apartment for the couple and to decide what kind of mortgage they should get. To support this second activity, the coursebook informs us of the monthly salary of the couple. With these data, students are to calculate their monthly mortgage payment through a table that presents the interest rates and the years they have to pay off the mortgage. Unlike *Nou Nivell Elemental*, in choosing a working-class immigrant woman as the main character of the unit, *Passos 2* presents a profile similar to the majority of students of Catalan as a second language.

However, since this coursebook does not propose any activity to consider Rosa’s background or the situation of housing in Spain, the opportunity to develop critical thinking among students is lost. For example, it would be interesting to present and discuss the fact that a very high percentage of homeowners lost their homes due to mortgage default and a high percentage of these ‘failed’ homeowners were immigrants with low-income jobs such as the main character of this unit.

Although the sample size included in this analysis is small, it still illustrates well the degree to which representation in current Catalan language coursebooks align with the values and practices of neoliberalism. Readers interested in a more complete overview of the topics covered in current Catalan language materials should consult the detailed study which I mentioned above (Bori 2018). Both Catalan coursebooks examined here emphasise the commodification of housing, especially through the central role of the banks in the residential sector and the naturalization of mortgages as the only possible solution for decent housing. Furthermore, tasks and activities often prepare students for the roles of consumers and bank clients in Catalan society. My point here is not to discuss whether this kind of content resembles the reality of many people in Catalonia. What I simply want to show is that the coursebook opts to give great importance to homeownership and to the practice of taking out a mortgage and in that way contributes to presenting it as common-sense behaviour in our societies.

Neoliberalism thus not only exists in macroeconomic politics, but it has infiltrated into all spheres of our contemporary lives, including language education, and particularly language coursebooks. If somebody were to ask me what is wrong with the neoliberal content of language materials, I would say that the core problem lies in neoliberalism itself, and I would refer to the often cited article by Bourdieu (1998), published more than two decades ago in which he characterizes neoliberalism as the imposition of ‘the struggle of all against all’, signifying that everyone must compete in a selfish way with all others and consequently to be completely indifferent to human suffering. I might also add, agreeing with Block (2017: 15), that, if language coursebooks emphasize a neoliberal worldview in their content without any activity or text which may challenge the existing status quo, they could end up becoming accomplices of the expansion of neoliberalism in today’s society. Nothing that I have written

here is meant to disparage the agency of teachers and learners, as they might agree with the political messages in coursebooks, but it could also happen that they resist and contest them.

5. Future directions

Thanks to increased community awareness about gender and race equality issues, a large number of teachers and learners would probably be extremely shocked if most female characters in a coursebook were depicted doing housework and babysitting, as happened in the language materials of the 1970s. Many language coursebooks users would also be scandalised to see that all the characters featured were white, as was the case in some older language learning materials. However, there is much less consciousness and sensibility to detect the ways in which language coursebooks promote and support the political and economic status quo. That is why there is an urgent need to develop further research to explain how neoliberalism has filtered into the content of language coursebooks.

More good quality research in this area is needed to analyse coursebooks for teaching English, since it is the most studied language in the world. Coursebooks for teaching languages other than English should also be studied in order to explore the ways in which the economic and political system is featured in language materials from different parts of the world. It would be very interesting to compare representation in coursebooks for different languages from a political and economic angle to examine how they deal with a particular topic. For example, research carried out to date suggests that the neoliberal representation of the world of work is very similar in coursebooks for teaching different languages such as English (Gray 2010b), French (Block and Gray 2018) and Catalan (Bori 2018). However, the neoliberal ideology underpinning house-related content may not be as pronounced in some language coursebooks as in the Catalan materials discussed above. It would also be desirable to compare materials from different historical periods to examine how the representation of

capitalism has evolved over the years, as Gray (2010b) and Copley (2018) discussed for global ELT coursebooks. Both authors explain how representation in English language coursebooks has evolved in recent decades to subscribe a more individualistic and competitive view of the world. Research of that kind might contribute to raising awareness among all actors involved in language education about the need to look at coursebooks through an economic and political prism.

