Relationship between Textbook Topics and Real Life Conversational Topics of EFL Students

Lovrić, Branka

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2015

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-03-19**

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Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti

Branka Lovrić

Relationship between Textbook Topics and Real Life Conversational Topics of EFL Students

Diplomski rad

Mentor: prof. dr. sc. Višnja Pavičić Takač

Osijek, 2015

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1. Introduction

The aim of this research paper is to examine the relationship between textbook topics and conversational topics of students in EFL classrooms. The main aspect that covers this topic is authenticity in Croatian textbooks and how textbooks topics correlate with the topics that students engage in real life. Due to the fact that most textbooks at the intermediate level are published abroad, it was interesting to see whether the topics are global, and how applicable they are to Croatian students. The topic was chosen because students' interests change as well as their needs, while textbooks remain the same over the course of many years.

Authenticity is quite a controversial topic and is widely discussed by scholars, and can manifest itself in many different ways and forms. Authenticity in classroom is a modern approach to language teaching and is believed to improve language learning. Making a classroom learning experience as authentic as possible depends on both students and on the textbook itself, especially in a textbook based curriculum.

The other focal point is conversational topics of students. The term itself is quite transparent. Willingness to communicate and motivation to speak were also discussed.

The paper consists of the theoretical and experimental part. The theoretical part covers the authenticity debate as well as a brief historical overview of authenticity. The paper also discusses authentic material and how they influence learning. Different views on the term conversational topic are shown. The experimental part shows the result of the present study whose aim is to explore the most frequent conversational topics amongst learners as well as to discuss its implications for teaching and material development.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Authenticity

This research paper discusses two concepts, conversational topic and authenticity. Authenticity is quite a controversial topic since it means different things to each person, and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Textbook authenticity has been discussed by many linguists, so that "the terms authenticity and authentic are often used to describe language samples, both oral and written, that reflect the naturalness of form, and appropriateness of cultural and situational context" (Rogers and Medley, 1988:467). Authenticity is taken as being synonymous with genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability, undisputed credibility, and legitimacy of materials or practices (Tatsuki, 2006, as cited in Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2007). This indicates that, the more authentic a textbook is, the easier it is for learners to comprehend language and the social context. In a classroom environment, this means that the textbook should be as authentic as possible, and that teacher should provide an authentic experience for their learners "the more authentically the classroom mirrors the real world, the more real the rehearsal will be and the better the learning and transfer will be" (Arnold, as cited in Love Joy 2001:8).

Widdowson (1998) states that authenticity in language in the classroom is 'an illusion' since language for the native speaker cannot be the same for the language learner in a classroom environment. Oxford (2001) suggests whole language, cooperative learning, task based learning, content based learning or multiple intelligences as examples of practice leading to authentic interaction in the classroom and are termed as 'integrated skills approaches'. Amongst the advantages are authentic language, natural interaction, and the richness and complexity of a language, making English a real means of interaction. This makes it easier for teachers to track students' progress in multiple skills simultaneously. Learning of content and not just the language forms are promoted as well as a high motivation for students. The term authenticity is used mostly in a language learning and teaching context. Ur's (1984, as cited in Zohoorian and Pandian, 2014) definition of authenticity divides the term into two kinds: genuine and imitation. Genuine meaning natural interaction among native speakers, while imitation refers to real speech, considering the learners' language level and ability.

Breen (1985, as cited in Zohoorian and Pandian, 2014) divided authenticity into "text authenticity" "learners' interpretation authenticity", "task authenticity" and "situation authenticity". Text authenticity includes text qualities as a source of data which will support the learner in the development of an authentic interpretation. Learner interpretation authenticity refers to how the learner interprets the meaning and conventions of the text. Task authenticity includes the "drive" learners put in learning a language. Breen states that all four types of authenticity are important for a real authentic feel in the classroom.

But how did authenticity come about? Zohoorian and Pandian (2014) found several sources that state that Authenticity was initially introduced over a thousand years ago by King Alfred of England. He used authentic texts for educational purposes. Roger Ascham and Michel de Montaigne portrayed the use of authentic approaches for teaching Latin (Mishan, 2005 as cited in Zohoorian and Pandian, 2014) in the 16th century.

2.1.1 Authentic materials and classroom authenticity

Authentic materials and texts make up big parts of authenticity in EFL classrooms. In the 1890s, Henry Sweet (as cited in Zohoorian and Pandian, 2014) approved authentic or natural texts saying that they do justice to every feature of the language; on the other hand, artificial materials include repetition of certain grammatical constructions, certain elements of the vocabulary, certain combinations of words to the almost total exclusion of others which are equally, or perhaps even more essential (Gilmore, 2007). In the 1960s and 1970s Chomsky and Hymes mentioned authenticity as part of the discussions of communicative competence which stated that communicative competence does not only include the knowledge of the language but comprises the need for contextualized communication (Mishan, 2005, as cited in Zohoorian and Pandian, 2014). This standpoint is still held by scholars in the 21st century.

Blagojević (2013) states that authenticity in the classroom is an important segment of modern language teaching, but it is still up for debate at what age and language learners' level authentic language material should be introduced into the classroom in order to achieve the best results. Some linguists (Kilickaya, 2004, and Kim, 2000, as cited in Blagojević) claim that authentic material can be used only with upper intermediate and advanced language learners (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: B1 and C1 levels), while methodologists (McNeill, 1994, Miller, 2005, as cited in Blagojević, 2013) think that it can also be introduced to lower level language learners, due to the flexibility of language that

can be adapted to any age and knowledge level. Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggest that the same authentic material can be used by beginners and advanced learners in different contexts and tasks. While beginners could use it for simpler and more general tasks, such as getting general information, advanced learners can interpret, summarize or give opinion on the given text.

