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# On the portrayal of indigenous peoples in English language teaching coursebooks used in Chile: a critical visual literacy/socio-semiotic study

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## Abstract

This research critically examines the multifaceted role of English as a foreign language (EFL) coursebooks beyond mere language learning objectives. Specifically, the study focuses on how these coursebooks often project universal cultural values that, though seemingly bland, can perpetuate power dynamics leading to various forms of inequality. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that amalgamates socio-semiotic analysis and critical visual literacy, the investigation scrutinizes the portrayal of indigenous peoples within 12 EFL coursebooks used in state-run and subsidized schools across Chile. Furthermore, the research explores the viewpoints and attitudes of seven EFL teachers towards the visual representations of indigenous peoples compared to non-indigenous individuals depicted in the same coursebooks. The findings suggest that indigenous peoples are often depicted as stereotypical remnants of the past, oversimplifying their intricate cultural attributes and presenting them as disconnected from contemporary society. Moreover, the study identifies the failure of coursebook publishers in acknowledging the richness and diversity of indigenous cultures, thereby perpetuating cultural stereotypes and contributing to the process of otherising, which reinforces a sense of separation between the majority (“us”) and the indigenous minority (“them”).

**Keywords:** EFL coursebooks, Socio-semiotics, Critical visual literacy, Indigenous peoples, Otherising

## Introduction

Despite the growing availability of online resources catering to language learners worldwide, coursebooks continue to dominate the English Language Teaching (ELT) market (Tomlinson, 2012). These coursebooks, produced for international markets, are seen as a commercial endeavor that must “capture, follow, meet, and create new demands in second language learning” (Banegas, 2013, p. 16). However, despite their prevalence, coursebooks often lack originality and exhibit similarities not only in terms of their format and methodology but also in terms of their content (Gray, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012).

Consequently, the content within coursebooks can be perceived as dull, trivial, and disconnected from learners' real-life needs (Tomlinson, 2012).

When examining the incorporation of cultural content in ELT coursebooks, Banegas (2013) argues that cultural topics are often presented as general historical and political facts about the UK and the USA, or oversimplified depictions of cultural customs primarily from inner-circle countries. In contrast to this prevailing bias, Gray (2010) proposes a concept of merging the local and the global, known as glocalisation, as a means to help learners gain a deeper understanding of English in a broader global context.

This study aims to investigate the socio-semiotic cultural representations of indigenous peoples in 12 English as a foreign language (EFL) coursebooks utilized in state-run and subsidized schools across Chile. The primary objective is to bring attention to how images are employed to portray, and more significantly, perpetuate power dynamics. Additionally, the study explores EFL teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards the visual representations of indigenous peoples (as opposed to non-indigenous) in coursebooks, recognizing that attitudes play a substantial role in shaping individual and social behavior (Maio & Haddock, 2010).

In her socio-semiotic study conducted in Brazil, Taylor-Mendes (2009) argues that images utilized in ELT coursebooks serve as a form of discourse that necessitates recognition and critical discussion to challenge racial and social stereotypes and ideologies. Taylor-Mendes further emphasizes that this process involves raising awareness about hidden power inequalities within taken-for-granted knowledge and working towards transforming society, empowering the marginalized to become agents of change (Taylor-Mendes, 2009, p. 66). These arguments align with Phillipson's (2008) claims that language plays a role in perpetuating colonial ideologies, and ELT publishers contribute to reinforcing imperialism by incorporating structural and ideological elements into their materials.

In the case of Chile, the country officially acknowledges eight distinct indigenous groups, namely Mapuche, Aymara, Rapa Nui, Atacameño, Diaguita, Quechua, Colla, Alacalufe, and Yagán, and guarantees their "respect and promotion" according to Act 19253 enacted in 1993. Consequently, it is expected that the Ministry of Education-funded coursebooks for English instruction at the school level will incorporate diverse forms of discourse and visual representations that reflect these indigenous cultures (Act 19253, 1993). For the purposes of this investigation, 'indigeneity' is understood as formally identifying oneself with one of the several groups traditionally referred to as indigenous, legal recognition in the above-mentioned Act and/or sharing cultural values and a connection to ancestral lands (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2023). A similar criterion is employed to denote indigenous peoples from various regions worldwide within the corpus utilized in the study. This is evident in the case of Aboriginals in Australia, where either self-identification, cultural values and practices or legal recognition constitutes indigeneity.. Ontological discussions of blurry distinctions between what counts and what does not as indigenous falls outside the scope of the present study.

Within the institutional framework of English teaching and learning, the presentation of (cultural) content through images can exacerbate the lingering effects of deeply ingrained beliefs that "reinforce dominant beliefs, values and norms among learners" (Lee, 2014, p. 40). This holds true for the indigenous peoples in Chile and beyond.

Traditionally treated as a monolithic group, indigenous communities share a history of oppression resulting from colonization and racialization (Denis, 2007). This study operates on the assumption that the deliberate use of visual (and linguistic) artifacts significantly contributes to the construction of meaning, while also acknowledging the potential for cultural misunderstandings and oversimplifications infused with stereotypical biases (Taylor-Mendes, 2009). Such processes can result in otherising, emphasizing differences and reducing individuals or groups to predefined characteristics (Holliday, 2010; Holliday et al., 2010).

As mentioned previously, the process of meaning-making can be facilitated through the utilization of images. This is evident not only in the explicit prominence of images in the media but also in textual contexts, as highlighted by Sturken and Cartwright (2009). Their perspective suggests the need for the development of visual literacy, enabling individuals to unveil implicit meanings. In this regard, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that images contribute to our understanding of textual content. Furthermore, in the absence of text, the image itself assumes the role of language and becomes a form of discourse (Fairclough, 2001). Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

How are the indigenous peoples socio-semiotically represented in EFL Ministry-funded coursebooks used in Chile? And.