Another area of research that might enrich our understanding of coursebooks could be examining the economic bases of language policies which can influence the form and the content of language materials. Focusing on the European context, for example, I have recently discussed how the main language education projects of the Council of Europe are conditioned by the prevailing capitalist political economy, as they promote an adherence to the principles which this economic system requires, such as individualism, employability and flexibility towards the market's needs (Bori 2018: Ch. 2). We could develop this research further by situating other language and education policies within their larger political and economic context. This could also help account for the impact of capitalist economic changes on the evolution of language teaching and learning and, ultimately, also on language coursebooks.

Finally, as has been pointed out by Gray (2010b) and Copley (2018), it would be interesting to explore the students' responses to the content of language coursebooks and the ways in which teachers deal with them in the classroom. Since very few researchers (Cannagarajah 1993; Taylor-Mendes 2009; Gray 2010a) have investigated the way learners engage with representation in language learning coursebooks, further research in this area may be needed. This could be achieved through observational studies in the classroom and interviews with teachers and learners in order to capture the perceptions and responses of the users of the coursebook content.

6. Conclusion

The main motivation of this chapter has been to raise the awareness of researchers, materials developers, publishers, teachers and teacher educators about political and economic representations in language coursebooks. If the arguments developed here based on critical pedagogy and political economy make any sense to the readers interested in applying critical approaches in language education, then perhaps the following suggestions should be considered. First, researchers could provide a new angle to critical studies on language learning coursebooks, focusing on issues related to capitalism under a political economy framework. Second, materials developers and publishers could try to create language coursebooks which encourage students to think critically about the world in which they live, instead of focusing on neoliberal discourses and the development of the tools needed for economic mobility. And, last but not least, teachers, as mediators in students' access to coursebooks, could play a key role to foster critical thinking in the classroom. For example, an easy-to-implement questioning sequence even for basic language courses would be the 'but why?' activity (Wallerstein and Auerbach 2004: 40). It could begin with a problem presented in the coursebook, followed by asking students for the reason of this. After each response, the question 'but why' allows the deepening in on the causes of such a problem. The teacher could continue with the questioning activity until all the background of the problem is exposed.

Some language teachers and material developers might argue that their job is uniquely to help students to learn the language, and not to empower them to become critical citizens. Still, this kind of attitude has the danger to reinforce the current trend in language teaching which conceives students purely as neoliberal entrepreneurs, consumers, and hyper-competitive agents. It would, of course, be presumptuous to expect that language materials or teachers

alone could challenge well-established power relations in society. This can be achieved only by changing the very foundation of capitalism and social relations on which it is based. However, the times of ever-increasing social and economic inequalities in which we live urge us to work as much as possible to turn education into a space for hope and transformation.

7. Further Reading

Babaii, E., & Sheikhi, M. (2018). 'Traces of neoliberalism in English teaching materials: a critical discourse analysis'. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 15 (3): 247-64.

An excellent and detailed critical discourse analysis of neoliberal tenets in English language coursebooks such as individualism, consumerism and superficial multiculturalism.

Block, D., Gray, J. and Holborow, M. (2012). *Neoliberalism and applied linguistics*. London: Routledge.

This is the first book which provides a detailed critique of neoliberalism, whilst offering insights into how applied linguistic research could be enriched by a turn to political economy. It contains an entire chapter about English language coursebooks (Chap. 5, by J. Gray).

Bori, P. (2018). *Language Textbooks in the era of Neoliberalism*. London: Routledge.

In this recent book, the author attempts to explain current language coursebooks and language education in light of capitalism today.

Gray, J. (ed.) (2013). *Critical Perspectives on Language Teaching Materials*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

A landmark collection of studies about language teaching materials from different critical perspectives.

Littlejohn, A. (2012). 'Language teaching materials and the (very) big picture'. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 9(1): 283–97.

This paper convincingly argues for the need to focus on the wider social and historical context for a better understanding of language teaching materials.

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