Pérez Cañado and Almargo Esteban (2005, as cited in Blagojević, 2013) discuss both authentic materials as well as classroom organisation. The discussion goes on to real-life text that have not been designed for classroom but for other purposes and contain a lot of grammatical structures instead of one targeted, thus making it not ideal for grammatical or lexical tasks. Widdowson (1998) calls these texts 'genuine' even though its purpose in classroom is not entirely authentic.

Zahra Zohoorian (2014) quotes several sources (Maher Salah 2008, Mulling, 1991), saying that authenticity relies not only on texts, but also on students' responses and how teachers work with the texts as well as tasks that correspond with those texts. Anderson (1999) and Velazquez (2007, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014) state that instead of only focusing on authentic materials, teachers must pay attention to the authentic use of materials and effective use.

According to Shomoossi and Ketabi (2007), an authentic material is materialized within each context with the interaction of its participants, while Tatsuki (2006, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014) believes that the real life is out there and has to be brought in to make most of authenticity. Chavez (1998, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014) claims that taking authentic materials out of the real world into a more artificial surrounding, such as a classroom makes it lose authenticity, and states that it could have a more authentic feel if real-life social interaction took place. Even though these two standpoints are quite contrasting, we can agree that authenticity does not only rely on texts but also a number of factors such as teaching methods, students' perception and classroom environment. He also argues that any text that has been taken out of its original context and brought into a controlled environment is 'inauthentic'. Even the 'realia' that we import into the classroom is 'inauthentic'. This does not mean that the outside world is more real, but rather that the controlled environment in classrooms makes materials lose their realness. Gilmore (2004) states that the goal is the classroom is to prepare learners for independent language use, meaning that teacher should present them with realistic models of discourse even if they are messy and unpredictable, because if teachers only present them with predictable materials learners will fail to develop their bottom up processing skills.

Velazquez (2007, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014) says that foreign language teachers use two kinds of texts in their classes; authentic and simplified. Both are of value because simplified texts prepare learner for authentic texts and are made for their abilities at their specific level, whereas starting with authentic texts right away might discourage them. This ties in with the earlier debate on when to start using authentic texts. Berardo (2006, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014) mentions that authentic materials can be used to promote motivation, give learners a 'sense of achievement' and encourage them for further reading. It also prepares them for real life situations outside the classroom, meaning the active use of language. Even though classrooms are artificial and condensed surroundings, authentic materials can provide them with the feel of 'realness', and they can acquire the skills necessary for engaging in a conversation.

Guariento and Morley (2001, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014) claim that texts have to be selected according to the learners' ability and adapt tasks to their comprehensive level, meaning that, for lower learners level texts have to be carefully selected for their lexical and syntactic structure, as well as content familiarity, because if these criteria are not met using authentic texts, students might feel unmotivated and underachieved. Gilmore (2007) also talks about the 'realness' of texts and that they contain a great diversity of grammatical and lexical elements, meaning they are much more abundant in language forms than texts built for teaching purposes, or form-specific purposes. That causes less repetition and recognition of the target form which might result in a lower performance.

Due to the fact that most learning takes place in classrooms, it is, as previously mentioned, necessary to bring the real world into the classroom. Cooper (1983, as cited in Love Joy, 2011) differentiates between two perspectives: authenticity as a quality of realness and a product of quality interaction. One focuses on the real life communication, and the other on the language in the classroom, that should correspond to the learners' level. Taylor (1994, as cited in Love Joy, 2011) concludes that authenticity is considered an attribute not only of the outside world but also of a classroom. He also observes that the classroom has its own reality and naturalness. Participants in the language classroom create their own authenticity there as they do elsewhere. This contradicts the claims that foreign language classrooms are artificial instances, where authentic learning cannot take place. Even though their authenticity cannot be compared to the outside world, each classroom and learners are capable of creating their own authenticity. Ellis (1993, as cited in Love Joy, 2011) has supported this view adding that a genuine learning purpose can help learners accept the classroom as real. Newmann and

Wehlage (1993, as cited in Love Joy, 2011) have also stated that it is up to the teachers to create a pleasing learning environment and an authentic feel with appropriate tasks. Even though it would be ideal to provide a certain variety in the environment where learning takes place, due to restrictions in the curriculum and performance, classes are still held within the safety of the four walls of the classroom. Since classrooms vary between cultures, and are differently equipped, it is again up to the teachers' willingness and expertise to provide a more pleasing environment and feasible tasks. Breen (1985, as cited in Zohoorian and Pandian 2014) supports the idea that authenticity in foreign language teaching includes not only authentic material, but also the way it is incorporated into the language classroom.

Day (2004, as cited in Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2007) states, that learners must feel positively towards the tasks and activities in order to participate in an authentic interaction. The way they perceive materials depends mostly on the teachers input, strategies, and appropriateness of language, tasks and activities. Chastain (1988, as cited in Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2007) claims that learners' knowledge level and contextual factors need to be taken into account to achieve pragmatic appropriateness, which he considers authentic an a broader context and is the result of pragmatic variation, and implications for teaching and materials development have to be considered for the future. Lee (1995, as cited in Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2007), mentions learners' motivation claiming that learner authenticity is possible only if learners feel positive about materials and have the intended pedagogical result. This also does not mean that learners will like materials just because they are real or authentic, but because of the communicative purpose and potential of materials. They should be relevant to their own experience and they have to feel connected to the topic so that they have something to talk about.