What are the EFL teachers' views on and attitudes towards the portrayal of indigenous identity in English language coursebooks?

In order to answer the first research question, all eight images including indigenous peoples found in the 12 EFL Ministry-funded coursebooks were analyzed following the principles of socio-semiotics and visual critical literacy. For the second research question seven English language teachers were interviewed and presented with images of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples found in EFL coursebooks currently used in Chilean public schools with a view to uncovering their views on and attitudes to such visual representations.

## Literature review

### L2 teaching, power structures, and coursebooks

English language teaching and learning cannot possibly be regarded as a neutral form of international interaction. ELT does not merely involve grammar rules to be taught to a group of learners (Núñez-Pardo, 2018; Tomlinson, 2013) or a “natural and neutral medium of academic excellence” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 24); it entails social and political values as languages encapsulate the ontological and epistemological views belonging to the speech communities where a particular language is used. As Auerbach (1995) argues, language teaching and learning imply “dynamics of power and inequality [which] show up in every aspect of classroom life, from physical setting to needs assessment, participant structures, curriculum development, lesson content, materials, instructional processes, discourse patterns, language use, and evaluation”, (p. 12). In India, for instance, English has proven to be rather a divisive artifact: While for some proficiency in English means easier access to social and personal development, for others it means “denigration of vernacular languages, cultures, and ways of learning and teaching” (Pennycook, 2016, p. 27). In this respect, ELT coursebooks play a significant role in that ELT is most

often reduced to portraying unitary and bland views of rather superfluous aspects of people's daily life. Consequently, coursebooks can be highly instrumental in portraying and creating a form of "cultural universalism ... with an organized predetermined knowledge system, [which] harms the socio-political purpose of EFL materials as socio-cultural mediations" (Núñez-Pardo, 2020, p. 116). As Pennycook (2016) argues, what educators do in the name of English language teaching is inevitably connected to power and politics. Therefore, it can be suggested that the role of language education (through the pervasive use of ELT coursebooks) in our society can serve to preserve the deeds of power structures or critically contest them and unearth concealed ideologies in teaching methodologies and materials as coursebooks are inherently problematic and inextricably linked to broader political issues (Gray, 2002). Thus, discourse relates to power in that language "is central in constituting and reproducing relations of power that result in forms of inequality" (Blackledge, 2012, p. 616). It follows, then, that language is the device most often used, yet not exclusively, to enact dialogical discriminatory practices, attitudes, and predispositions, by those who hold power or dominant positions.

As has been suggested over the past 20 years or so, the overriding goal in the realm of ELT is not necessarily to pursue target-language competence, but rather global cultural consciousness, connectedness, intercultural citizenship, and intercultural competences comprising several components, namely (intercultural) attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2008, 2011). In this respect, a transformative agenda can either be facilitated or hindered by ELT coursebooks. Textbooks, however, continue to portray idealized and stereotypical inner-circle representations of cultural and aesthetic values (Ndura, 2004). Furthermore, coursebooks, according to Gray (2010), are carefully and strategically crafted artifacts "in which discourses of feminism, multiculturalism and globalization are selectively co-opted by ELT publishers as a means of inscribing English with a range of values" (p. 3) mostly associated with individualism, cosmopolitanism, mobility and affluence. This reveals the geopolitical dynamics of power at a global scale and end up exacerbating essentialist views of culture and peoples (Reimann, 2009), thus misrepresenting "the plurality of the local and foreign cultures" (Núñez-Pardo, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, as noted by Núñez-Pardo (2020), language learners fail to develop both their sought-after communicative competence and the much-needed intercultural communicative competence.

#### **Coursebooks: carriers of cultural values and meaning construction devices**

Without doubt, the 1990s witnessed a surge of interest in examining how coursebooks incorporated and portrayed cultural content (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Starkey, 1991). Following Núñez-Pardo (2020), the last decade has seen a renewed interest in studying how coursebooks address various issues dealing with cultural values, cultural knowledge, and power issues. In her thought-provoking article, Núñez-Pardo (2020) distinguishes scholarly works examining sexism, decontextualization of knowledge, the pervasive Anglo-centric cultural component in coursebooks, intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence, contextualized vs. instrumental literacy, and discourses of otherness.

Otherness stems from an attempt to define and differentiate social groups based on both physical and (or) imagined attributes (Miles & Brown, 2003) benchmarked against

'whites' or the dominant mainstream (usually Western) community, which perpetuates long established centre-periphery power relations at a global level. In this respect, Lee (2015) warns that there is no clear-cut distinction between 'race' and 'culture' and that teachers' "pedagogies may be 'doing race' through 'doing culture in the ESL classroom" (p. 80). Accordingly, a number of studies have examined the extent to which 'culture' (or race, for that matter) is represented in coursebooks (Bao, 2016; Ndura, 2004). It has been found, for instance, that despite an increasingly enthusiastic discourse of multiculturalism, ELT curricula continue to legitimize and normalize language learners into a "dominant culture" (Fleming, 2010, p. 600), which involves a form of coloniality of knowledge, power, and being, as proposed by Núñez-Pardo (2020).

Otherizing is often understood as reducing someone to less than what they are (Holliday et al., 2010), to the level of ignoring their existence (Sayer, 2005), which may be accomplished by stereotyping, i.e., reducing people to a few fixed-by-nature features (Hall, 2014), and the exacerbation of prejudice. Yassine (2012) investigated the relationship between the Self to the Other as portrayed in three ELT coursebooks used in Algeria drawing on both linguistic and semiotic analyses and found that coursebooks portrayed an evident ranking of cultures. In this respect, Holliday (2010) suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between stereotype and prejudice which results in a judgment based on interest rather than facts. In Chile, for instance, otherising the Mapuche people—one of the largest indigenous peoples in Chile—through the interplay between stereotype and prejudice has resulted in fairly well-established judgmental views of the Mapuche as being lazy, drunkards, and terrorists (CNN Chile, 2018).

#### **Discourse: Images, power, and meaning in textbooks**

As Kress (2012) argues, discourse subsumes at least two notions, namely one that refers to stretches of language in use, and another which points to the "salient social, political, psychological features in text-like entities" (p. 35). Whilst discourse and text are for the most part used interchangeably, discourse implies a political or philosophical turn (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1981), whereas text may refer, as advocated by Kress (2012), to the site of emergence of discourse. Text, as its etymology suggests, implies the idea of weaving, behind which lies the figure of a weaver, i.e., someone who sets to construct (discoursal) meaning making use of linguistic forms and images (still or moving) in text. It follows, then, that texts, therefore, carry the meanings that their makers intended in a coherent manner in a particular social order. Whether the interpretation of the text—with its embedded discoursal meanings—coincides with the way discourse was first construed varies from culture to culture and from community to community.

The study of the interplay of visual images and text for meaning-making purposes has been systematically conducted since the 1990s, with seminal works by Kress and van Leeuwen. Since then, in order to make sense of the cultural values portrayed in textbooks, researchers have either relied on canonical textual approaches or a mix of textual and visual approaches, both from qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Thus, examining how social meaning is constructed on the basis of the dynamic analysis of cultural artifacts and signs, both textual and non-textual visual, lies at the heart of semiotics (Chandler, 2007). Such analysis, as warned by Weninger and Kiss (2013), should not naively assume that meaning is merely locked into the particular isolated sign under

analysis; instead, meaning emerges from the social dynamic relationship between signs and the reader or user of the teaching materials. Socio-semiotics does not scrutinize semiotic artifacts in isolation; however, it seeks a form of analysis that integrates the various signs in a multimodal environment, which is why this study also gathered data from a sample of in-service teachers of English to better complement the complex socio-semiotic analysis.

Language learning is about learners attempting to work out meanings carried by coursebooks by combining text, signs, and various visual artifacts symbiotically (Widiastuti & Chu, 2017). Such a combination can contribute to shaping learners' mindsets and predispositions based on how power relates to meaning (Hodge & Kress, 1988).

Regarding the visual content in coursebooks, it is common to find images produced in photo studios portraying worry-free white people in social activities such as travelling the world, going to university abroad, applying for jobs or engaging in business activities. However, Blackburn and Clark (2007) argue that the materials of coursebooks are inherently biased through the inclusion and hence, exclusion of particular events and peoples. Issues of elitism, racism, and prejudice become inextricably interwoven in the world of ELT (Pennycook, 2016) and, by the same token, in coursebooks by merely ignoring the existence of those who are different, by failing to recognize particular groups of people, they are stigmatized as the "other" and are stripped of the dignity they deserve. Values, morals, and norms of mainstream society are usually reflected in coursebooks, while those of non-mainstream norms are usually omitted. Therefore, it can be argued that coursebooks normalize what is accepted and marginalize what is contested or feared. As claimed by Gray (2010), coursebooks convey values linked to "individualism, egalitarianism, cosmopolitanism, mobility and affluence" (p. 3), which is something L2 teachers and educators should become aware of and decisively work against.

Since coursebooks are also used widely in Chile, there are reasons to conclude that students are exposed to a large number of images contained in these coursebooks. However, there is scant research regarding the images that are used in English language education. This study seeks to bridge that gap and provide the current system and educators with a new sense of awareness to uncover and unveil power structures behind the images contained in the English coursebooks used in public schools in Chile.

Eriksen (2018) investigated the ways in which Sami people, Norway's indigenous peoples, are portrayed in coursebooks through the lens of critical multimodal discourse analysis. The analysis was largely focused on the use of vocabulary and pronouns indicating inclusion or exclusion. It was found that the Sami are portrayed as the Other through the content of the structure and content of the narratives. They are essentialized and actively constructed as different from the Norwegian majority through the emphasis of cultural symbolic artifacts such as the Norwegian national day, through discourses on history, and, in particular, the treatment of the discriminatory Norwegianization politics, thus stressing the image of Norwegian exceptionalism. Overall, the portrayal of the Sami people in the textbooks is on the negative side and contributes to their othering and marginalization.

The survey of the relevant literature above underscores the socio-political implications of English language teaching coursebooks, highlighting their potential to perpetuate power imbalances and stereotypical cultural representations. In particular,



it becomes apparent that there is a need for a critical examination of visual content and discourse relating to the representation of indigenous peoples in Chilean EFL coursebooks, a focus addressed by this study.

### **Methodological framework**

This study draws on a qualitative framework that comprises (1) Critical Visual Literacy (CVL for short) and Socio-semiotic Analysis, with a focus on the study of the corpus used in the investigation, i.e. 12 English language coursebooks used in Chilean public schools, and (2) semi-structured interviews with teachers from the public and private arena as well as teacher educators, which aim at addressing the research questions posed by the authors. The former is an approach predicated on the assumption that images are deliberately constructed in the way they are presented and lead on to particular (and biased) views of the world (Janks et al., 2014). This approach subsumes the notion of reading against the visual text; put differently, it involves uncovering the concealed dominant discourses and resisting them as a result (Newfield, 2011).

For Research Question 1, a methodology drawing on CVL and socio-semiotic analysis is used. CVL prompts critical questions dealing with the concealed (author's) purposes behind a text (Stevens & Bean, 2007) and, as a result, with whose voice gets to be foregrounded—and whose voice gets to be backgrounded—and silenced (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Socio-semiotics, partly based upon the application of systemic linguistics to (action and non-action) images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), allow for the (1) the representational aspect, i.e., analysis of the all those taking part in an image, viz. human and non-human characters (and their bodies), objects, settings; (2) the interactive aspect, i.e., the (intended or actual) relationships construed by the image and the reader including issues of power, emotions; and (3) the compositional aspect, i.e., the layout of the visual text (Callow, 2006).