In her article about teaching ESP to philosophy students Blagojević (2013:120) states that the selection of texts and their use in teaching ESP to philosophy students are based on two assumptions:

1) "Students have reached a high enough level of English grammar, that is, linguistic competence, and"

2) "Students are able to understand language expressions necessary to have a conversation on general topics."

These texts should encourage students to express themselves on a given topic since they already have the competence to do so. It also enables them to express their knowledge in the foreign language, which is beneficial for their future profession.

Authentic materials are also a great source of cultural insight provided by native speakers in a non artificial language and integrated cultural elements such as accents. According to Shrum and Glisan (2000, as cited in Zohoorian, 2014:8) authentic materials provide an effective mean for presenting real language, integrating culture, and heightening comprehension. They present two reasons why such texts are beneficial to foreign language learners. On one hand, they have the experience and are exposed to the real world and real conversation that provides them with a more authentic feel, and on the other hand they are given first hand insight into some cultural aspects, making them prepared for the previously mentioned outer classroom interaction instead of focusing so much on grammar and form.

Contrary to that, McKay (2003, as cited in Siegel, 2013) believes that instead of focusing solely on English speaking cultures in EFL classrooms, each country should take matters into its own hands and select their own language aspects and pedagogy that is appropriate and meets their learners' needs, including textbook topics. She also states that textbooks should include topics about their own culture as well, in order to be able to communicate about it in English.

However, McKay's own study, in which she administered a questionnaire to teachers in Chile, showed that most of them believed that textbook topics should deal with various cultures, rather than focus only on the local, in this case Chilean, or UK/US culture. This goes back to teachers providing additional materials for successful learning.

Wolf (2013, as cited in Siegel, 2013) found that his Japanese EFL students preferred local topics over international topics. His data showed that over 80% of the topics his students had chosen were local, and only 15 out of 101 topics were international topics. This may be true for Japanese classrooms, which are monocultural, but it prevents them from experiencing authentic interaction.

2.2 Conversational Topics

The term conversational topics is quite transparent. Siegel (2013:364) defines the term 'topic' as the "the main theme or subject of conversations and language textbook chapters. In the

conversations, this refers to the focus of the discussion; in the textbooks, this refers to the discussion prompts or themes of the content through which grammar or vocabulary items are introduced." The article *What should we talk about? The authenticity of textbook topics* by Aki Siegel (2013) discusses conversational topics at a Japanese University and college textbook authenticity. Siegel used recordings to collect the conversations between students over a 6 month period.

Cumming (1994, as cited in Siegel 2013) claims that socially relevant topics for students in language classrooms can motivate students to also engage in a classroom environment. This has been supported by the concept 'willingness to communicate' (WTC). WTC refers to the 'probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so' (MacIntyre et al.1998: 546, as cited in Siegel, 2013:364) and emphasises the communication in foreign language learning. MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that self confidence in language learning increases as the familiarity with the topic increases. In contrast, a lack of these aspects will hinder their WTC. Therefore, WTC is described as a stable predisposition to talk, making it a personality trait. As a personality trait it is related to communicative apprehension, communicative competence, introversion and extroversion, and self-esteem. There are many factors that influence a person's WTC, some of them being the degree of acquaintance with the speaker, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, topic of discussion, and the most influential one is the language in which the communication takes place. Meanwhile Zuengler (1993, as cited in Wolf, 2013) find greater content knowledge as an incentive for language production and language proficiency. Wolf (2013), in his study on self-selected discussion topics, found out that students preferred topics in a more national context, proving that students prefer topics they are more familiar with. McKay's (2003) research showed that Chilean teachers are somewhat prepared because of the familiarity with the local culture. Even though native speakers were preferred in private schools because of the prestige they provide to the school, they lack in local knowledge. Local teachers are culturally connected to the students, speak their native language and are more familiar with the socioeconomic status and educational system of the country. All of these factors may influence the communication between students and teachers and the topics they discuss. The teachers who were for the use of global topics explained their choice by saying that this gave students the encouragement to use English everywhere, thus enhancing the global use English. Meanwhile, the teachers that were for local discussion topics said that this is way to preserve and value the local culture.

Another way to increase communication in classrooms is through group work. Group work is a way for students to communicate without the feeling of being observed or evaluated. In McKay's (2013) study the majority of teachers felt no need to include group work into their classroom because there was already enough interaction between students and teachers. Generally speaking, teachers saw many advantages of group work such as learning to listen, social rules as well as team work, respect and responsibility. Amongst the disadvantages they named the lack of space due to the large number of students in the classroom and the time that goes into these activities. Discipline also plays a large role in group work, as students usually tend to go off task, as well as uneven participation. This makes it very difficult to implement the communicative approach into classrooms.

The increasing number of bilingual speakers of English makes the connection between the local culture and English as international language even more important. Smith (1976, as cited in McKay, 2013) states that in order to acquire an international language, learners do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers, thus making the language denationalised. This way, the educational goal of the international language becomes to get learners to communicate their ideas and culture. McKay (2013) believes that this manner has an impact in teaching English. Firstly it affects the teaching materials. Materials should in this case not be limited to native English speaking cultures, but they should include local culture in order to communicate their culture to others. An appropriate pedagogy should also be implemented into language teaching. Many countries use the methodology of native speaking teachers in their own countries, since it is considered the best, but since in a non-native environment English is considered a foreign language, appropriate methodology should be applied. And lastly, non-native speakers should be appreciated since they are a part of the learners' culture.