For Research Question 2, individual in-depth photo-elicitation-based semi-structured interviews are used. Broadly speaking, photo elicitation is a data-gathering procedure consisting in gathering qualitative data, usually in the form of verbal responses, by showing photographs—which serve as prompts—to the participants, thus securing greater participant engagement for more nuanced perspectives (Harper, 2002; Richards, 2003). Following Harper (2002), image analysis can lead to profound and rich reflections. Similarly, Harper (2002) claims that photo-elicitation “may overcome the difficulties posed by in-depth interviewing because it is anchored in an image that is understood, at least in part, by both parties” (p. 20). This view is supported by Padgett et al. (2013), who point out that qualitative research has much to gain by using the photo-elicitation method alone or in connection with other forms of data, for it offers an alternative to verbal-only methods of capturing perceptions or experiences.

Similarly, Bukowski and Buetow (2011) argue that photographs have surface content as visual records, yet they can also make the invisible visible by evoking memories, feelings, and thoughts that require verbalization to be accessible to the researchers. Overall, these authors advocate the efficacy of photo-elicitation protocols in qualitative research.

### The corpus

According to the national curricula, the Chilean state acknowledges the existence of eight indigenous cultures, namely Mapuche, Aymara, Rapa Nui, Atacameño, Diaguita, Quechua, Colla, Alacalufe, and Yagan. Thus, these cultures are essential to the Chilean nation's roots and must be "respected and promoted by implementing bilingual education in highly populated areas so the indigenous can develop in their local society as well as in a global society" (Act 19253, 1993). Thus, the teaching of indigenous languages is formally promoted alongside the formal teaching of the official dominant language in Chile, Spanish. The status of English in Chile is clearly that of a foreign language. Consequently, it is expected that the coursebooks tailored for the teaching of English in public schools in Chile will contain verbal and visual representations of indigenous people as well as other different cultures.

The researchers carefully examined each coursebook used in the public school system at the time (12) in the search of suitable material for the present study. The coursebooks analyzed in the study are produced for the Chilean public-school market by various publishers, such as Richmond, SM, and Cal y Canto, which put in bids for the national tender, and whose proposed coursebooks go through an evaluation and selection process based on detailed rating scales and rubrics designed to ensure the coursebooks meet quality standards and align with the EFL national curriculum.

It became apparent that out of the 16 visual representations depicting indigenous people found in the 12 English language coursebooks used in the public-school sector in Chile, including photographs and illustrations, the first portrayal of indigenous peoples was found in the coursebook used in 7th grade, leaving younger learners of English unexposed to images of indigenous peoples.

Operationally, this study explicitly focused on representations that were presented as indigenous by coursebook developers, often in a discursive manner. Nevertheless, the broader conceptualization of what constitutes indigenous identity is both theoretically and instrumentally intricate. Indigenous identity can be examined through various lenses, including cultural and anthropological perspectives, which delve into how a community shares cultural practices and possesses a profound, enduring connection to a specific place. Additionally, social and sociocritical perspectives address tribal membership, power dynamics, social vulnerability, and a strong sense of subjugation (Horn, 2017). Ethnic and precision genomic analyses, along with self-identification, further contribute to the complexity of this discourse (Jacobs, 2019).

This debate is exacerbated by the reality that individuals often embody multiple identities. Consequently, instances may arise, as observed in Chile, where individuals who genuinely do not self-identify as indigenous may, at least partially, possess ethnic or cultural indigenous attributes. Moreover, the situation is further enriched by the nature of *mestizo* peoples in Chile, who frequently find themselves entangled in negative social labels associated with indigenous communities, leading to the indigenous becoming obscured, particularly when a significant number of Mapuches migrate to urban areas. These urban indigenous populations are sometimes perceived as less authentic (Gagné, 2016).

In conclusion, the matter of indigenous identity is rather complicated, allowing for diverse approaches from individual or combined perspectives. These perspectives may



be specific to certain groups or universally applicable, shaped by socio-political pre-conceived notions of indigeneity or evolving concepts of indigenous identity. Therefore, strictly and theoretically speaking, there can well be indigenous in other photos used in the course books.

### **The procedure**

Firstly, for Research Question 1, the principles underlying CVL and socio-semiotic analysis (outlined earlier) were carefully applied by all three researchers separately to the 16 visuals. Each researcher made notes of their observations and analyses, which were later contrasted with the other researchers' annotations and comments. Later, individual in-depth photo-elicitation-based semi-structured interviews were set up with seven EFL teachers, who had been previously approached by one of the researchers who informed them of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from it at any time. A consent form containing details of the study and of their participation was duly signed by all participants. The seven interviews were conducted at the participants' most preferred time and location over a period of the three weeks. Finally, the data from the individual in-depth photo-elicitation-based semi-structured interviews were transcribed selectively. The participants' native language (Spanish) was used as it facilitated the natural flow of the conversation. Pseudonyms are used in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants' personal information.

During the interview, the participants were presented all eight images portraying indigenous peoples and/or indigenous cultural elements found in the entire collection of coursebooks, together with a similar amount of non-indigenous images and illustrations depicting other ethnicities and international/Westernized cultural aspects. The rationale behind this layout was to provide the participant with greater cultural benchmarking context allowing for richer analyses of the social activities in which different ethnicities are portrayed.

Before interviews started, the researcher explained the procedure to follow. Once the interviews were underway, teachers were asked to describe the activities, environment, and facial expressions of the images portraying indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. Given that images and photographs are viewed as credible representations of reality (Sherwin, 2008), and in an attempt to verify whether the images reinforced or weakened any possible form of stereotype, the researcher asked participants to read Act 19,253 appearing in the National Curriculum to elicit their perceptions. After transcribing the interview data, analyzing text and applied content analysis, the following major themes were found: (1) Indigenous as heritage/disconnected from the modern world, (2) Stereotypes of struggle lesser ability to adapt to modernity, and (3) Absence of conflict and image quality.