Teacher expectation and student expectation differentiate largely. Studies have shown that learners prefer a more traditional way of presenting grammar, while teachers preferred pair work and group work (Hawkeye, 2006; McDonough, 2004; Peacock, 1998, as cited in Wolf, 2013). Meanwhile, Savignon and Wang (2003) found that students preferred communicative lessons, as opposed to grammar-based ones proving that teachers' views and students' views often differ. Wolf's (2013) research on Japanese EFL university student showed that learners showed much more knowledge in self assigned topics, as opposed to textbook assigned topics. They also reported having higher confidence in discussing their own topics. As for difficulty, learners reported no difference in discussing textbook topics and self assigned topics. Interestingly, learners showed no difference in confidence in discussing both types of topics

in a group environment. In their study, Cao and Philip (2006, as cited in Wolf, 2013) similarly reported that learners preferred interacting in smaller groups. According to these findings, working in groups provides confidence for learners even if the topics are assigned. Reasons for that might be a more supportive and familiar atmosphere in groups, unlike the pressure learners might experience in whole class presentations.

2.2.1 Willingness to communicate

Willingness to communicate was already touched upon in the previous section. MacIntyre et. al (1998) presented a heuristic model in form of a pyramid to show the layers of potential influences on WTC in L2. The pyramid shape shows how some of the features are more cloesly together while others are quite different. The following section shortly describes each section. The first layer deals with communication behaviour. In an ideal classroom, students would speak up, read L2 magazines, watch TV and actively use the language. Teachers do not usually have the time to offer such a large spectrum of activities and because of that, students are not willing to produce language. The second layer discusses students' willingness to communicate knowing that there would be some consequences and experiencing them. The third layer can be divided into the desire to talk to a specific person and the state of self confidence. The first is motivated by control and affiliation. Students often talk to the people that are similar or close to them. The control they have in interacting with someone close to them gives them the feeling of comfort to use L2. Clement (1980, 1986, as cited in MacIntyre et. al, 1998) made a distinction between perceived confidence and lack of anxiety. These characteristics are relatively enduting, yet some situations require more confidence and depend on prior experience.

Layer IV cover motivational propensities which are based on the affective and cognitive context which lead to self confidence and the desire to communicate. Interpersonal motivation is individual and describes the relationship between the speakers and the L2. As mentioned, control and affiliation are essential in determining with whom we speak. Layer V includes intergroup attitudes, social situation and communicative competence. These influences are not as closely related to language learning they still need to be mentioned. Integrativeness and fear of assimilation are on the opposite spectrum of individual, it is important to recognize them. Fear of assimilation appears when a minority group feels the loss of its own culture in L2. Meanwhile, if the majority of the group takes interest in the minority's native language, they will not feel discouraged. Motivation is an important aspect in language perception. If learners have positive experiences with learning L2 or express a positive attitude, it may take form in terms of WTC. There are many factors influencing the social situation. Age, gender and social class as the obvious ones, as well as level of intimacy or distance between speakers, level of knowledge and proficiency and the place and time in which the conversations take place. Al of these factors contribute to different goals of discourse. Topical

expertise and familiarity may help in achieving confidence in L2, whilst the lack might lower the confidence level. Communicative competence is another factor of the affective and cognitive context. Communicative competence consists of many other competences. Canale and Swain's (1980, MacIntyre et. al, 1998) model was extended by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995, as cited in MacIntyre et. al, 1998) by expanding it by five additional competences. Linguistic competence includes knowledge of syntactic and morphological rules, lexical resources and phonological and orthographic systems. Discourse competence referes to a set of skills necessary to achieve a coherent and cohesive written or spoken text. The key units in achieving actional competence are speech acts, used to carry out actions, language functions and speech act sets. Development of this competence is necessary to achieve a goal in communication. Sociocultural competence includes knowing when, with whom and how to use language. Lastly, strategic competences are the speaker's verbal and nonverbal helpers when communication temporarily stops.

The base of the pyramid is the societal and individual context of communication. The societal context covers intergroup climate. Generally speaking, a positive environment and attitudes of a group results in positive interactions amongst members. Personality of individuals also set the tone for group interactions and influence language learning.

In conclusion, there are a lot of factor that influence WTC and a lot of research still has to be made to achieve optimal language learning conditions.

We can conclude that topic selection plays a vital role in classroom interaction between students and teachers, and is often influenced by textbooks, which makes the correlation between textbook topics and conversational topics crucial for successful language learning.

3. Experimental Part

3.1 Aim and purpose

The purpose of the present research is to reveal students' interests in everyday life as well as to explore the level of authenticity of EFL textbooks in Croatia. The ultimate goal is to help teachers create a more appealing classroom environment. The main research questions are whether topics in textbooks are authentic and appropriate, and whether the textbooks used in Croatian grammar schools correlate with the actual interests of the target users. In addition gender differences will be explored to see whether gender influences students' interests and choices of topics. The research could help teachers adapt their teaching methods with additional materials from different sources and provide a better and more authentic learning experience, so that learners could achieve better results.

3.2 Sample

The participants of this research were 82 students of *Matija Antun Reljković Grammar School* in Vinkovci. As can be seen from the table below (Table 1), the number of female students was noticeably larger, which may influence the above mentioned gender difference in interests. The participants were all in the second grade, because the later textbooks used in Croatian grammar schools are used throughout 2 academic years, which means that they were already quite familiar with the form of the textbook, and they had already covered a large part of the topics. They had entirely covered *New Headway* and units 1-3 in *New Success.*

Table 1: Sample gender representation

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	20	24.2
Female	62	76.6
Total	**82**	**100**

3.3 Procedure

The research was conducted using a questionnaire which can be found in the Appendix 1. The questionnaire was composed specifically for this research using the three most frequent textbooks in Croatian schools: New Headway: Intermediate Student's Book Liz and John Soars; Oxford University Press, 2008; New Success: Intermediate Student's Book Stuart McKinlay, Bob Hastings; Pearson Longman, 2007; and Opportunities: Intermediate Student's Book Michael Harris, David Mower, Anna Sikorzynska.

The topics were divided into 8 categories according to the topics in the textbooks, and afterwards used to create a Likert scale questionnaire that contains 15 items called: *Conversational topics amongst peers*. The entire questionnaire was written in Croatian in order to prevent any misunderstanding due to the language.

The questionnaire was conducted during regular classes and took participants on average 10 minutes to complete. Since the questionnaire was not connected to the English classroom, the students in two groups solved the questionnaire during their History class, and one during Chemistry. The researcher was present during the data collection and introduced them to the questionnaire, but did not say the purpose of the questionnaire or that it was connected to their English class textbooks in order not to influence their responses. The students reacted positively to the questionnaire and every questionnaire was properly filled out. The atmosphere was quite good and the students seemed very invested in solving the questionnaire as accurately as possible and even discussed amongst each other their different conversational topics. The collected data were statistically analysed by means of SPSS.

3.4 Instrument

As previously mentioned, the questionnaire was composed using the three intermediate level textbooks currently in use in Croatian High Schools: *New Headway*, *New Success* and *Opportunities*. The questions have been formed by using the topics discussed in these textbooks. The first step was to collect all the main topics from the textbook and after that they were grouped into eight categories of the most common ones that overlap in all three books: education, careers, sports, culture, technology, clothes, food, life and relationship. Then, fifteen questions were formed according to these categories. Some topics are covered more widely in the textbooks, which is why some categories have more than one question. The items were followed by a three-point Likert scale (1- never or almost ever, 2- sometimes, 3- often). The questionnaire also elicited information about participants' gender. A more detailed explanation of each category of questions follows.

3.4.1 Education

The first three questions are part of the category called Education. These are questions about their school subjects, relationships between students and teachers, and students' college plans. The questions were based on the chapters "Success", that briefly covers success and failure in a scholarly way, and "To err is human" in *New Success*, where they discuss the vocabulary and texts about school, success and failure, work and education. "To err is human" discusses life after school in the text "Where 2 Now", as well as a text about a student in the role of the teacher.

Module 7 called "Learning" in the *Opportunities* textbook focuses on learning and different types of learning, teachers and their impact on students, and different types of schools. It focuses on different chores in schools and mentions summer schools as well as compares the education process in the U.S. and the UK as part of the culture corner. It also includes students' input on how to improve their educational system.

New headway mentions school in Unit 4 "Getting it right" as part of the topic of rules. It contains a comparison of the education in Victorian England to today's and the rules they had to obey.

3.4.2 Career

Question 4 focuses on students discussing their future career path since it is one of their main concerns. It is expected to be a common topic amongst students. It is in the category named Career and is based on texts in all three mentioned books.

New Headway in unit 2 “The working week” presents a text about different tasks, or jobs people have, ranging from more common ones, like office jobs, to the royal career of being a prince. Students are asked to voice their opinion careers. In “Who earns how much?” students have to think about different professions and salaries. Students are also given a writing task where they are being familiarized with formal and informal Letters and e-mails.

In *Opportunities* there is a module called “Career” which introduces some odd jobs or dangerous jobs around the world. It also consists of some examples of job interviews and practical advice on how to make the most of an interview, and how to write a curriculum vitae and letter of application. It touches upon the costs of living and the standard in some countries.

In *New Success*, similarly as in the group education, career related topics are discussed in Unit 8 “To err is human” mentioning life after school and interviews with a guidance officer on what to do after school.

3.4.3 Sports

Question 5 falls under the category sports, and asks whether they talk about sports events and sports results. This question was based on the fact, that all books contain sports in some form.

It is mostly present in *New Success* in Unit 8 “Taking a break” extreme and adventurous sports where briefly mentioned as well as statistics of the most popular sports while unit 13 called “Game over” goes more in depth. Students should develop their terminology regarding different types of sports as well as commenting on sports results and sports events and the following of sports. In the other two textbooks it is only briefly mentioned.

In *New Headway* football is mentioned in unit 7 called “Passions and Fashions” in the text “The beautiful game” as a global sport. The beginning, the business around the sport, as well

as students' opinions about the significance of football in the media, explaining its beginning was explained.

In O*pportunity's* Module 1 named "Adventure" there is only a brief mention of extreme sports and students' sports habits and preferences.

3.4.5 Culture

The next three questions focus on the topic of culture, i.e. media, local cultural events, and foreign cultures. Culture is one of the most frequent and extensive topics in all textbooks and is always represented in some way.

Opportunities has an additional culture corner after a couple of modules where there are texts about different English speaking countries like Canada, Australia, Great Britain and Wales or famous musicians like Elton John and Bob Dylan, as well as pop music in general. One "Culture corner" is dedicated to the comparison of the education system in the United Kingdom and the United States, as previously mentioned, and additionally a segment where student have to compare it to their own educational system. Almost Each Culture corner contains a "Comparing Cultures" part where students either have to put themselves in the position of the visitor to the said culture, or research the history of their own culture or famous and influential people. But culture is represented in other forms in this textbook as well. In Module 2, called "Stories" they have to discuss types of films and what it takes to make a movie, while in Module 3 "Travel" students' should put themselves in the position of tourists as well as introduce tourists to their hometown. Module 9 "Culture shock", as the name would suggest explores the topic of culture by comparing and contrasting cultures of Cuba and Ireland in the text "Living abroad". It also discusses the difference in manners and gestures in various countries and students should be able to present another country and its famous people.