### **The participants**

For this study, seven EFL teachers took part in the individual in-depth photo-elicitation-based semi-structured interviews, one of whom was a teacher educator and Head of a Teacher Education program at a state university in Chile, two public school teachers, two private school teachers, and three university teachers from undergraduate and graduate programs. The participants' teaching experience ranged from one to over ten years.

All participants were licensed English language teachers and held an MA. The recruitment process, based on convenience sampling, aimed at gathering educators working in different educational systems and levels with a view to collecting richer perceptions and insights. Five of the participants were fellow EFL teachers working at the same institution as one of the researchers, while the other two were former fellow students at the MA TESOL programme one the researchers had pursued. None of them belonged to any indigenous advocacy group or identified themselves as indigenous.

### Findings and discussion

The findings and discussion of the semiotic analysis of images in coursebooks are converged in this section. This follows the order of research questions formulated in this study.

Research question 1: How are indigenous peoples represented in EFL coursebooks?

The visual analysis of indigenous peoples in EFL coursebooks in Chile, based on the representational aspect, the interactive aspect, and (3) the compositional aspect, has largely demonstrated that while there is an attempt to ensure representation of indigenous cultures, values and knowledges in Chilean EFL materials, its presence tends to be tangential, stereotypical (Fig. 1), and rather distant and despondent looking (see Figs. 2, 3). Instead of presenting indigenous peoples as individuals, groups, or communities with status, sovereignty, voice, and integrity, they are often visually depicted through the perspective of the colonizer as "defeated," relegated to secondary positions, and stereotypically detached from the modern world. Consequently, indigenous peoples are predominantly portrayed in EFL coursebooks as solely representative of "heritage," downplaying their significant presence and contributions within the wider community as can be seen below:

While highlighting indigenous communities as custodians of traditional knowledge, beliefs, and values is crucial, their marginal representation in coursebooks indicates varying degrees of subtle or overt marginalization and racialization. Moreover, this phenomenon perpetuates what Holliday (2010) refers to as "otherizing," which occurs when



Australian Aboriginal man

**Fig. 1** Australian Aboriginal Man. From "E-Teens 8", by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 172). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V



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**Fig. 2** Indigenous People. From “E-Teens 8”, by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 142). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V



**Fig. 3** Huichol. From “E-Teens 8”, by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 137). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V

cultural stereotypes reduce the differences among individuals or groups to a predefined set of features (Holliday et al., 2010) (see Fig. 4).

In Fig. 5, the central focus appears to be on a school child surrounded by three adults, two of whom are attired in traditional indigenous garments. However, the accompanying written text does not directly reference the non-indigenous or so-called ‘contemporary’ activities in which the child or potentially the mother, depicted in the image, might be engaged. The text merely offers a loosely related discussion prompt. While the inclusion of individuals wearing both traditional indigenous attire and Western clothing may initially convey a sense of democracy and inclusivity, the absence of a more comprehensive text detailing the child’s involvement in ‘modern’ education or the mother’s successful professional role in society, for example, fails to capture the symbiotic interconnections



**Fig. 4** Indigenous Peoples. From “Teens in Motion 2”, by Alvarado (2018, p. 13). Copyright Ediciones Cal y Canto

**4 Discuss the questions.**

- a. What are the positive and negative aspects of indigenous people adapting to modern society?
- b. What can people do to help protect traditional culture and language?
- c. In Chile, how are the problems of each indigenous group similar or different?

Discuss



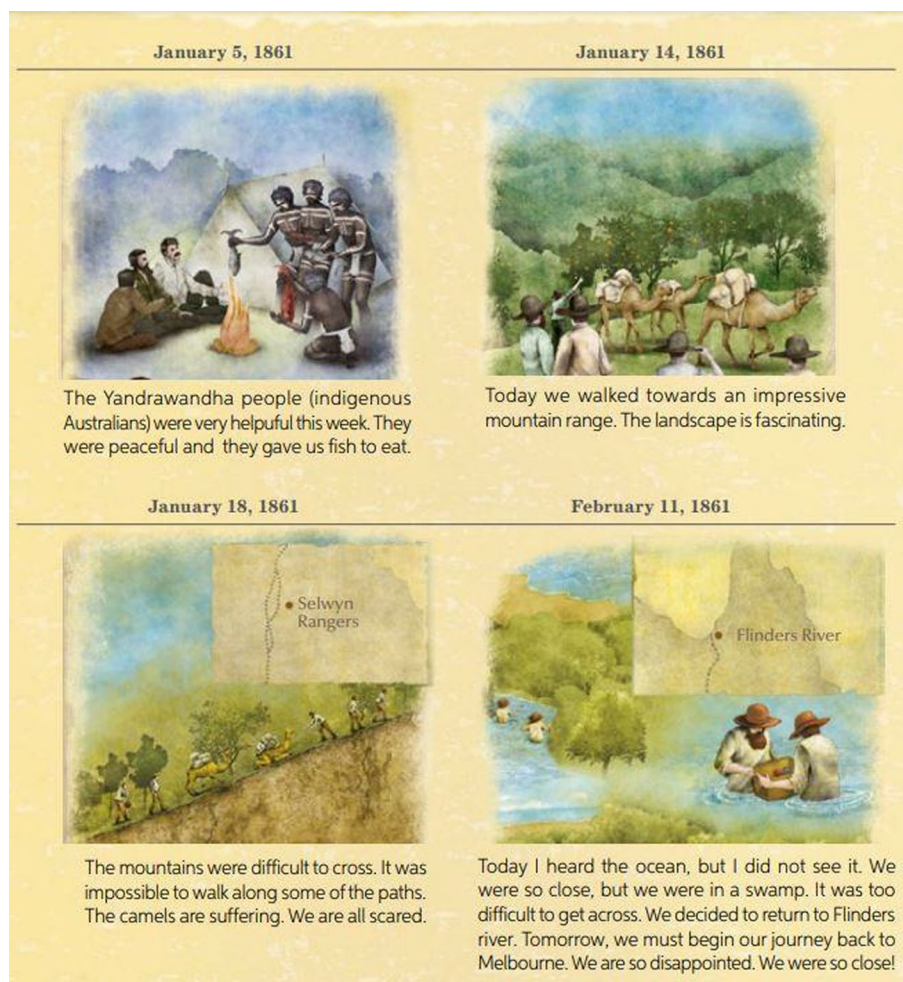
**Fig. 5** Indigenous Groups. From “E-Teens 8”, by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 139). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V

between the reproduction of traditional culture and participation in contemporary life. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that in Western societies, written language holds a primary position, resulting in the visual mode being subservient to language as a means of expression (p. 34). In the image presented, neither the visual representation nor the written language effectively support each other, as the written text alludes to historical events or practices of other indigenous groups. Consequently, the significance and potential meaning of the visual image in the coursebook become obscured.

Importantly, it is worth noting that this was the only image found in the collection of coursebooks under scrutiny that depicts an indigenous child performing an activity other than what it is conceived of as ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary’ in Western cultures such as formal schooling.



Another illustration (Fig. 6) renders an encounter possibly held at the birth of colonisation or ‘white settlement’ in Australia when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experienced not only the loss of homelands but also of children, traditional culture, and citizenship rights (Human Rights Commission, 2023). The visual and compositional structure of the illustration below reveal several semiotic features through power imbalance, dominance and subjugation are foregrounded and legitimised. First and foremost, the short vignettes which accompany each visual image are ‘candid’ colonial accounts narrated by the settler through their own lived experiences as colonisers. Not only does this provide a narrow and rather fragmented view of reality but also reaffirms what has been labelled as ‘the great Australian silence’ (Barnwell, 2021). That is, colonial storytelling which negates the presence, voices and visibility of indigenous knowledges. While the first image (top left, January 5, 1861) underlines the beneficence of the Aboriginal peoples as being ‘helpful’ and ‘peaceful’, it denotes servanthood as the settlers remain seated whilst members of the Yandrawandha people occupy themselves cooking fish to feed the newcomers. Elements of indigenous invisibility, and therefore subordination,



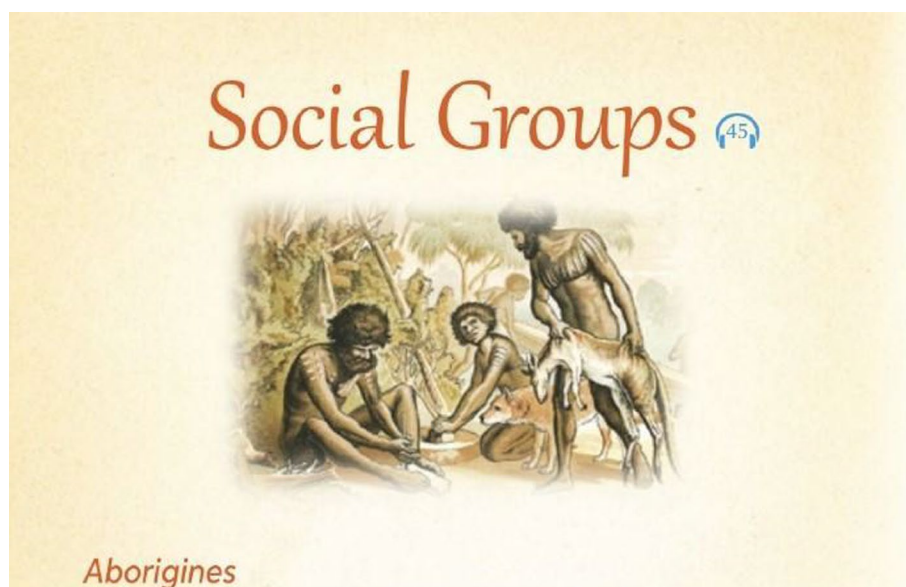
**Fig. 6** Yandrawandha people. From “E-Teens 7”, by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 125). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V

subjugation and relegation, are prevalent in all three other visual images which foreground the presence of settlers on indigenous homelands undertaking arduous activities such as the transportation of goods with the help camels and crossing rivers to reach other destinations as part of the expeditions.

Moreover, the visual marginalization of indigenous peoples is exacerbated by power imbalances and white dominance, which are further accentuated by specific elements of visual design employed in these depictions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), elements such as perspective, distance, gaze, color, lightness, darkness, and brightness significantly contribute to both the salience and meaning potential of visual representations.

In Fig. 6, a notable contrast in color and lightness is evident in the first image positioned at the top left, distinct from the remaining three images. The utilization of gray, ash, and clouded colors in the initial image depicting members of the indigenous community starkly contrasts with the open use of green, blue, and brown tones in the other three images, which semiotically connote comfort and happiness, while also portraying settlers as hardworking and perseverant in their pursuit of a new home. Similarly, Fig. 7 below exhibits comparable visual semiotic elements, portraying indigenous peoples as primitive and underdeveloped. These depictions reinforce stereotypical perspectives that marginalize and stigmatize indigenous communities as the "other" (Holliday et al., 2010), thereby diminishing their presence, role, and status in modern or contemporary society.

Equally interesting is the apparent absence of conflict in depictions of indigenous peoples unique to Chile and other countries. This contrasts sharply with historical accounts of the Mapuche people, which highlight their rich warrior culture. The Mapuche's adept war strategies and tactics allowed them to maintain a resilient and successful resistance against the Spanish that spanned centuries.



**Fig. 7** Aborígenes. From "E-Teens 8", by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 136). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V



This deliberate portrayal of indigenous communities as stagnant in time is particularly notable. In many images, individuals are often portrayed in static scenes—either, for the most part, posing for what seems like somewhat staged photographs or, to a lesser extent, engaged in conflict-free, subsistence-related daily tasks.