Culture is also represented in *New Headway*. The topics range from lifestyle matters, such as homes, to the ever changing world and architecture. In unit 4 "Getting it right" and unit 5 "Our changing world", the focus is on the past and the present like in texts "Kids then and now (Unit 4)", which is about a family going back to the 70s and leaving all the luxuries behind in order to appreciate everything they have. In the text "Life in 50 years from now

(Unit 5)", students are introduced to the future and what will happen in the year 2060 and the culture in a time they have not experienced, or future generations will not be able to experience. In chapter 6 called "What matters to me" there is a text called "The heart of the home- My Kitchen" in which three women from the different countries (Italy, US, India) describe their kitchen and what role it plays in their family. Student can see a difference in the living standard from the price of their house and kitchen to what they spend on groceries. In unit 10 "All thing high tech", students discuss architecture and the new London Eurostar station where old meets modern and they discuss other famous buildings, while in Unit 12 "Telling how it is" they talk about people who have changed the world and the impact they have made on today's society.

New Success does not have such a large representation of culture as previous textbooks except for Unit 12 called "It's Showtime" which focuses on culture and different cultural elements in a town or city such as museums, galleries or concerts. There is also a text about New Orleans talking about its long history and the natural disaster the city suffered, as well as different manifestation and landmarks it is famous for. Students also have the task to try and write a film review on a move they have recently seen and are introduced to vocabulary to help them describe films.

3.4.6 Technology

Question 9 falls under the topic Technology and is present in all three textbooks, but not as widely and elaborately as culture. Since we live in a society dependent on technology even in the simplest things, it was interesting to see how it reflects in the textbooks. Students' learning habits have changed immensely, in that they rely solely on internet for getting information on a certain topic.

In Unit 2 "Keeping up to date" in the textbook *New Success* students are warned about the dangers of the Internet and asked to voice their own opinion on that topic. It also covers the cell phone phenomenon and how it has developed over the years, how it changed communication. Unit 13 "Game over" opens with a review of three video games and asks for students' opinion.

New Headway deals with this topic in two units; first in Unit 5 “Our changing world” where the previously mentioned text “Life 50 years from now” talks about the future and the changes in technology. The Unit also mentions the future of space tourism and elicits students’ thoughts on it. A teenager’s opinion on the influence of video games on adolescents is presented, too. Unit 10, called “All things high tech” goes deeper into the matter. It starts with a text on microprocessors and the first computer and is followed by the text “What do you do on the net?” where five people talk about their internet habits as well as by a section where students talk about their own internet habits, websites they visit, what they use it for, and what the Internet represents to them.

Opportunities only briefly mentions technology in Module 4 “The Media” as a way of receiving news from the Internet and their cell phones.

3.4.7 Clothes

The topic called Clothes contains question 10 in the questionnaire and is represented in books not only through fashion vocabulary, but also through advertising behaviour, financial issues and classification problems. Due to the fact that today’s society is based on superficiality and is of concern to quite a number of students, it was to be expected that they would exchange opinions on that topic amongst themselves.

In *New Success* fashion is part of Unit 1 “Join the club” where fashion serves as an example of money making. It portrays how youth is categorized into which lifestyle they part-take in, meaning that it is important how you dress, because it shows which group you fall under. It also contains a vocabulary part describing clothes and accessories. The text “Beauty through the ages” in unit 11 called “Beauty and entertainment” covers the topic of appearance. First it discusses what was considered ideal hair, skin and built in different stages of history. There is also a part dedicated to practicing describing peoples’ appearance. It is also partially mentioned in Unit 14 “Who cares?” which discusses shopping habits.

Unit 6 called “What matters to me” in *New Headway* shows a dialogue about what happens in a department store covering topics such as clothes, changing fashions to discounts, receipts and clearance and peoples’ habits in department stores. Continuing on that note Unit 9 “Depends on how you look at it” has a segment on dealing with money and currency, and

students' relationship with money, while Unit 7 "Passions and Fashions" contains an interview with fashion designer Calvin Klein on his career in the fashion industry.

Opportunities only indirectly touches upon the topic of clothes. Module 5 in the textbook is called "Advertising" and gives an insight into the advertising world, and shopping behaviours and consumerism in general.

3.4.8 Food

Food is another category that is ever present in our daily lives but not as much in textbooks. It is the least represented topic. Going back to the topic of appearance, nutrition was an obvious choice, but not important enough to have its own section in the textbooks.

Success only briefly touches upon food in the sense of describing it for advertising, i.e. using different adjectives for describing food in Unit 14 "The hard sell.

New Headway mentions food as part of Unit 6 "What matters to me", in an advert describing pasta sauce, in the previously mentioned text "My Kitchen", and in Unit 10 in the section about everyday objects about kitchen utensils.

Opportunities has almost no representation of food, except for Module 6 "People" where peoples' personality is compared to different types of chocolate.

3.4.9 Life and relationships

The life and relationship category contains the last three questions of the questionnaire and includes their relationship with their family, peers and current events in their surroundings and the world, meaning any interaction with people. Due to the broadness of the topic, the representation in the textbook is quite large. It is the most frequent category in all three textbooks.