This portrayal can be seen as an oversimplification and misrepresentation of indigenous societies, distorting the dynamic nature of their cultures and histories. The historical accounts of the Mapuche, in contrast, showcase a people deeply connected to their warrior traditions, demonstrating adaptability and resilience in the face of external pressures that continues into the present day.

Figure 7 captures the image of an indigenous individual carrying the carcass of a kangaroo, drawing attention to the deceased animal and prompting viewers to focus on this particular element of the scene, which portrays a raw depiction of animal hunting. Given the sensitivity surrounding such content, as many people worldwide oppose these practices, it is crucial to approach this subject with care.

While the accompanying written narrative briefly mentions that “Today, Aborigines have adapted to Australian culture,” the visual representation fails to demonstrate the diverse ways in which indigenous communities in Australia have integrated into established Westernized systems and practices. While we all may face challenges in adapting to modern society, the absence of indigenous peoples in contemporary contexts not only silences their presence and involvement in modern society but also influences learners’ perceptions and attitudes (Hodge & Kress, 1988), contributing to the perpetuation of exclusion, inequity, and social injustice within ELT materials (Pennycook, 2016).

Research question 2: What are the EFL teachers’ views on and attitudes towards the portrayal of indigenous identity in English language coursebooks?

To address the second research question at hand, an individual in-depth photo-elicitation semi-structured interview approach was utilized, involving English language teachers from various educational settings. The visual stimuli shown to the participants during the interviews can be found in “Appendix”. Through a rigorous content analysis of the collected data, three prominent themes emerged: (1) Indigenous as heritage/disconnected from the modern world (ii) Stereotypes of struggle lesser ability to adapt to modernity.

### **Indigenous as heritage/disconnected from the modern world**

The analysis of the data obtained from teachers revealed a prevailing perspective that positions indigenous peoples in the visual images primarily as representative of heritage, focusing on their adherence to traditional beliefs and values that hold subjective historical significance in today’s world (Olivia). According to Olivia, a teacher from a public school, many of the representations appeared as though they had been “taken from a ritual, or some sort of ceremony”. This observation aligns with Pablo’s remarks, an adult education teacher, who expressed that “these images look like they were taken from an old history book, maybe from the 70s”. Furthermore, Pablo noted that it is not uncommon to encounter depictions of indigenous people situated next to modest huts in rural areas or in isolated and desolate locations (see Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8** Indigenous children. From "E-Teens 8", by Curwen and Pontón (2013, p. 140). Copyright U.D. Publishing, S.A. de C.V

Roberto, a teacher educator, asserted that indigenous peoples often find themselves relegated to history books and museums as "they don't have space in current education, nor in the constitution, and their worldview is rather excluded from our society". Roberto further expounded on the notion of living in an era of "cultural denial," where the traditional custodians of the land are perceived merely as "historical artifacts". Consequently, teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards the representation of indigenous peoples in EFL materials reflect a sense of detachment from contemporary society, perpetuating stereotypical notions surrounding indigenous communities.

#### **Stereotypes of struggle and lesser ability to adapt to modernity**

Ernesto, a tertiary education teacher, voiced that indigenous communities are often socially and culturally associated with such activities as farming, fishing or hunting in the wilderness, and "they will always seem to remain that way". While this observation appears accurate in its portrayal of indigenous peoples, hinting at a link between ancient, technologically limited subsistence practices, it falls short in acknowledging the modern aspects of these practices. Today, these traditional activities often incorporate more advanced technologies, reflecting the evolving nature of our collective participation in them. In contrast, images of non-indigenous people, as Ernesto declared, generally depict individuals travelling around the world, involved in business transactions, driving luxurious cars, or engaged in fitness or recreational activities through which feelings of contentment, satisfaction and comfort are conveyed (see Fig. 9).

Similarly, Ernesto took a more critical stance on the unavailable opportunities for indigenous communities to develop their personal and cultural capital and mentioned that "the lack of opportunities for their personal and cultural growth" widens the social and cultural inequity gap in society. To further stress on the idea of "detachment" from society, Andrés, a public-school teacher, said that "they [the images] don't seem to have much educational value" as they fail to draw learners' attention to how indigenous

communities actually live in today's society. In contrast, as argued by Andrés, non-indigenous children are portrayed playing video games, chess, painting, singing and undertaking fun activities that children in our contemporary world normally do when they are not at school (Figs. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 in "Appendix"). This, in his view, adds to "stereotypical views of indigenous peoples", which are nurtured through the de-contextualised and inequitable ways in which EFL materials convey cultural meanings and otherwise indigenous peoples (Eriksen, 2018).

#### **Absence of conflict and image quality**

Another prominent theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was related to the quality of the images utilized in the coursebooks. The participants unanimously highlighted that most depictions of indigenous peoples appeared "old-looking," "dated," and "old-fashioned" and, as expounded earlier at length, in a conflict-free environment where the indigenous individuals are mostly depicted as stuck in time or performing rather dull subsistence-related daily tasks. These images were often captured from a distance, resulting in grainy visuals that starkly contrasted with the high-resolution pictures of non-indigenous individuals, which probably responds to coursebook developers' idea that indigenous peoples simply do not evolve. When presented with an image featuring non-indigenous individuals (e.g., Figs. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14), Andrea, a teacher from a private school, immediately recognized some of the characters from music videos and the internet. She also perceived these images as being utilized to "sell you something," implying their commercial nature (Andrea). The production of these coursebooks is influenced by power structures that do not prioritize the promotion, pride, and respect that indigenous cultures truly deserve. In the case of Chilean EFL coursebooks the Act 19253, as pointed by Olivia, "indigenous cultures have never been properly acknowledged, and the only ones who are fighting for their lands and rights are the Mapuche, yet the government criminalizes them". In discussing the enduring struggle of indigenous cultures to protect their lands, Denis (2007) argues that the ideology of European supremacy has been used to justify the subordination of indigenous communities, the appropriation of their ancestral lands, their confinement to reserves, and their forced assimilation through Christian education (Denis, 2007).

Upon further examination of this issue, it becomes evident that colonialism continues to permeate our society. Kumaravadivelu (2006) asserts that colonialism, as a historical construct, remains closely intertwined with the contemporary phenomenon of globalization. As Pablo, a university teacher stated, we are living in a colony and consequently "we will always remain branded by our rulers (Spaniards), and that is what is happening in Chile right now with our natural resources, and financial institutions: all the revenue has to go back to the colonizers before we get our share". Consequently, such sentiments may contribute to the marginalization of the Mapuche people, as their perspectives diverge from the dominant view, and their minority status often leads to their ostracization by the government. Furthermore, Pablo expressed that understanding the Mapuche people is challenging because they perceive us as part of a foreign culture. In their eyes, we prioritize Western cultures rather than embracing our own roots. Similarly, Ernesto highlighted the issue of identity among Chileans as "...Chileans are aspirational and

always try to level up with Europe because that is where culture and evolution are". Interestingly, although the participants were presented with images depicting various indigenous groups still residing in Chile, a majority of them referred to these groups as 'Mapuche', the largest indigenous community. This tendency once again highlights the challenge of overlooking the rich diversity that exists within the realm of indigeneity in Chile. Thus, even though participants are able to identify how images contribute to stereotyping the indigenous community, they do so by oversimplifying the indigenous mosaic existing in Chile, wherein the historical background, language, cultural practices, and geographical contexts of northern indigenous groups, such as Aymara, Atacameños or Diaguitas, differ greatly from the southern Mapuche peoples.

### Conclusions

The present study aimed to critically examine the relationship between power dynamics and ideologies concealed in the representation of indigenous cultures in EFL coursebooks utilized in Chilean public schools during the data collection period. The obtained findings demonstrate that indigenous peoples are portrayed as stereotypical relics of the past, thereby reducing their intricate cultural attributes to superficial elements and presenting them as disconnected from modern society, as rightly put by Hall (2014).

The discussion hinted that the images produced and selected by coursebook publishers fail to acknowledge the richness and diversity of indigenous cultures. According to Holliday (2010), cultural stereotyping perpetuates the process of othering, as evident in these images. By oversimplifying and relying on stereotypes, these images reinforce a sense of distance between the majority ("us") and the indigenous minority ("them"), as emphasized by Eriksen (2018). Consequently, these findings illustrate how such portrayal of indigenous cultures potentially perpetuates myths and ideologies that hinder the development of much-needed intercultural competence, a goal that, as argued by Núñez-Pardo (2020), English language education should strive to achieve. These representations contradict the principles of inclusion enshrined in the Indigenous Act, which emphasizes the importance of respecting and promoting these cultures as integral to the roots of the Chilean nation. The Act further asserts the need for implementing bilingual education to enable indigenous individuals to thrive in both their own society and the global community (National Curriculum, Language, Culture & Ancient Peoples, p. 7).

The study collected the perspectives and attitudes of teachers regarding these representations. The participants unanimously agreed that indigenous peoples were misrepresented and reduced to stereotypes, while the portrayal of non-indigenous individuals in the images was equally stereotypical as the participants highlighted that the images depicting non-indigenous people seemed staged, idealized, and disconnected from the socioeconomic reality of students attending public schools. Consequently, these findings uncover what scholars like Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Podeh (2000) have argued: That the images in coursebooks not only reflect the ideologies of their producers but also serve as ideological tools employed by publishers to promote and legitimize the prevailing social order.

Lastly, the study revealed that the analyzed coursebook images were not representative, leading to a lack of identification and potential social distance and rejection among viewers. Specifically, the images utilized in this study perpetuated exclusion by diminishing the richness of indigenous cultures, as noted by Holliday et al. (2010) and Pennycook (2016).

It is important to acknowledge an obvious limitation of this study, which is the absence of indigenous perspectives on and attitudes towards their portrayal in the collection of coursebooks used in Chilean public schools; indeed, none of the participating teachers in the study are indigenous. However, the researchers were fully aware of this limitation from the inception of the study, leaving the door open for future research endeavors.

## Appendix

See Figs. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14.



**Fig. 9** My favorite activity. From "English 5," by Miranda (2016, p. 380). Copyright Ediciones SM Chile S.A





**Fig. 10** We live here. From "English 5," by Miranda (2016, p. 52). Copyright Ediciones SMChile S.A





**Fig. 11** Jobs. "Teens in Motion 1," by Polk-Reyes (2017, p. 21). Copyright Ediciones Cal y Canto



**Fig. 12** Studying abroad. "Teens in Motion 1," by Polk-Reyes (2017, p. 82). Copyright Ediciones Cal y Canto



**Fig. 13** Role play for job interview. “Global English,” by Polk-Reyes (2018, p. 122). Copyright Ediciones Cal y Canto



**Fig. 14** Fitness gym. “Global English,” by J. Polk-Reyes (2018, p. 127). Copyright Ediciones Cal y Canto

**Author contributions**

MVC prepared the first version of Literature Review. MVC and FR developed data collection methods. FR collected the data. MVC, FR and LV engaged in a preliminary analysis of the collected data. LV prepared the introduction and wrote the methodology section. MVC and FR developed a preliminary analysis of images and integrated relevant literature to substantiate it. LV further developed the socio-semiotic analysis. FR and MVC checked in-text citations and references in the list. LV formatted all references as per journal’s guidelines.

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**Availability of data and materials**

Data for this study is securely stored by the principal researcher in an institutional storage iCloud system. Should it be required, it can be made accessible upon request.

**Declarations****Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

This study received ethics clearance from the Ethics Committee at Universidad Andrés Bello, Chile.

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