Opportunities starts in Unit 1 "Join the club", by discussing different types of clubs people can join, based on their common interest, as well as peoples' reasons to join clubs. It presents their advantages and disadvantages and how they differentiate from other clubs. Unit 3 "An

eye for an eye", touches upon the crime and punishment issue and provides insight into the relationship people have and their reactions to different situation. Unit 4 "(S)he" goes deeply into the relationships people can have, from gender relations to family matters. In the field of gender differences the textbook covers clichés, gender separation, prejudice and gender roles, while the family part covers the influence of our upbringing in personality formation. Unit 5 "The world ahead" talks about how peoples' surroundings and natural disasters have a great impact on peoples' lives as well as the future that comes with it.

New Headway covers family relationships in unit 6 "What matters to me" by discussing some stereotypes about family. Students listen to what five people think whom they are closest to in their family. It is followed by students discussing their own family dynamics by comparing families and saying who the closest family member to them is and why. Continuing on that note, Unit 7 "Passions and fashions" has a text about a family member and students practice writing by describing a family member of their own including physical appearance, character and current lifestyle. Unit9 "Depends on how you look at it" is about the relationship with students' past self and reminiscing about their childhood as well as discussing the advantages and disadvantages.

In *Opportunities* Module 4 "The media", shows an insight to the media and various vocabulary on current events as well as the relationship of famous people towards the media. In Module 6 "People", *Opportunities* mentions the generation gap between children and their parents. It discusses the difference in appearance and behaviour as well as making assumptions about people and their past. In the part of the Unit called "Personality", they practice adjectives by describing peoples' personality, appearance and interests.

The table below (Table 2) shows a numerical representation of the frequency in which topics appeared in each textbook, starting from the highest, *Life and relationships,* to the least frequent category (*Food*).

Table 2: Frequency of topics in each textbook

Category	Textbooks	Topic representation	Total
Life and relationships	New Success	8	22
	New Headway	8	
	Opportunities	6	
Culture	New Success	12	20
	New Headway	6	
	Opportunities	2	
Clothes	New Success	6	14
	New Headway	6	
	Opportunities	2	
Education	New Success	4	13
	New Headway	2	
	Opportunities	7	
Technology	New Success	5	13
	New Headway	6	
	Opportunities	2	
Sports	New Success	5	10
	New Headway	3	
	Opportunities	2	
Career	New Success	3	9
	New Headway	3	
	Opportunities	3	
Food	New Success	2	6
	New Headway	3	
	Opportunities	1	

4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the analysis are presented. Table 2 shows the extent to which students choose to discuss the topics covered by the questionnaire. The most frequently discussed topic amongst students in this sample is *Education* with a mean value of 2.97. This partially corresponds to the representation in the textbooks, where it is ranked as the fourth most frequent topic. The least talked about subject is *Food* with a mean value of .3171, which also corresponds to the textbook representation, since, as previously mentioned food is quite vaguely represented in the textbooks.

The category of *Life and relationship* had a large representation in all textbooks, as already mentioned, and was accordingly ranked as the second most common topic among students with a mean of 2.84. *Culture*, as the second most frequent topics in textbooks, because of the broadness of the topic, also ranks high with a mean of 2.18. The groups of *Clothes* and *Career* are ranked fifth and fourth in the table with the same mean value (.9268). *Career* is not represented as much in textbooks, while the topic of *Clothes* has a higher representation in textbooks. *Sports* is ranked sixth by students, much like its representation in the books, while *Technology*, although largely represented in textbooks in a myriad of ways, does not seem to be a common topic of interests amongst students.

Table 3: Conversational topics ranking by students

Category	Std. deviation	Mean
Education	1.37174	2.9715
Life and relationships	1.25295	2.8415
Culture	1.12716	2.1870
Career	.58332	.9268
Clothes	.87179	.9268
Sports	.85795	2.1870
Technology	.59114	.5488
Food	1.65974	.3717

The independent t-test was used to test the difference between genders in the frequency of conversational topics use. As we can see in Table 3, the three first topics, *Sports, Culture,* and *Clothes* show a significant difference between genders: while Female learners show more willingly talk about culture and clothes, male learners show significantly more interest in sports.

Table 4: Gender difference in conversational topics

	Gender	**Mean**	**t**	**Sig.(2-tailed)**
Education	Male	2.8000	-.756	.395
	Female	3.0269		
Life and relationship	Male	2.2000	-2.774	.008
	Female	3.0484		
Culture	Male	1.4167	-4.362	.000
	Female	2.4355		
Career	Male	.7500	-1.573	.120
	Female	.9839		
Clothes	Male	.3500	-4.445	.000
	Female	1.1129		
Sports	Male	1.4167	2.957	.002
	Female	.5806		
Technology	Male	.6500	.993	.382
	Female	.5161		
Food	Male	.1750	-1.513	.271
	Female	.3629		

5. Discussion

The results show that conversational topics students choose in their everyday conversations and textbook topics mostly coincide. This means that the textbooks in Croatia are well chosen, because they show a good variety of topics which interest learners. This could be because textbooks were constructed to present an array of general and global topics which interest a large variety of people from around the world. Since the textbooks are written by native speaker, from the cultural point of view, mostly native culture is represented. Meaning, teachers should try and include as much of their local culture as possible.

Education, as the most popular topic, should be focused on even more since, in terms of topic representation it is ranked fourth. Participants are at a stage in their life when they need to choose their future path. Therefore, they feel the need to talk about it. They are especially interested in higher education since most of them probably plan to study at a university after grammar school.

Teachers should include texts and activities on education into the classroom to introduce students to the vocabulary and cultural background. Teachers should also expose them with texts about education in other countries in order to include cultural diversity into the classroom. Food as the least talked about topic in the textbooks does not play, according to the results, any significant role in the conversation.

Career is another topic that is ranked high by students as a conversational topic, but only seventh in textbook representation. Other categories are for the most part equally ranked. Life and relationships, and culture are ranked highly in both textbooks and conversations. The categories of food and sports are both ranked low in both spheres. Food being the least talked about and represented topic.

As for the gender difference; the results were as expected; males show significantly more interest in sports related topics, while girls show more interest in topics related to clothes and culture. This can be attributed to a somewhat traditional gender division where males are exposed to sports from a very young age, while women were expected to be into more feminine aspects of life. All the other topics were equally frequently selected by both genders.

The limitation of this study might be the fact that the number of female students is much greater, but this is not as important in the practice, since there are only a few gender specific

topics. The problem might be found in classrooms where there is no time to go deeper into some topics or to please everyone's interest. The curriculum limits most teachers in having the freedom to self –construct the class to find a common ground for each topic. Teachers should try to make the topics as interesting as possible for students, and adapt to their needs as much as possible. Most textbook are quite outdated and sometimes learners find it hard to relate to such texts, in which case a comparison is recommended between what they know from their own lives and personal experience, and what is said in the text. Another suggestion might be to include other authentic materials from different sources and different forms of media to motivate students to perform better and achieve better results.

It would be interesting to see how learners' conversational topics have changed since the first editions of the textbooks in comparison to today to see if, and how the textbooks respond to those changes. Further research may include other levels of students and textbooks, as well as a longitudinal study of how a generation's interests in conversational topics change. It would also be interesting to explore how the representation of topics in textbooks influences students' general motivation to learn the language.

6. Conclusion

This research analysed the relationship between topics in the most frequent textbooks used in Croatian EFL classrooms and real life conversational topics amongst students. Authenticity is a large component in foreign language teaching, and is said to improve motivation and performance. Although many scholars cannot agree on the universal definition of authenticity, it undeniably plays a vast role in foreign language classrooms. There are many ways to bring authenticity into the classrooms, but textbooks are the focal point of any class and the curriculum is based on them so it is important for them to be as authentic as possible. Teachers have the role of the facilitator and should provide a good surrounding for language learning by making as many changes or additions as necessary.

Times change, and so do learners and their needs and conversations, they should be always up-to-date, but since it is, in most cases impossible; alternatives need to be introduced into class. Selecting appropriate texts can be challenging but tasks could be more easily adapted to levels students' levels. Appropriate and authentic texts can influence students in many ways, so teachers need to fill in the gaps that textbooks leave open.

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Appendix

Razgovorne teme među vršnjacima

OPĆI PODACI

SPOL: a) muško b) žensko

Cilj ovog istraživanja je otkriti o kojim temama razgovaraš sa svojim vršnjacima u slobodno vrijeme. Molim te iskreno odgovori na sljedeće izjave, nema točnih i netočnih odgovora.

Za svaku izjavu odaberi jedan od sljedećih odgovora:

1-nikada ili gotovo nikada
2- ponekad
3- često

1.	Razgovaram o predmetima u školi.	**1**	**2**	**3**
2.	Komentiram odnos nastavnika i učenika u školi.	**1**	**2**	**3**
3.	S prijateljima razgovaram o odlasku na fakultet.	**1**	**2**	**3**
4.	U društvu razgovaramo o mogućim budućim zanimanjima.	**1**	**2**	**3**
5.	Komentiram sportska događanja i rezultate s prijateljima.	**1**	**2**	**3**
6.	S prijateljima razgovaram o novim filmovima/serijama koje sam pogledao/la.	**1**	**2**	**3**
7.	Razgovaramo o kulturnim događanjima u gradu.	**1**	**2**	**3**
8.	Razgovaramo o mjestima/ kulturama koje smo već posjetili ili želimo posjetiti.	**1**	**2**	**3**
9.	Raspravljam s prijateljima o najnovijim tehnološkim dostignućima.	**1**	**2**	**3**
10.	S prijateljima komentiram najnovije modne trendove.	**1**	**2**	**3**
11.	Razgovaramo o eksperimentiranju s egzotičnom hranom.	**1**	**2**	**3**
12.	Razgovaramo o raznim vrstama prehrane(vegetarijanskoj, organskoj...)	**1**	**2**	**3**
13.	S vršnjacima razgovaram o odnosu u obitelji.	**1**	**2**	**3**
14.	Razgovaramo o odnosu s ostalim vršnjacima.	**1**	**2**	**3**
15.	U društvu razgovaramo o aktualnim događajima u zemlji i svijetu.	**1**	**2**	**3**

Summary

The present study examines the relationship between textbook topics and conversational topics of EFL students. The theoretical part covers authenticity and its importance in EFL classrooms as well as the term conversational topics. Textbook topics were extracted to form a questionnaire which would elicit the most common conversational topics of students. The research revealed that textbooks in Croatia are for the most part authentic. The study also presents how traditional gender roles influence conversational topics.

Key words: textbook topics, conversational topics, authenticity

Sažetak

Ovo istraživanje ispituje odnos između tema u udžbenicima za strane jezike i razgovornih tema učenika. Teorijski dio pokriva pojam autentičnosti i njegovu važnost u nastavi, kao i pojam razgovornih tema. Upitnik je sastavljen na temelju tema u udžbenicima kako bi se otkrile najučestalije razgovorne teme učenika. Istraživanje također prikazuje utjecaj tradicionalnih uloga spolova na razgovorne teme.

Ključne riječi: udžbenici, razgovorne teme, autentičnost